

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason Parshas Re'eh August 15, 2015

“John Urschel: The NFL's Unusual ‘Mathlete’!”

John Urschel is widely known for being the smartest player on the NFL's Baltimore Ravens. That's what makes his choice in cars even more confounding to his teammates. John proudly drives a used 2013 Nissan Versa -- a strong candidate for the humblest vehicle in the Ravens' parking lot -- even though his rookie contract was a four-year, \$2.364 million deal. What is a 6-foot-3, 308-pound NFL lineman doing in a compact car? John's explanation for driving his \$9,000 used "dream car": "It's great on gas. It's surprisingly spacious. And you know what the best feeling is? You're driving into a parking deck, it's near full and you're on the first level and there is that space that everyone has passed because they said, 'No, we can't park in there.' And I take my Versa and I just go right in there. I'm on the first level, parking lot full and everyone else is parking on the upper deck where the car is getting hot. I'm not even taking the stairs." So, how many offensive lineman can it fit? "It only needs to fit one," John said with a smile.

John Urschel certainly knows his numbers. He earned a bachelor's degree from Penn State in three years and spent his senior year getting his master's degree in mathematics while teaching integral vector calculus trigonometry during the fall semester. He's been interviewed by Rolling Stone, the New York Times and National Public Radio, and has shared his insights on simplifying complex data with the National Security Agency. The NFL lineman recently spent a morning with students in Maryland as part of a Discovery Education event, telling them the joys of math and science. John Urschel has had numerous papers published in journals, including his latest one, "A Cascadic Multigrid Algorithm for Computing the Fiedler Vector of Graph Laplacians." (ed. note: 'Huh?') The humble "mathlete" lives on less than \$25,000 a year to help save money, and even took on a roommate last year to mitigate the cost of the home he leased during the season. "I'm very much a hermit. I do my football. I do my math, and I like to keep to myself," he says. "As social as I'll get on the weekends is probably doing some math in Starbucks with other people."

Humility is not only a calming and healing attribute, but enables us to act more easily with respect toward others. The humble person doesn't feel the need to appear stronger, wiser, wealthier or better than others in any way. Instead of seeking honor, humility frees us to honor others. And paradoxically, in the end we become honored anyway, as Ethics of the Fathers (4:1) teaches: *“Who is honored? He who honors others, as it is said: ‘For those who honor Me will I honor, and those who scorn Me will be degraded’ (I Samuel 2:30).*

Parshas Re'eh -- Deuteronomy 11:26 - 16:17

Moses informs the Jewish people that we each face a choice; choose to observe G-d's directions for living (i.e. the Torah) and receive blessings, or choose to ignore G-d and experience estrangement and its consequences. Moses then turns to describing a number of religious, civil and social laws relevant once the Jewish people enter the Promised Land. Included in this listing are:

- Don't imitate the ways of the nations surrounding you
- A false prophet who attempts to entice you to idolatry should be put to death
- Since the Torah is complete and perfect, nothing may be added to or subtracted from it
- Self infliction of wounds on the body as a sign of mourning is prohibited
- As a holy people, refrain from eating non-kosher food
- Be particularly warm-hearted and charitable. Many laws and guidelines concerning tzedaka (righteous giving) are found in this week's portion
- The three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavous and Sukkos) are opportunities to ascend (make aliyah) to Jerusalem and the Temple to celebrate our blessings

Rabbinic Ruminations

Google had an M&M problem. In company offices, employees were eating too much of the free candy. So, with a strategy known as *Project M&M*, a special ops force of behavioral science PhDs conducted surveys of snacking patterns, collected data on the proximity of M&M bins to any given employee, consulted academic papers on food psychology, and launched an experiment. The experiment: What if

the company kept the chocolates hidden in opaque containers but prominently displayed dried figs, pistachios and other healthful snacks in glass jars? The results: Over the course of seven weeks, their 2000 employees at the New York offices consumed 3.1 million fewer calories.

As the Google example highlights, by avoiding temptation or, at the very least, minimizing exposure to triggers of temptation, it is easier to promote and sustain behavior change. B.J. Fogg PhD, founder and director of the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University, theorizes that behavior is fueled by three components, and each must be present for a behavior to occur. They are: 1. Motivation 2. Ability 3. Trigger. By definition, motivation requires willpower and willpower is hard to maintain. Ever have the experience of waking up in the morning motivated to eat well, but by evening losing your motivation and gobbling up half a quart of ice cream? It is a lot easier to make a task easy and simple. As described above in the Google example, simply remove the trigger: Without the visual trigger of colorful M&Ms, employees were less tempted to consume them.

Teshuva is on the forefront of our collective minds as we approach the High Holidays. Often translated as 'repentance', *tshuva* literally means 'return'; a return to G-d and to the best version of ourselves. An integral component of *tshuva* is *azivas hachet* -- "abandoning" or desisting from sin. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur present all of us, adults and children alike, with a great opportunity to turn over a new leaf and come closer to G-d. Perhaps this year we can establish a personally-tailored Project M&M to bring about meaningful long-term change in at least one area of our life.

Quote of the Week

True forgiveness is when you can say: Thank you for that experience. -- *Oprah Winfrey*

Joke of the Week

A would-be Romeo was seated next to an attractive woman on a coast-to-coast flight. Summoning all of his nerve, he said, "What type of man attracts you?"

"I've always been drawn to Native American men," she said. "They're so in tune with nature."

"I see," the man said, nodding.

"But then," she continued. "I really go for Jewish men who put women on a pedestal, and I can hardly resist the way Southern men treat their ladies with such respect."

"Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Running Bear Goldstein, but all my friends call me Bubba."