

Sermon/ Drasha -- Parshas Tetzaveh, 5774-2014 "Poles and the three Ps"
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You may have heard that there's a football game scheduled tomorrow. They call it 'The Super Bowl'. *Super Bowl Sunday* -- a day that has virtually attained the status of a national holiday -- is almost upon us. The game itself, together with the over-the-top halftime show, is the-most viewed television event of the year. Last year, the average cost of a 30-second advertisement was \$4 million. That's a lot of nachos.

Personally, I'm rooting for Denver for two reasons: First, Peyton Manning, the Denver quarterback, is a class act. And second, Pete Carroll, the Seattle coach, used to coach at USC -- and I went to UCLA!

I'm not emotionally invested in the game, and certainly won't be broken-hearted if Seattle wins. There is one thing, though, that I really love about sports -- particularly competitive sports played at the highest levels. That is: it reminds me of how there are still people on the planet that dedicate their life in the pursuit of their goals and who strive to achieve excellence.

Most people don't. A lot of people are wandering through the mindless minutiae of everyday life without much focus on anything.

They aren't in pursuit. They aren't chasing. They aren't pushing. They aren't striving. And perhaps not coincidentally, the importance of striving for excellence is presented in this week's parsha.

The poles shall remain in the rings of the Ark; they may not be removed from it (Exodus 25:15)

The *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark) had cherubic images atop a golden, rectangular box, and two long poles inserted into rings built into the side of the Holy Ark. In the above-mentioned verse, the Torah tells us that the poles inserted into the rings were never to be removed.

Given that other furnishings in the Tabernacle had poles (namely, two altars) why was the Holy Ark singled out that its poles not be removed? And perhaps more perplexing, the prohibition of removing the poles of the Holy Ark is listed as one of the 613 *mitzvos* (commandments). What lesson could be possibly be so significant from this statute that the removal of poles be ranked among the 613 mitzvos? Is there a lesson in this mitzvah deserving of inclusion with fundamental Torah principles such as Shabbat, kashrut, and honoring one's parents?

Stephen King wrote about his own writing habit in his 1999 book *On Writing*. He poo-poo's writing workshops and says in a nutshell, if you want to become a better writer, write a LOT. (He also says to read a lot, but that's another topic). King writes several hours a day. Every day. Including Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. And he's got dozens of bestsellers to show for it.

Milton rose every morning at 4 A.M. to write *Paradise Lost*. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* took Gibbon 26 painstaking years to complete. Ernest Hemingway is said to have reviewed *The Old Man and the Sea* manuscript eighty times before submitting it for publication. Outstanding writing requires outstanding effort.

To return to our questions about the poles of the Holy Ark: Something remarkable about the Holy Ark was that it traveled under its own power and actually carried its bearers with it. The act of carrying was only an illusion. In real terms, those who carried the Holy Ark contributed nothing to its transportation, and yet there's special emphasis in keeping the poles of the bearers in place. Why is this so?

To teach us a profound lesson . Every person in the world -- not just great writers -- is obligated to accomplish as much good as he possibly can. He or she is obligated to exert maximum effort in both the material and spiritual realms. This is called *hishtadlus*. Ever hear the expression, 'G-d helps those who help themselves'? It's a Jewish concept.

Although we know in the final analysis that Hashem controls the world and everything that happens in it, we shouldn't say, "Why should I bother when it is all up to Hashem anyway?" G-d wants us to exert ourselves to the full extent of our abilities, as if it were all up to us.

True, the Holy Ark carried itself, and for that very reason that the poles must never be removed. Don't delude yourself, says the Torah, into thinking you don't need to lift up the poles because it won't make a difference anyway. The permanent poles are there to remind you that you are always obligated to do your utmost - no matter what.

Doing the most we can do has three parts I call 'The 3 Ps': Plans, Persistence, and Perseverance

1) Plans & Goals

There is a famous study involving graduates of Yale U. from the class of 1952. The students involved in this study were asked if they had a clear, specific set of goals for their future, and if they were written down with a plan for achieving them. Only three percent of those interviewed said that they did.

Twenty years later the researchers went back and interviewed the surviving members of that class. They discovered something amazing: The 3 percent with specific written goals had achieved more in financial terms than the entire other 97 percent put together. They also seemed to be happier and more 'together' in every way.

Astounding things can be accomplished if you set out plans and make goals -- like John Goddard.

John Goddard is the famous California adventure-seeker who earned the nickname "the real life Indiana Jones." When John was 15, he overheard his grandmother saying, "If only I had done this when I was young." At that moment, young John resolved not to be part of the army of "If only I had done this," and sat down and decided what he wanted to do with his life. He wrote down 127 goals.

He listed 17 mountains he wanted to climb, and 10 rivers he wanted to explore. He wanted to have a career in medicine, visit every country in the world, learn to fly an airplane, retrace the travels of Marco Polo, and ride a horse in the Pasadena Rose Parade. Other goals were to read the Bible from cover to cover, read the works of Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, Dickens and a dozen other classic authors. He wanted to become an Eagle Scout, dive in a submarine, go on a church mission, play the flute and violin, marry and have children, and read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica.

So how did he do? John Goddard ran out of time and didn't quite complete his list. He passed away last year at the age of 88 -- but not before checking off 109 of his goals. He lived an absolutely incredible life.

Among the places he didn't see? The North Pole and the moon. But he did achieve the last two goals on his list: marry and have children (goal No. 126) and live to see the 21st century (No. 127). And he left

behind six children, 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren -- and a legacy of a full, well-lived life because of the plan he created when he was 15.

Avos 2:20 Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses."

Always have plans and goals, regardless of your age. When the great architect Frank Lloyd Wright was asked at the age of 90 to single out his finest work, he answered, "My next one."

The work is great. The beginning of *hishtadlus* -- our obligatory effort -- is to have plans and goals.

2) Persistence

In a 1995 interview ex-Beatle Paul McCartney said he once wrote a song with the first line, "Scrambled eggs, oh my baby how I love your legs."

Ever heard that song?

Not likely. McCartney had the tune in head, but struggled to come up with the right lyrics. After many months, he tossed those words and wrote, "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away."

Since then "Yesterday" has played on the radio more than 6 million times, more than any other record in history." Its entry in *Guinness World Records* states that, by January 1986, 1,600 cover versions had been made. "Yesterday" was voted the best song of the 20th century in a 1999 poll of music experts and listeners and was also voted the No. 1 Pop song of all time by MTV and *Rolling Stone* magazine the following year. "Yesterday" also happens to be McCartney's favorite song.

The difference between failure and success -- between "Scrambled Eggs" and "Yesterday" -- is persistence.

On opening day of the 1954 baseball season, the Milwaukee Braves visited the Cincinnati Reds. Two rookies began their major league careers with that game. The Reds won 9-8 as Jim Greengrass hit four doubles in his first big league game. A sensational debut for a young player with a made-for-baseball name!

Greengrass shares with Pop Dillon (another great baseball name) the record for the most doubles hit on the opening game of the Major League Baseball season. But Greengrass didn't have much of a major league career: He played 5 seasons with a .269 batting average and 69 home runs.

And what about the other rookie in that game? The rookie starting in left field for the Braves went 0 for 5. Not a great start. But THAT rookie stuck with it. He spent 21 seasons with the Milwaukee and Atlanta Braves, and had a pretty good career. His lifetime numbers were a .305 batting average, 3700 hits, and 755 home runs. You may have heard of him. His name is Hank Aaron.

The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses."

The workers are lazy. Do you want success? Be like the long-established dry cleaners that had a sign that said, "38 years on the same spot!" Be persistent.

3) Perseverance

In September of 1987, Henry Dempsey was piloting a commuter flight from Portland Maine to Boston. Pilot Dempsey heard an unusual noise near the rear of the small aircraft. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went back to investigate.

As he reached the tail section, the plane hit an air pocket, and Dempsey was tossed against the rear door. He quickly discovered the source of the mysterious noise. The rear door hadn't been properly latched prior to takeoff, and it flew open. He was instantly sucked out of the jet.

The co-pilot, seeing the red light that indicated an open door, radioed the nearest airport, requesting permission to make an emergency landing. He reported that the pilot had fallen out of the plane, and he requested a helicopter search of that area of the ocean.

After the plane landed, they found Henry Dempsey -- holding onto the outdoor ladder of the aircraft. Somehow he had caught the ladder, held on for ten minutes as the plane flew 200 mph at an altitude of 4,000 feet, and then at landing, kept his head from hitting the runway. It took airport personnel several minutes to pry Dempsey's fingers from the ladder.

Things in life may feel turbulent, and you may not feel like holding on. But have you considered the alternative?

We should realize the word persevere comes from the prefix per, meaning through. Joined with the word severe, persevere means to keep pressing on, trusting Hashem, looking up, doing our duty -- even through severe circumstances

Avos 2:20 Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses."

The reward is great and the Master is insistent. Even when times are tough, we have to hold on and persevere.

In our own lives, we are sometimes overwhelmed by the daunting tasks that face us, whether in our private lives, the workplace or in our obligations to the community. We sometimes cannot see how we will ever achieve success, and therefore, we become discouraged and lose heart. And we should recognize that there is a desire deficit in the world today. There is a lack of people willing to push. There is a lack of people willing to lay it on the line. There is a lack of people willing to try. There is a lack of hustle and a lack of discipline.

Let us draw on the lesson of the poles of the Holy Ark: All is in the Almighty's Hands, but *hishtadlus* and maximum effort on our part is still required.

Remember the three Ps: Plan, be Persistent, and Persevere.