

Rosh Hashanah 5776, Day 1
September 14, 2015

I am going to begin with a name: Bill Cosby. Until a few years ago, the name evoked laughter, stand-up comedy that mirrored the funny realities of family life. A man who was arguably “Dad” to a whole generation. A Black entertainer with a PhD who told young people of the importance of education. Now his name evokes derision, a sense of betrayal. Someone who did not practice the values he seemed to stand for in any way. He appears to have committed deliberate sexual assault numerous times, which in his eyes was simply an impressive “way with women.” We hear or read his name and the old feelings of warmth begin to come back, only to be suddenly repressed when we remember. And he is not the only one. There is Jared Fogel, hardly an icon, but someone respected for conquering his obesity and creating a million-dollar niche as a pitchman for the Subway chain. He is in jail for the sexual abuse of children. There is the Orthodox rabbi known as an ethicist, who is now in jail for secretly filming women in the mikvah for his own pleasure. There are rabbis and priests -- some prominent colleagues of mine, some local -- who had inappropriate relationships with minors, and went to unethical lengths to hide them. There are ultra-orthodox rabbis who told their flocks it was a sin to report child abuse to the police. Sometimes it feels like you can’t trust anybody. Even Atticus Finch is no longer a reliable source of decency, for the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is portrayed as a racist in Harper Lee’s new book *Go Set a Watchman*.

We live in an era of the collapse of heroes and leaders. This has been a trend for some time now. It has been decades since we have seen heroes like John F. Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover tarnished. But some of the stories from this past year or so have been simply mind-boggling. In an excellent article in the Orthodox Union’s magazine *Jewish Action*, Rabbi

Yitzhak Breitowitz addresses himself particularly to the very public failures in the rabbinic community. Rabbi Breitowitz writes, “We live in the era of the fallen hero—indeed the tragic hero who is destroyed by the fatal flaw that lies within.” He reflects on leadership failures that have created widespread cynicism and a sense of betrayal. These failures sometimes cause people not only to lose faith in those who speak for Torah, but “in the goodness and morality of the Torah itself.” In his words:

In some ways, this cynicism and loss of faith may be a greater tragedy than even the very real pain suffered by innocent victims (a pain that I certainly do not want to minimize in any way). The tragedy of cynicism presupposes that everything is tainted. Nothing good is real. No one is sincere. Everything is a gimmick. Everyone is a charlatan and a faker.

And what is the use of pretending otherwise?

What do we do about it? The first thing is that our communities have an obligation to protect our children and adults. All institutions are fallible, and it is a great sin to try to protect the community from shame instead of helping those in need. This is true whether we are talking about Penn State, a Catholic archdiocese, or a synagogue community. The Torah makes clear that when ethical breaches happen on our watch, we are responsible. There is a ritual in Deuteronomy where, if the body of a murder victim is found and the killer is unknown, the elders of the town make a sacrifice and try to win atonement for themselves. For the whole community bears guilt.

Furthermore, when abuse occurs there are victims who feel angry, betrayed, and confused, and they need to be able to express those feelings. As important as the laws of lashon ha-ra [slander] are, victims must be able to speak out. In addition, fixing the breaches that led to abuse must have input from the victims themselves. It was a positive sign, I thought, that after

the mikvah violation in Washington, the Rabbinical Council of America appointed some of the converts who had written online about their feelings of violation to a committee overseeing how conversions are done.

But at the same time, do not confuse Torah with those who claim to represent it. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that it is a big mistake to judge Judaism by the behavior of Jews. The court of public opinion has always been harsh, and in the overheated atmosphere of the internet it is even harsher. It is very easy to see a Rabbi or other respected figure fail and use that to justify a sometimes previously acquired hostility to religion or institutions in general. Most people who serve the community are dedicated people who strive to do the right thing.

Another point is that it is very easy to build a thick wall between “us” good people and “those” unethical ones. But one of the major points of the Torah is that we are not as righteous as we might think. Traditional Judaism has a lot of rules which work under the assumption that behavior can quickly become inappropriate. Unmarried men and women were not to be alone together, all the more so if one of them is married to another. Tzniut, rules of modesty, dictate the kind of conversation appropriate in public. I don’t believe it is realistic or even desirable that all of us should be strict about all these rules once again. But Rabbi Breitowitz -- who is also an attorney -- makes a comment that, strange as it may sound, professional workplace handbooks are beginning to read a lot like the “outdated” laws of the Shulchan Arukh, in the effort to emphasize appropriate behavior. We each have an obligation to consciously guard ourselves from problematic behavior, especially in the sexual realm. This is obviously an issue that has come up on a lot of college campuses. The Talmud asks the question, why doesn’t the Torah generally provide reasons for the mitzvot? The story that follows tells how King Solomon broke the Torah’s rules for a king, not to take too many wives or acquire too many horses. He figured

out reasons for these mitzvot, determined that the reasons did not apply to him, and therefore did not follow them. The Talmud sees this mistake as ultimately leading to the destruction of Jerusalem. Do not believe too fervently in your own righteousness.

Yet another caution is *al tivtekhu binedivim*, “Don’t put your trust in princes.” Do not worship any individual. Personal charisma is attractive, but it can also be dangerous. Rabbi Berel Wein writes:

We love the flash of brilliant insight, the devastating quip, the broad permanent smile, the warm embrace and the hero worship that characterize the person who possesses that elusive quality of charisma Yet, like all other seeming blessings, charisma carries within it seeds of self-destruction.

Why did Moses have a speech impediment? One commentary suggests it was so the people would not elevate him to a demigod, swept away by his hypnotic oratorical abilities. The great sage known as the Alter of Slobodka deliberately spoke in a dry monotone. Normally that is something we avoid like the plague. Think, “Bueller, Bueller.” But the Alter wanted his students to pay attention to the words and ideas that he was transmitting, not the charisma of the person delivering them. Rabbis and teachers with great charisma also sometimes tend towards the autocratic, instead of encouraging disciples to think for themselves. And it is very easy to reject the message when a charismatic messenger proves himself fallible.

Last but not least, in most cases we should not reject the possibility of teshuvah. In a case like Bill Cosby’s, it is not at all popular to speak of teshuvah. We want to express our revulsion by saying, “lock the door and throw away the key.” But perhaps we should not be so quick to reject the things we used to love about such a figure. Rabbi Breitowitz says:

The good that a person does is not destroyed by the evil. A lifetime of good work, Torah

scholarship and helping countless people in need is not destroyed by sin or mistake.

Every person will have to give a *din v'cheshbon* [accounting] for his *aveirot* [sins], but the bad does not cancel out the good. The good remains. The good within the person remains. It is still there. The fact that someone fails does not mean that his or her life was a failure.

Teshuvah is difficult. True teshuvah is rare, perhaps. It involves begging forgiveness of all those you have hurt, and of society for the damage you have caused. It means concrete action to begin to make up for the enormity of your sin. But it is also possible. The Kabbalistic tradition asks why the royal line was given to Jacob's son Judah, instead of Joseph. Joseph is famous for his rejection of temptation, when his master's wife tries to seduce him. Judah sins with his daughter-in-law Tamar, and he sins by suggesting selling Joseph into slavery. But through hard work he gets himself back into God's good graces, and becomes the agent of healing for his family, when it is he who approaches Joseph to beg for the life of his brother Benjamin. The tradition wants us to understand the awesome power of teshuvah, which in some ways makes a person better than if they were a total *tzaddik* from the start.

One of the most evocative lines of twentieth century music comes in the last stanza of the Simon and Garfunkel classic "Mrs. Robinson." "Where have you gone, Joe Dimaggio? A nation lifts its lonely eyes to you. What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson -- Joltin' Joe has left and gone away?" Joe Dimaggio once confronted Paul Simon about those lyrics -- he thought somehow he was being made fun of -- and Simon explained that the Yankee Clipper had been a true hero of his youth, and he was expressing the fact that such heroes were harder and harder to come by in a more cynical age. One could argue that the twenty-first century has only brought more cynicism. But even though we shouldn't put our absolute trust in any public figure, even

sometimes religious leaders, it does not mean that all our values about behavior are for nought. Most religious leaders, and many other public figures, remain basically decent people on whom we can rely in time of crisis. May we protect ourselves from the sin that it is so easy to fall into. Let us put our absolute trust only in God, and -- when choosing our models for behavior -- make quiet modesty and middot [worthy qualities] more important than incredible charisma. This Rosh Hashanah, let us reflect on the awesome power of teshuvah, available even to those who have besmirched God's very name. As Jews and people of faith, these are the messages that are our duty to send to the world.