

## MENDING BROKEN FENCES

Teshuvah- repentance, turning, self-correcting, forgiving- this is our central focus as we begin the Jewish New Year. During the past month of Elul, our tradition encouraged us to seek forgiveness from all whom we may have wronged over the year- reminding us to grant this forgiveness quickly and readily. It is the work of teshuvah that is to be our highest priority on these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe. And it is the work of Teshuvah that contains the secret to beginning the year off on the right foot. The challenge, of course, is that this is very easy to speak about and much more difficult to accomplish. For our mistakes often leave behind scars that are hard to mend.

There is a story told by Rabbi Allen S. Maller that illustrates the point: The story is about a girl whose mother gave her a bag of nails and told her that every time she lost her temper or insulted somebody she must hammer a nail into the back of their fence. The first day, the girl hit fourteen nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as she learned to control her anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled. She discovered it was easier to hold her temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally the day came when the girl didn't lose her temper at all. She told her mother about it, and the mother suggested that the girl now pull out one nail for each day that she was able to hold her temper. The days passed. Finally, she told her mother that all the nails were gone.

The mother took her daughter by the hand and led her to the fence. "You have done well, my daughter, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like these.

"How can I repair the fence?" asked the girl. "Will it have to remain damaged forever?"

"Yes and no," said the mother. "Our Rabbis say that if the fence is alive and responds to the way you have changed, it too can change and heal itself. If the fence is dead to the possibility of your repentance it will carry its scars onward. The fence will never be as it was before, but it doesn't have to become like new to be a good fence. If you do your part and change, and the fence does its part in response, God will do something wonderful. God will promote a healing that will make you and the fence better. The process is called atonement. It means that the changes that come about from repentance and forgiveness lead people to higher levels of relationship than was the case before."

"What happens if the fence doesn't respond? asked the girl. "Can I ever make it whole?"

"You should try on three different occasions." said the mother, "but if the fence remains dead even after you have changed, you can't force it to become whole. in that case you should fix another fence somewhere else. There are always lots of fences that need fixing, and whenever you fix a fence, God will make something wonderful happen. That is the miracle of atonement. God always responds to our attempts to change by helping us change, and always responds to our change by giving us new and wonderful opportunities for atonement. This is why we have a Day of Atonement at the beginning of every new year; so that the new year will be a better one than the last one." **(Elkins, Rosh Hashanah Readings, 206-207)**

I want to share a contemporary story, a true story, of something that just took place a few weeks ago across the internet and social media, that is a perfect example of what this story is describing.

For those of you who did not catch the controversy, earlier this year there was a video made at a young man's Bar Mitzvah party in Dallas, Texas. The video depicts a Sam Horowitz, age 13, dressed in a shiny white suit during his bar mitzvah party while doing a glitzy and elaborately choreographed

dance with some scantily clad "showgirls" dancing around him. His name, "Sam" is behind the stage in huge letters with light bulbs outlining each letter as he dances. The entire spectacle was something that one would expect to find at a Las Vegas club, or at a bachelor party, but not at a celebration of a thirteen year old boy becoming a bar mitzvah.

After this video "went viral," reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers, and even getting the boy a guest appearance on the Today show, one of the Conservative Movement's most celebrated and respected rabbis, Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, penned an article in the Washington Post criticizing Sam, his family, and the culture of B'nai Mitzvah parties gone wild. This is some of what he wrote in a piece entitled: *Have we forgotten what Bar Mitzvah's are all about? (Aug. 15, 2013)*

*The egregious, licentious and thoroughly awful video that is circulating 'celebrating' a Bar Mitzvah contains so much that is offensive that it requires restraint to hold oneself to three ways in which this display slaughters the spirit....*

*I am leery of being too maudlin but really, our ancestors struggled and suffered and fasted and prayed so Sammy could cavort? There is an historical outrage here. The Bar Mitzvah (which is a stage a child reaches, not the name of a ceremony) is important because one becomes responsible for the mitzvot, not because one poorly approximates a pubescent Justin Timberlake. Bar Mitzvah means*

*something and however beautiful his religious ceremony may have been, and however sincere the Judaism of his family (I don't know and cannot judge) it is drowned out by the cymbal crash of hip grinding libertinism.....*

*Poor Sammy. I say this with no irony. What remains to him of the small triumphs of life? When he struggles with math and earns a 'B' when before he could never do better than a 'C' will they purchase an island to mark the occasion? Will he take Air Force One to his prom? This young boy been so extravagantly recompensed at 13 as to make all future victories hollow. Alexander the Great, it is said, grew depressed when he realized he had no more worlds to conquer. And since Sammy's extravaganza would probably have been too grandiose for Alexander to entertain for the mere conquest of the Persian empire, what of Sammy's next achievement? His marriage had best take place on Mars or it will make no impression.*

*Achh. I know I sound like an old curmudgeon.... This video is a "YES" to a child from all the people in his life who should be teaching him "no." And that kind of education has consequences far beyond Sam Horowitz and his dancing Bar Mitzvah girls.*

I must admit that when I first read this piece I was a bit taken aback. I certainly agree with Rabbi Wolpe's observation that Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties can get way out of hand, and can have little to nothing to do with the meaning of the day itself. But at the same time, I found myself wanting to defend Sam and his family from this pretty personal attack on their characters. I found myself wondering what Rabbi Wolpe thought his

message would mean to this young man who recently became a responsible member of the Jewish community. And I found myself curious about why a rabbi who I know and respect, and from whom I have learned a great deal, would write such an article.

I was not alone in my curiosity and dismay. And the following day, I read the following response from Sam's rabbi- someone well known to our community because he grew up right here in Ocean Township, Rabbi Bill Gershon. Here is what Rabbi Gershon wrote in his response on Facebook:

*Dear David:*

*I felt I had to respond regarding your article that appeared in the Washington Post, "Have we forgotten what Bar Mitzvahs are all about?" You wrote: "...however beautiful his religious ceremony may have been, and however sincere the Judaism of his family (I don't know and cannot judge)... " Well, that is true. You don't know and you cannot judge. But I do know and I can judge*

*I am Sam's rabbi and have known him his entire life. And by the way, his name is Sam and not, as you mockingly call him, "Sammy." Sam's Bar Mitzvah was beautiful and meaningful, and Sam is not just some kid who had a blowout Bar Mitzvah party. He goes to our Hebrew School, has sung in the youth choir for years on Shabbat and the High Holidays, took his study of the Torah portion very seriously, loves being Jewish and loves Israel and the Jewish people. Sam requested that his guests not give him gifts, (the opposite of what most b'nai*

*mitzvah do) but rather that they contribute money to the Ben Yakir Youth Village in Israel. To celebrate becoming Bar Mitzvah, Sam went to Israel with his family. Unlike many kids his age, (at the time he was not even 13), Sam was focused on helping under-privileged Israeli kids rather than doing the "touristy" activities that most B'nai Mitzvah trips stress. He took this mitzvah very seriously and raised \$36,000.*

*You don't know Sam, David, but I do and the Sam I know is a sweet kid with a sensitive neshama (soul). The Sam I know loves to lead services from the bimah and sing the songs of his people. The Sam I know may come from a family of great financial means, but whose largesse to the Jewish Community and to Israel is an inspiration to all of us who have the privilege of knowing them. And I can attest that not only has his family passed on the value of giving and Tzedakah to Sam, but they possess a deep sense of Jewish belonging and commitment which permeates their family and is very much in Sam's heart and life.*

*The three minute dance he performed at his party, however questionable, hardly portrays a complete picture of who Sam is or his core values.*

*I have no problem with a rabbi railing against materialism, misplaced values, or exhorting the community to understand the sacred nature of Bar Mitzvah and its meaning. I have written and spoken about such issues for years in my own community. My issue with what you wrote, David, has to do with the vituperative tone of your words— the way they mock and humiliate one of the children of my synagogue in the public forum. Sam is not an object. He is a Tzelem Elohim, an image of God, who happens to have a passion for acting, dancing and singing.*

*I would have welcomed your criticism of the media's misappropriation of "Bar Mitzvah" and the sensationalism that has followed. But your words play right into that sensationalism and buttress the real travesty of this matter – the egregious and hateful words many have directed at a child of God, which have now gone viral on the Internet and blogosphere.*

*This is the month of Elul, a month of self-reflection and repentance. Humiliating anyone in public, let alone a teenager, flies in the face of the values that we would both agree are at the very heart of what it means to become Bar Mitzvah and to be Jew.*

*No, David, you don't know Sam Horowitz. And while I respect and love you, in this case I think you owe Sam an apology.*

*Bill*

Now, do you know what happened next? And do you know why I am telling you this story on Erev Rosh Hashanah? I am not just trying to sneak in a critique of over-the-top bnei mitzvah parties (that is a whole other sermon). And I am not simply reminding you to THINK BEFORE YOU write an email or post online ANYTHING (yet another sermon). And I do not want to focus on criticizing Rabbi Wolpe, because we all make mistakes. *Everyone*, even rabbis, make holes in fences. But *every one* of us has an opportunity to patch those fences even if they cannot be permanently fixed. Here's what happened next and here's why I am telling you all of this tonight.

In response to feedback from many, including Rabbi Gershon, Rabbi Wolpe publicly apologized- writing this follow-up piece in the Washington Post:

*The article was written at white heat. A few correspondents, and particularly my friend and colleague, Rabbi William Gershon, the Horowitz's rabbi, took me to task not for the points I made, but for appearing to insult a child and those who love him. I am truly sorry for that, and apologize to Sam and his family for anything I said that was wounding. As a Rabbi I should know better than to push "send" without calm and consideration. And I am additionally sorry for not addressing what is in some ways the greater and more pressing issue, which is not about any individual or family but about our community.*  
(Washington Post, August 20th)

Although Rabbi Wolpe -- a rabbi whose congregation serves Beverly Hills, by the way -- went on to reiterate the "lack of modesty, humility, and gratitude, found in many of our celebrations and synagogues," I believe that his response was coming from a place of true teshuvah, making a u-turn on his critique of a 13 year old boy, and recognizing the dangers of posting in anger, or haste. I could not have imagined a more perfect public playing out of the process of teshuvah during the month of Elul, and I am grateful for all that both Rabbi Gershon and Rabbi Wolpe taught me, and all of us, in this real-life scenario.

As we begin this New Year, with our focus on teshuvah, and with this incident in the back of our minds, here are some questions that I invite you to take with you tonight:

1. When was the last time that you posted something, e-mailed someone, or snapped in person in anger without thinking? What can you do to fix that hole in the fence?
2. When was the last time that you attacked someone's character, instead of constructively critiquing a particular issue? And what are you going to do about it?
3. To whom must you apologize, publicly or privately, this week as you prepare for Yom Kippur?

As our rabbis of old, and our rabbis of today have taught us- it is never too late to apologize. And while it cannot undo the damage that has been done, it is a good place to start. That is what it means for each of us to be a bar or bat mitzvah- a responsible Jewish adult.

*Shanah Tovah U'metukah.* I wish you and your family a sweet and good New Year.