

**Parsha Shemoth, 12/21/2013 - 5774**

**Sermon/Drasha "Selfie-ism"**

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Football fans will recognize the name of Don Shula. Shula was coach of the Miami Dolphins in the 1970s, the team he led to two Super Bowl victories and to the National Football League's only perfect season. Coach Shula was named the 1993 Sportsman of the Year by Sports Illustrated, and currently holds the NFL record for most career wins with 347. Don Shula was a great coach ..... with a great sense of humor.

Coach Shula tells a priceless story about himself. He said that he wished to take his wife to a quiet place for vacation. They chose a small seaside town in Maine, where they could relax without people recognizing them. When they arrived it was raining, so they decided to go see a movie. When they entered the theater, the house lights were on and they were surprised that the small handful of people gave them a warm round of applause as they sat down.

Secretly pleased, Shula whispered to his wife, "I guess there isn't any place I'm not known."

A man came over with a friendly smile and shook hands with Shula and his wife. "I'm surprised you know me here," said Shula.

"Should I know you?" asked the man, puzzled. "We're just glad to see you folks -- the manager said he wouldn't start the film until at least ten people came in."

Ego. At times it gets the best of us, doesn't it?

*Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: Jealousy, lust and the [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world.  
Avos 4:28*

We all want to be top banana. The desire to see MY name in lights is part of the human condition.

A conductor of a great symphony was once asked, "What instrument do you think is the most difficult to play?" The old conductor thought for a moment, then said, "Second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists. But to find someone who can play second fiddle with enthusiasm, that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddles, we have no harmony."

Wanting to be first violinist -- and not play second fiddle -- is an old problem that vexes us today.

I'm sure some of you heard the news that the Oxford English dictionary just announced "**selfie**" as their International Word of the Year 2013. Frequency of the word in the English language has increased by 17,000% during the past 12 months. And it's not just that people are using the word a lot. What it describes has become a universal obsession.

In case you don't know, selfies are self-portraits taken on smartphones and uploaded to social media. More than 53 million of these pictures have been tagged #selfie on the photo-sharing site Instagram. 93% of teenagers take pride in regularly using them, and you see them all the time on the Internet.

Mobile phones now come with cameras specially designed for the arm's length selfie shot. And their message is always the same: me, me, me.

Facebook and Twitter have been elevated to a new level of narcissism. We are no longer content to share ideas; we only want to share our photos. All this reminds me of the joke: How many egomaniacs does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: One -- he just holds onto the bulb, and the whole world revolves around him. The worshipers of selfies give new meaning to the word "idolatry" - ignoring everything in their surroundings except for themselves.

Everyone is vulnerable to 'Selfie-ism' -- even rabbis.

A number of years ago a rabbi gave what he thought was a terrific sermon. He thought to himself, 'This is undoubtedly my finest hour as a rabbi.' Unequaled eloquence, he felt, seemed to roll off his lips. Afterwards the rabbi commented, he thought rather modestly, to his wife, "I wonder how many great rabbis there are in the world?"

The Rebbitzin said, "One less than you think."

The past few months gave us incredible examples of 'Selfie-ism.'

While scores of onlookers watched in horror as a suicidal man prepared to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, a bystander turned her back to the scene, angled her phone toward the bridge and snapped a shot which would prominently feature her profile -- even as it included the less significant sight in the background. To complete the picture, the scarf-clad blonde cracked a thin smile just to make sure she looked her best.

The "Selfie Hall of Fame" for the past year has been on display on a website that included selfies at funerals, featuring young people frighteningly unaware of the inappropriateness of their self-centeredness. "Love my hair today. Hate why am dressed up #Funeral" texted one teenager with herself in the foreground and the corpse of her deceased grandmother visible in the background in an open casket.

The clear winner for most outrageous selfie -- because of the prominence of its participants -- is the one that went viral around the world, featuring a trio of political superstars attending the memorial service for former South African president Nelson Mandela. At what was meant to have been a solemn service recognizing the achievements of the person who brought apartheid to an end, we witnessed three heads of state happily giggling their way through a selfie session.

Long ago, Judaism recognized that the greatest threat to the worship of God is the idolization of the ego. The 10 Commandments begin with the verse "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." The first word is "I". Why is "I" the first word of the Decalogue?

Hashem asks us to replace the personal obsession we have with our own selves for an awareness of a higher power who controls the world. In a profound sense, the Torah does indeed teach "an I for an I" -- to substitute the supremacy of the Creator for the feeling of our own importance.

Isn't it refreshing when people in the spotlight don't take themselves too seriously? Democratic Senator Ernest "Fritz" Hollings served in the U.S. Senate for over 38 years, making him the 8th-longest serving Senator in U.S. history. Sen. Hollings used to tell colleagues he once took a polygraph test to find out what the lie-detector fuss was all about. But Hollings, a silver-haired, flamboyant orator, said he flunked the test when he started a sentence with: "In my humble opinion ..."

Rabbi Benjamin Blech said that his father once taught him a profound insight into the prayer with which we begin every day. In Hebrew, we recite *modeh ani*. It is a prayer of thanksgiving for the return of our souls after sleep, a blessing of gratitude for the first of G-d's gifts to us throughout our waking day. In English the opening phrase is translated "I give thanks." When he was old enough to understand the Hebrew words, the young Ben Blech asked his father why the Hebrew seems to be written in a grammatically incorrect way. The word *modeh* means to thank; it is the word *ani* that means I. Should we not, he questioned, read it "*ani modeh*," the way we say it in English, "I give thanks"?

No, the rabbi's father responded. That would make the first word out of our mouths every single day the word "*ani*" – I. That's impossible for a Jew – to think first and foremost of himself. Let the first word to come from our lips be *modeh*, demonstrating gratitude is more important than ego. All that we have comes from G-d.

The antidote to Selfie-ism is an attitude of gratitude -- as this beautiful story, with which I'd like to conclude, demonstrates.

A young boy was watching his mother pay bills. The little boy asked "Mom, what are you doing?" She replied "Well honey, I am paying bills- which means I am writing checks to pay money for the work that other people have done for me."

Suddenly the little boy had an idea! That day he worked extra hard around the house and slipped a note under his mom's bedroom door at night. When she woke up the next morning she saw a piece of paper, which said "BILL" at the top. Underneath it said "Taking out the trash – \$5. Doing the dishes – \$5. Cleaning up my room – \$10. Total Amount Due – \$20." That day the mom paid the young boy \$20 in cash.

However, the next morning the little boy woke up and saw a piece of paper under *his* door. At the top it was marked "BILL." Underneath it said, "Cooking for you every day that you've been alive – \$5000. All the clothes you've ever worn – \$10,000. Changing all of your diapers and cleaning up after you your entire childhood – \$20,000."

The only difference was at the very bottom it said "Total Amount Due – \$0. Paid in full by the love that you give me each and every day."

You see friends, if there is one thing we should learn in this life is that we never really *give* anything...every once in a while we simply get a chance to pay back a little bit of all that we *owe*.

The most generous givers simply give out of thankfulness for all that's been given to them.

All that we have comes from G-d. This is what you must remember your entire life, and it's the antidote to Selfie-ism. Be grateful, and turn your camera around and worship Him, not yourself.

(with thanks to Rabbi Benjamin Blech)