

Getting A's And/Or Being a Mensch: 2 Polls

ולחוי אנה פקידא בגו צדיקיא

“Allow me, [O Holy One], to be counted among The Good People.”

(Zohar 2:206, Siddur)

In my formal lectures, as well as in private conversations, I have often asked parents, “What would you like your children to be when they grow up?” In various orders, the four most common answers are: “happy”, “healthy”, “a Mensch”, and “Jewish”.

In my talks as well as in private conversations, I have asked thousands of teen-agers, “What single thing could you do at this stage of life to please your parents the most?” The near-universal answer: “Get good grades.” And they usually answer very quickly and spontaneously.

When I review these two polls in front of an audience, you can feel a certain uneasiness in the air. I usually break the tension with a joke from the not-well-enough-known and too-often-remaindered classic of Jewish humor, *The Unorthodox Book of Jewish Records & Lists* (authors, Allan Gould and yours truly), “The Smartest Jewish Grandchild: Harold Weinstock of River Junction, Missouri, grandson of Earl and Anne Grossinger of Teaneck, New Jersey, recited the Four Questions of the Passover Service *at birth*.” There are three jokes in the chapter, concluding with Sharon Firestone who “*at the age of five weeks* began her own petition to fire the rabbi.” We get some good laughs out of this lampooning of precociousness. Then return to the issue at hand.

There is a very serious disparity in the results of these two informal polls. What could possibly explain it? Numerous people have offered possible reasons. One reason they give is, that since the polls were not taken by the standard rules of poll-taking and statistical analysis, it could very well be a false result. Other possibilities suggested include: The people polled may not have constituted a truly random sample; the question may not have been accurately phrased and may have led to “the answers that Danny Siegel wanted to hear”, and finally, the same teen-agers I asked may not be the same children of the parents I asked. Their own children may, indeed, know that their parents want them to be happy, healthy, a Mensch, and Jewish. I suspect that the last reason is extremely unlikely. I have asked thousands of teen-agers. The sheer size of my sample leads me to believe the answers given reflect a fundamental problem we need to face squarely.

In truth, I wish the results were different. But since they aren't, we have to make some sense of them, and *do* something about this enormous disparity. However the message has become central in their thinking, the teen-agers are swept up in the pursuit of excellence and achievement, and the sensation of competitiveness for good grades is often brutal. Inevitably, it takes a toll on the teen-agers' wellbeing.

I remember reading an interesting phrase in a newspaper long ago — “the prison of excellence”. When excellence has no context, I think this reporter's phrase is extremely appropriate. To illustrate: Certainly in the world of sports, The Olympic Games are a prominent example of competitiveness. The motto of The Games is “*citius, altius, fortius*”, Latin for “faster, higher, stronger”, and the rewards are gold, silver, and bronze medals. The question remains — “context”: For the victors, what is the greater, the ultimate significance of winning these medals, and for those athletes who did not place 1st, 2nd, or 3rd, what is the ultimate meaning of losing?

At this point, I need to make myself absolutely clear, since many people in the past have misinterpreted my words. Some have even taken offense. I am *not* saying, either explicitly or implicitly, that being a straight-A student and being a Mensch are a contradiction in terms. That

is why this chapter is called “Getting A’s *And/Or* Being a Mensch”. Nor am I saying that there is something *essentially* wrong in getting good grades. I am only trying to interpret the results of these two polls. I want to understand the underlying forces that reflect themselves in the emphasis, values, and priorities relating to grades and *Menschlichkeit*.

A מעשה/Myseh, a real-live story: In the summer of 2000, I was studying with my Ziv Tzedakah Fund summer interns in Israel when, out of the blue, I asked the question, “Which of our Mitzvah heroes do you think has the highest IQ?” The minute I asked, all of us were taken aback. It was such an irrelevant question, and even though we spent no more than 5 minutes going down the list, we remained uncomfortable about it. It really had nothing to do with their Mitzvah work, *absolutely nothing*. What difference, at all, would it make in their awesome Tikkun Olam activities and projects? Even now, reflecting back 3 1/2 years, I wonder, why I asked it at all. And even stranger is this: I began my work with Mitzvah heroes in 1975. A full quarter of a century had passed before the thought even occurred to me to ask, and having asked it then, I don’t think it will ever come up again in any future conversation.

Now, we need to deal with this issue of Getting A’s *And/Or* Being a Mensch.

Indeed, I believe we need to deal with this issue, and, I believe we need to deal with this issue *Jewishly*.

Jewishly, the first point to consider is that there are no Talmudic terms for “excellence”, “achievement”, and “competitiveness”. While the Rabbis of the Talmudic era *did* have the term “יצר הרע/Yetzer HaRa”, it meant the human inclination to do the wrong thing. Competitiveness was only one aspect of the Yetzer HaRa, and the term itself is negative. Competitiveness as a single concept would not have been part of their thinking.

I believe the rabbis’ understanding of these concepts would be that, without a connection to some kind of *values*, the terms had no ultimate meaning. For them, to say that someone should achieve excellence because a person should achieve excellence would make no sense. Concerning all three of these terms, I believe they would have asked, “Be excellent, be competitive, achieve — for what purpose? To what end?”

Even nowadays, if you were to ask in slightly literary Hebrew, “For what purpose?” you would say, “לשם מה?—Leshaym Mah?” Someone attuned to the language would then expect to hear “לשם שמיים—Leshaym Shamayim, For the sake of Heaven” meaning “for some higher purpose”.

If, for example, we are competitive when we have to raise large sums of emergency Tzedakah funds for a recent catastrophe somewhere in the world, *that* is לשם שמיים—For the sake of Heaven. The same is true for a sense of achievement — we are entitled to feel good for having made this effort and achieving our goal.

For another example, “achievement” might mean that a community achieved the goal of making certain that *everyone in the community* had enough money to make a decent Passover Seder.

The ultimate example for “excellence” is the Mitzvah work of David Copperfield. Copperfield (a.k.a. David Kotkin, Bar Mitzvah at Neve Shalom in Metuchen, NJ) is certainly the most famous magician and illusionist in the world. His Mitzvah project is called Project Magic, and it is used in more than 1000 hospitals around the world. Occupational and physical therapists employ his special method of teaching simple magic to people in various stages of rehabilitation in order to strengthen their dexterity and improve their motor use. Being the center of attention and performing for others also clearly adds to their motivation and self-image. The end result of Project Magic is that thousands of people can now feed themselves. More important, thousands clean themselves, and avoid the humiliation of having others help them with their bodily needs.

The favorite part of the story is this: Copperfield says, “There is nothing I do that is more important.” A perfect statement from *The Best in the World*.

In the context of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, excellence should not, therefore, be determined by the fact that he or she recited the blessings fluently, though that is important to a certain extent and very nice. As mentioned in another section of this book, I have never really been comfortable with well-wishers telling the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, “Good job!” It just feels to me like the wrong phrase. The appropriate Jewish phrase would be, “יִישָׁר כַּח” – Yishar Koach, All the more strength to you [to live a wonderful life of Mitzvahs].” According to the latest Talmudic dictionaries, the root of the word “יִישָׁר” is “ש-ר-ר” – the very same root that gives us the word “שריר-muscle”. With your encouragement, the Bar and Bat Mitzvah *kinderlach* are building their constitution to its optimum strength and efficiency to prepare them for a life filled with idealistic good deeds.

The praise of excellence really ought to be: That the Bar/Bat Mitzvah has brilliantly achieved the goal of fully joining the Jewish community as a full-fledged 100% Mitzvah Person.

Returning to the poll of the parents and their answer that they want their child to be a Mensch, let me conclude with some excellent Jewish terms that help us define and articulate what we really want the teen-agers to grow up to be: מענטשלעך-**Menschlich**, best translated as “a decent, caring human being (and much more); ערליעך-**Ehrlich**, honest; פֿיין-**Fein**, just like it sounds, a fine human being; שיין-**Shayn**, meaning beautiful, as in “a beautiful human being”; זיס-**Ziess**, sweet; איידל-**Aydel**/noble, as in “a person who has a noble soul”; to have תמימות-**Temimut** — a powerful word meaning simplicity, innocence, and humility; to embody the all-important principle of “תוכו כבודו-**Tocho KeVaro**” — one’s inner being is the same as one’s outward behavior, and from Turkish Ladino — the self-explanatory terms for a Mensch...“hombre bueno/mujer buena” or “precioso/preciosa.”

Perhaps with the approach of this important Jewish milestone of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, there is an excellent opportunity to discuss what you, as parents, *really*, do expect of your child.

To state it in Yiddishized English syntax — Your child should only grow up to be happy, healthy, a Mensch, and a Jew...all four of them, not three, not two, not just one of them.