

**Drasha/Sermon: Yisro: *The Ten Commandments for Failure***  
**Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ** **14-feb-2015**

You may not know his name, but you've seen his work everywhere. Yusef Karsh was an Armenian-Canadian photographer, and one of the most famous and accomplished portrait photographers of all time. Over his 67-year career, Karsh (who died in 2002) photographed some of the most notable thinkers, artists, entertainers and leaders of the 20th century, using a lighting technique he himself pioneered. You have seen those iconic portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, Albert Einstein, and Ernest Hemingway - just to name a few

One of Karsh's most famous portraits is the picture of Winston Churchill as an indomitable wartime leader. Karsh was brought to photograph Winston Churchill during the latter's wartime visit to Canada in December 1941. He was given only two minutes to take it, during which he is said to have angered the visiting statesman by taking away his cigar before shooting. However, the portrait that resulted, showing the British prime minister glowering at the camera with a bulldog-like tenaciousness, seemed to epitomize the determination of the British to defeat Hitler, and catapulted Mr. Karsh into international fame.

Most of the famous people photographed by Yousuf Karsh and included in his book, *The Faces of Greatness*, were not physically attractive. Somebody studied the faces of the 90 people in the book and determined that 35 had moles or warts; 13 had noticeable freckles or Liver spots; 20 had obvious traces of acne or other pimples; and 2 had highly visible scars.

But the blemishes did not deter these people. Thornton Wilder, the playwright; Richard Rodgers, the composer; Picasso, the painter; and many others had obvious imperfections. But what might have embarrassed some just added character when they posed before the truthful lens of the camera.

Sometimes greatness appears in the most unlikely of people.

G-d calls on each and every one of us to reach greatness. Our instruction manual for achieving greatness is called the Torah. And one of the most important chapters in that manual appears in this week's Torah portion; the *Aseres HaDibros*, the 10 Statements, often called the 10 Commandments.

This Shabbos is our synagogue's Installation Shabbos, where we focus on those who have stepped forward to accept positions of leadership in our shul.

You have two options before you through the choices you will be making: Greatness, or failure. Since greatness is an all-too-frequently used term, I'd like to share with you a different type of Ten Commandments: *The Ten Commandments for Failure*. Today I direct my remarks to our synagogue Board Members, officers, and leaders of our Sisterhood and Social Club. But for the others among you, I think that if you listen (and read) carefully, there will be something in here for everyone.

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*Commandment For Failure 1: Thou Shalt Have Little Faith*

What is the opposite of faith? Fear. Without faith, you not only live with fear, but you live without hope. As someone once put it, living with fear is like being nibbled to death by minnows. Fear keeps us from reaching our goals and taking risks. The first of the 10 Commandments -- the REAL 10 Commandments -- Anochi (I am the Lord your G-d) , is to know that there is a G-d and to create a faith-relationship with Him that means something in your life.

*Commandment For Failure 2: Thou Shalt Pick Thy Partners With Wanton Abandon*

Why is it that we spend more time selecting a car that we'll drive for only a short time than who will watch our children? Why is it that we give more thought to the smartphones and electronics we purchase, than to the people in whose company we'll be spending a lifetime?

It's more important to select your partners than to select your profession, synagogue or business.

*Commandment For Failure 3: Thou Shalt Make the Quick Buck*

There will always be charlatans looking for the quick buck. Commandment # 8 --Lo tignov (Don't steal) -- addresses this explicitly. Doing wrong in many cases has been a shortcut to making good, but the "quick buck" is its only reward. It's a lousy way to make a living and, more importantly, a lousy way to make a life. The Chinese have a wise saying: "The short path is the long path, and the long path is the short path." Don't let short cuts, especially when it comes to money, drive your decision making.

*Commandment For Failure 4: Though Shalt Have No Enthusiasm*

The definition of enthusiasm is "to be possessed by G-d." In the history of our people, nothing great has ever been accomplished without it -- or Him! There's a world of difference feeling you "Have to" rather than feeling you "Get to". If you ever feel you "have to" when it comes to Board meetings or mitzvos, that's a sure sign your understanding about the venture at hand is skewed. Enthusiasm is contagious -- try it.

*Commandment For Failure 5: Thou Shalt Seek Easy Street*

Seeking Easy Street is seeking a dead-end street. Work is a privilege. Through work and struggle we find challenge and personal growth. I once had someone tell me he couldn't attend synagogue because "it isn't convenient." Board work and the mitzvos aren't, by definition, convenient. But nothing good -- ever -- has been achieved without really hard work. Our rabbis say, "Ohev es ha'melaha": Love work, and love working hard. Celebrate the struggle!

*Commandment For Failure 6: Thou Shalt Do It Alone*

Never underestimate the value of teamwork. Lefty Gomez, a great New York Yankee pitcher, was once asked about the secret of his success. The secret, he said, was a fast outfield. Your

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greatest accomplishments will be in partnership with others. Take a look at your children. Did you raise them entirely by yourself? Take a look at our wonderful shul, Nusach Hari Bnai Zion. It required an extraordinary amount of participation to arrive at where we are today. And remember to give others credit. No one succeeds alone.

*Commandment For Failure 7: Thou Shalt Not be Accountable*

Accountability often stands between success and failure. The ability to stand up when you are wrong, admit it, and accept responsibility marks you a winner, and distinguishes you from the people who fail. Eliminate the words 'I'll try' from your vocabulary. Do what needs to be done, and complete what you've accepted upon yourself to do.

*Commandment For Failure 8: Thou Shalt Have No Sense of Humor*

Many tense synagogue situations in which I've been involved have been resolved by the inclusion of some levity. We need more laughter in our lives. Learn to laugh, especially at yourself!

*Commandment For Failure 9: Thou Shalt Give Nothing Back*

Shuls and individuals who focus on nothing but bottom-line success reap (maybe) only those rewards, but miss the reality that ultimately in life all we keep is what we give away. When you give, you're the big winner. The greatest satisfaction in a synagogue, institution or relationship is found by those who give the most.

*Commandment For Failure 10: Thou Shalt Believe that Failure is Final*

Failure is never final. Failure is an opportunity for success in disguise. How we respond to failure determines what is final.

I'd like to conclude, on a somewhat lighter note, with the following story.

One night outside a small town, a fire started inside the local factory. The alarm went out to all fire departments for miles around. But the roaring flames held the firefighters off. Soon more fire departments had to be called as the situation became desperate. The company president shouted out that he would offer \$100,000 to the fire department who could save the company's building.

From the distance, a lone siren was heard as a small fire truck came into sight. It was the nearby Chasidic rural township volunteer fire company composed mainly of fervently observant men over the age of 65. To everyone's amazement, their little broken-down fire engine went flying right past all the sleek newer engines that were parked outside the plant.

Without even slowing down, it drove straight into the middle of the inferno. Outside, the other firemen watched in amazement and disbelief as the Chasidic old timers jumped off right in the

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middle of the fire and fought it back on all sides. It was a performance and effort never seen before! Within a short time, the Chasidic old timers had extinguished the fire and saved the building.

The grateful president announced that for such a amazing feat he was upping the reward to \$200,000, and walked over to thank each of the brave Jewish fire fighters personally. The local TV news reporter rushed in to capture the event on film, asking their chief, "What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Vell," said Moishe Epstein, the 70-year-old fire chief,  
"Da foist ting ve gonna do is fix da brakes on da truck!"

Sometimes, greatness appears in the most unlikely of people.

Daily we have opportunities through our choices to succeed or fail. What rules will govern your life? What standards will you adhere to? What principles will you embrace? What values will you instill? What guidelines and commandments will set you on the path to greatness?