

## Sermon / Drasha Parshas Akev "A Job Well Done"

To some, he was Mr. Coffee. To others, he was the man who for decades regularly sent red roses to the grave of his second wife, Marilyn Monroe. There also were those who knew him only because of a musical question, "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?" But baseball fans knew him long before any of that. And in 1999, there was a sad truth provided by the second part of the Simon and Garfunkel lyric: "Joltin' Joe has left and gone away."

The son of an immigrant crab fisherman, DiMaggio was one of nine children in a family that also sent two brothers to the major leagues. He was born Giuseppe Paolo DiMaggio, but came to be known as the Yankee Clipper while being the best player of baseball's best team for 13 seasons. DiMaggio has what many consider the one batting record that will never be broken: a hit in 56 consecutive games.

DiMaggio's seemingly effortless grace in center field and at the plate has inspired countless odes. Les Brown and his Band of Renown dedicated a song to DiMaggio in the '40s, and even Nobel Prize-winning author Ernest Hemingway devoted several passages of dialogue to DiMaggio in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Yankees manager Casey Stengel said of DiMaggio:

"Joe did everything so naturally that half the time he gave the impression he wasn't trying. He made the rest of them look like plumbers."

Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda said:

"He was the kind of guy that exemplified what a major leaguer should be like, act like, and play like."

What was Joltin' Joe's secret to success?

In the late innings of a game toward the end of the season, the Yankees had the game -- and the season -- comfortably in hand. A long fly ball to center field could have been comfortably played off the wall by center fielder DiMaggio, holding the batter to a double. However, DiMaggio took off after the hard-hit smash, caught it, bounced off the center field wall, and came up holding onto the ball for a putout. It was a typical outstanding DiMaggio play.

Following the game a reporter asked DiMaggio why he went for that long fly ball, given that the outcome of both the game and season had already been determined. DiMaggio said, "I went for that ball because maybe there was some kid in the park who had never seen me play."

Joe DiMaggio played the game with pride. It was pride that motivated him to be one of the all-time greats on the field -- and from all reports, a decent, dignified man of exceptional character off the field. And it was pride that led him to strive for personal and professional excellence, paying attention to the smallest of details.

Taking pride in one's work and paying attention to details is a topic found in this week's parsha.

*V'haya eikev tishma'oon* (Deut.7:12) *And it will be, because you will listen ....*

The plain meaning of *eikev* is 'because'; however, it can also mean 'heel.' Rashi explains that if you perform the small mitzvos that one treads upon with his heel (*eikev*); Hashem will safeguard His covenant and kindness that He swore to your forefathers.

The 'big mitzvos' certainly matter. But if you're striving for excellence and trying to rise above mediocrity to be not simply a 'good Jew', but an 'outstanding Jew', you'll realize that the little mitzvos are also of great importance. You'll be All-Stars in the Hall of Fame that really matters: Hashem's Hall of Fame.

Taking pride in a job well-done has become, sadly, a lost art. But on occasion we come across someone who has a great work ethic and takes pride in a job well-done.

A large, well established, lumber camp advertised that they were looking for a good lumberjack. The next day, a skinny little man showed up at the camp with his axe, and knocked on the head lumberjacks' door. The head lumberjack took one look at the little man and told him to leave.

"Just give me a chance to show you what I can do," said the skinny man.

"Okay, see that giant tree over there?" said the lumberjack. "Take your axe and go cut it down."

The skinny man headed for the tree, and in five minutes he was back knocking on the lumberjack's door.

"I cut the tree down," said the man.

The lumberjack couldn't believe his eyes and said, "Where did you get the skill to chop down trees like that?"

"In the Sahara Forest," replied the puny man.

"You mean the Sahara Desert," said the lumberjack.

The little man laughed and answered back, "Oh sure, that's what they call it now!"

When's the last time you met someone who took great pride in their work?

English writer Jerome K. Jerome said, "I love work; it fascinates me; I can sit and watch it for hours." That great philosopher Dobie Gillis once said, "I don't have anything against work. I just figure, why deprive somebody who really loves it?"

When we talk about pride, many people mistake pride for selfishness. When I looked up pride in a thesaurus, I was shocked at the suggestions -- haughtiness, arrogance, conceit, smugness, self-importance, egotism, vanity, immodesty, superiority and on and on. Maybe there isn't a good synonym. To be honest, I'm not even sure how to refer to this type of pride in Hebrew. But pride to me is having a positive, can-do attitude because you will settle for nothing less than your absolute best.

The American work ethic has been in decline for decades, and the entitlement mentality has stained workers of all ages in all levels and forms of employment.

Have you ever heard of Roman Hruska? Hruska was a Republican Senator from the state of Nebraska. He was known as one of the most vocal conservatives in the U.S. Senate during the 1960s and 1970s. Hruska is

best remembered in American political history for a 1970 speech he made to the Senate urging them to confirm the nomination of G. Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court.

Responding to criticism that Carswell had been a mediocre judge, Hruska said, "Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they, and a little chance? We can't have all Brandeises, Frankfurters and Cardozos."

And that was 40 years ago! Today, mediocrity has slowly crept into society and become institutionalized. You don't believe me? Check out the apathetic cashiers at the supermarket, repairmen who have to come out a second (or third) time because they didn't care enough to do the job right the first time, shoddy workmanship in the items we buy ...the list is almost endless.

There are three aspects to taking pride in your work.

First, understand that whatever you do -- for a living, and otherwise -- your signature is on it. You can't buy a reputation; you have to earn it. Would you buy a product from someone who didn't take pride in their work? Would you hire a teenager to cut your grass or a mechanic to work on your car who didn't take pride in his work.

In one of my favorite stories from the turn of the previous century, a new Jewish immigrant to America from Eastern Europe took his pregnant wife to the hospital but during the delivery of the twin babies, he fainted. The father's brother had to be brought into the room to name them. "My brother named the kids?" the father asked. "My brother barely speaks English. What did he name the girl?"

"He named her Denise" said the doctor. "Denise? Well, that's not such a bad name" said the father. "I kind of like it. And what did he name the boy", he asked?"

"Da nephew."

The Torah teaches us that there is nothing more precious than a good name. In the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), we read, "a good name is more precious than fine oil" (7:1). *Pirkei Avot* / Ethics of the Fathers teaches, "There are four crowns in Jewish tradition: the crown of royalty, the crown of priesthood, the crown of Torah, and the crown of a good reputation" (4:17).

Your name is on everything you do. Pay attention to the details, and you'll have a name more valuable than solid gold.

A second facet of taking pride in your work means understanding that your name not only affects your own reputation, but the reputation of those you represent.

As a member of a family, a shul, and a community -- to the degree you take pride in your efforts, you shape people's image of who and what you represent.

Imagine sitting down for a twenty minute chat with someone from Denmark. If you had not previously had a personal encounter with someone from that nation, your impression of the Danish people will be formed by that initial conversation. If you found the Dane to be polite, respectful, intelligent and friendly, you will likely have a positive mental association of all people from Denmark.

Imagine being a first-time visitor to a synagogue. You are warmly welcomed at the door by a greeter, offered an honor during the service, personally greeted by the rabbi following services, and then during kiddush asked to sit a table filled with warm, interesting shul regulars. How will you later feel about that synagogue?

Third and finally, when we take pride in who we are as Jews and strive to be the best possible Jews we can be -- it makes a big impact because as the Chosen People, G-d's name is on us.

In a recent New York Times column titled "The Weiner Spitzer Summer," Gail Collins wrote about the events surrounding Anthony Weiner, Eliot Spitzer and Bob Filner, three Jewish politicians seeking to move on after their well-publicized misdeeds. Collins also brought in the bewildering case of Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), who was caught tweeting and deleting messages to a bikini model during the State of the Union address in February.

In her column, Collins did not identify the protagonists as Jewish. But the constant appearance in the news of 'Jews Acting Poorly' is particularly painful for all of us. Ann Lewis, who previously served as White House communications director, said about Weiner [et.al.](#), "If we need a reminder of how Jews are like everyone else, this is a useful one."

Is that true? Are we like everyone else? If that is the perception of those around us (non-Jews, and our fellow Jews) -- we're failing miserably. Our mission is to be a 'light unto the nations of the world'; we are ambassadors of the Almighty, and should take pride in the special role we've been given. Having G-d's name upon us means we have to act the part.

I'd like to conclude with the following story.

As a professional photographer, Julie took a lot of pride in her work, and brought samples everywhere she went in hopes of getting new business. One evening she was at a dinner party, and her host asked to see her portfolio. She showed him over a dozen pictures, and the host was impressed.

"These are some really nice shots," he told her. "You must have a great camera."

Julie was annoyed at the suggestion that it was her camera – not her talent – that allowed her to take great pictures. But she said nothing until the meal was over.

"That dinner was excellent," she said.

"Thank you," said the host, pleased. "I prepared it myself."

Julie smiled. "You must have some great pots and pans."

Joltin' Joe has left and gone away, but that doesn't mean we can't live our lives with the same type of pride. Remember that whatever you do, no matter how small, has your signature on it. The 'Universal Sandbox Values' that our parents taught us -- reliability, hard work, initiative, respect, integrity, gratitude -- are the details upon which successful lives are built. Parshas Akev teaches us to pay attention to details. And in whatever you do, take pride in yourself and in a job well done.