Drasha/Sermon Create Your Real World by Practicing Loyalty

A while back country music singer Alan Jackson wrote the song, Here in the Real World. I'd like to begin today's drasha by sharing the song's opening lines.

Cowboys don't cry, and heroes don't die

Good always wins, again and again

And love is a sweet dream, that always comes true

Oh if life were like the movies, I'd never be blue

But here in the real world it's not that easy at all.

'Cause when hearts get broken, it's real tears that fall.

This past week, football fans in Los Angeles were ecstatic, but there was no joy in either Mudville or St. Louis. Real tears fell when St. Louis football fans suffered a tough lesson in the world of pro sports. As you probably heard, NFL owners approved the plan of Stan Kroenke to move his St. Louis Rams to a palatial stadium he will build on an old horse track in Inglewood, Calif.

Did Kroenke have the right to make the move? If a multibillionaire pro sports owner can make an extra buck somewhere else, there isn't much anyone can do to stop it. But some St. Louis Rams fans -- or should I say, former St. Louis Rams fans -- are doing more than just crying in their Budweiser. A class-action lawsuit was filed Wednesday in St. Louis Circuit Court. The suit alleges that Kroenke and Chief Operating Officer Kevin Demoff made false and misleading statements over the years indicating the team had no intention of leaving St. Louis, violating Missouri's Merchandising Practices Act.

What is the suit seeking? In essence: If Kroenke lied about his intentions, and fans paid up as a result, Kroenke just may owe them -- not only a refund, but money to punish him for his wrongdoing. Among the statements in the lawsuit:

Demoff was asked after Kroenke's purchase of land in Inglewood about the Rams' future and said, "I expect it will be right here in St. Louis."

In a 2010 interview, Kroenke said "I’m born and raised in Missouri. I’ve been a Missourian for 60 years. People in our state know me. People know I can be trusted. People know I am an honorable guy. I’m going to attempt to do everything that I can do to keep the Rams in St. Louis, just as I did everything that I could to bring the team to St. Louis in 1995. I believe my actions speak for themselves.”

They certainly do, Mr. Kroenke.

Will the lawsuit be successful? I don't have a crystal ball, but don't bet your Kurt Warner jersey on it.

Here in the real world -- at least, in the world of business, money, and pro sports -- everything is negotiable. In Alan Jackson's real world, good doesn't always win again and again. Loyalty has a price. And that makes sense in a world where people live by such aphorisms as:

\* Time is money

\* How much is enough? A little bit more

\* When money talks, people listen

But in a world based upon spiritual values, loyalty doesn't have a price and isn't negotiable. Loyalty is the nuts and bolts of commitment and the cement of any relationship. And here in our real world -- the world of our relationships and our community -- loyalty is something we can't live without.

Take marriage.

Marriage is built on a commitment that's forever; loyalty is the trait that provides it. It means you can trust, rely and count on someone. Without it, there is no marriage -- only two lone travelers sharing the same quarters.

A kehila - a spiritual community founded upon Torah values and principles, such as ours here at Nusach Hari B'nai Zion, is also based on commitment. And loyalty is the trait that provides it. Practice makes perfect, and loyalty requires practice.

This Shabbos is our 'Installation Shabbos', where continuing and new members of our synagogue's leadership affirm their commitment to our shul. In that light I'd like to share some insights about loyalty. Following are four ways to practice loyalty in order to deepen our relationship commitments.

The noted actress, Simone Signoret, wrote: “Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads which sew people together through the years.” It's the day-to-day activities and events give partners shared experiences and memories. Noted Jewish educator and outreach expert Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald said, "You can't have quality time without quantity time."

The first step in practicing loyalty is: Being there.

In a relationship, you have to be there in body and presence -- not just in spirit. Once in a while someone will tell me, "Rabbi, I'd love to be there at shul for Shabbos (or an event). I can't make it but I'll be there in spirit!"

Can you imagine a husband saying to his wife, "Honey, I'd love to spend time with you Saturday night. I'm going out with the boys. But I'll be with you in spirit!"

Over time, small moments of being there grow into a shared history that is deep and binding. We feel strongly connected to our spouse not just because we feel love for him or her, but because we have a life together, every day, including good times and bad. We feel connected to our synagogue not just because we love it and have a history with it. Our regular participation in the day-to-day smiles, tears, and growth tie us to our relatives, friends and community,

Prioritize your time to give more to that which is important. Family events. Meals at home. Minyan. Regularly attending shul, at least on Shabbos. Practice your loyalty and deepen your commitment by being there.

Are you your partner’s first critic or first cheerleader?

In popular culture, sarcasm and playful criticism are often glorified. Sometimes we’re entertained by television and movies that show spouses and friends mocking each other and that negatively emphasize differences between men and women. Especially when children come along, new parents go through so many changes and life becomes more hectic. What we really need to emphasize is the togetherness between husbands and wives. Parenting is hard, so it’s easy to feel incompetent as a new parent.

When a guest begins to frequent a shul and later becomes a member -- and perhaps become involved in synagogue leadership -- there's a learning curve needed to become familiar with a new shul culture.

As you struggle in or begin new relationships, it’s especially important to defend and generously build each other up in your conversations with each other. A second way to practice loyalty and deepen your commitment is by being a cheerleader, not a critic.

A third way of practicing loyalty is simply to listen to our partner with full attention.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches in the name of a famous rabbi: "All my life I have lived among the sages, but never found anything as good for the body as silence."

Supportive, whole-hearted listening lets our partner know that he or she is really our first priority. It takes time and effort to understand one another and to be cheerleaders for each other. And, because in marriage -- especially when children come along -- new parents go through so many changes and life becomes more hectic, loyal listening can be even more difficult. But we also need it more than ever. A real friend is someone who cares enough about his friend to truly pay attention to what he or she is saying.

When a synagogue grows, many new faces appear, programming increases exponentially, and loyal listening can be even more difficult. But we need then more than ever. The path of least resistance in a synagogue is to not get involved and sit on the sidelines. Taking an active role in your synagogue requires attending meetings. Lots of meetings. Sometimes, long meetings. But that's how good things are accomplished. And when you listen with full attention, non-judgementally, great things can happen.

Deepen your commitment by loyally listening.

A fourth and final way of practicing loyalty is gratitude.

Loyalty means remembering all that you owe to your spouse and being true to your shared history and shared future. That leads to a constant effort to keep your relationship strong. Cultivating a close relationship is a life-long process, but it gets easier over time as the trait of gratitude becomes second nature.

We may give generously in our relationships. But the frequent realization that we have an unpayable debt of gratitude to those who have given us so much will deepen our commitment to our loved ones and to our community.

There's sadness in St. Louis with the departure of our football team. But some Rams fans might not know that the franchise began as the Cleveland Rams in 1936. The team was somewhat successful, even winning the NFL championship in 1945. Guess what happened the following year? The team moved to Los Angeles! In 1979 the Rams moved to Anaheim. Then, in 1995 to St. Louis. Next year, in 2017: Back to LA.

That's how pro sports work, and that's what fans should remember the next time they are marketed to as being part of a "[insert team name] Nation," or told they are the greatest in the world. Here in the 'real world', everything is negotiable, and loyalty has a price. If an owner can make an extra buck somewhere else, there isn't much anyone can do to stop it.

But here in our real world, we can construct a beautiful world of deep relationships and supportive communities. How? Through deep commitment nurtured by practiced loyalty.