

Drasha/Sermon Parshas Toldos "Nobody's Perfect"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 11/9/2013

There are no better baseball fans in America than the fans of the St. Louis Cardinals. This fact -- and I have the credibility to call it a fact, since I grew up in LA and am a Dodger fan -- irks and irritates many people. One group of people this fact really bothers are Chicago Cub fans.

I mention Chicago Cub fans -- those who, at least publicly, will admit that they're Cub fans -- because earlier this week I received an article in the mail from my father-in-law, who lives in Chicago. The article from the Chicago Tribune is titled, "The most insufferable fans in sports live in St. Louis", and takes to task the best baseball fans in America (that's you, Cardinal fans), for being 'annoying.'

I called my father-in-law on erev Shabbos, just after the Cardinal's World Series loss to Boston. I wanted to thank him for sending the article. When he answered the phone and realized it was me, he said, 'Yisgadal v'yiskadash.'

Oh well. I guess there wasn't much for Cub fans to do during the World Series but be annoyed at the Cardinals for (again) making it to the World Series. Maybe their irritation stems from the fact that the last time the Cubs won the World Series, Roosevelt was President. That's Teddy Roosevelt, not F.D.R. But although the Series didn't have the result we were hoping for, it did result in redemption of sorts for one of the good guys in baseball -- umpire Jim Joyce.

Jim Joyce is a name familiar to baseball fans as the umpire who made the brave but accurate call of obstruction that decided Game 3 of the Series. A different character trait of Jim Joyce was seen back in June 2, 2010, when Joyce was standing at first base in Detroit.

You may remember, but in case you don't: Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga should have thrown a perfect game, but on the 27th and final out, Joyce ruled that the Cleveland Indians' Jason Donald was safe. In the umpires' room afterward, a devastated Joyce admitted that he blew the call.

Joyce had blown calls before, of course -- every ump has. But this was different. As he said that night: "I took a perfect game away from that kid over there." Joyce was tearful and apologetic to Galarraga after the game when he saw the video and realized he had made the incorrect call.

What was more remarkable, though, was Galarraga's reaction. The pitcher was forgiving and understanding of the mistake. His immediate reaction to Joyce's on-field ruling was a momentary pause followed by a wry smile at the umpire before returning to the mound. Galarraga told reporters after the game that Joyce

"...probably feels more bad than me. Nobody's perfect. Everybody's human. I understand. I give the guy a lot of credit for saying, 'I need to talk to you.' You don't see an umpire tell you that after a game. I gave him a hug."

Umpire Joyce and Pitcher Galarraga were the epitome of class and decency. Joyce apologized. Galarraga acted with grace and compassion.

At the time back in 2010, Jim Joyce said, "I didn't want this to be my 15 minutes of fame. I would have liked my 15 minutes to be a great call in the World Series. Hopefully, my 15 minutes are over now". Guess what, Umpire Joyce? You had another 15 minutes of fame this World Series with your spot-on obstruction call. And although I don't have a hotline to heaven, I'd venture a guess that your most recent 15 minutes of fame were *mida k'neged mida* a measure-for measure Divine reward for a man who, like Armando Galarraga, was able to admit that nobody's perfect.

Nobody's perfect. I think that's an important idea to keep in mind as we go through life -- both how we look at ourselves and others. And it's a principle that helps to explain a great difficulty in this week's parsha.

Jacob was a great tzadik. And it was no surprise that the righteous Jacob came from two immensely righteous and virtuous parents, Isaac and Rebecca. But twin brother Esau, to put it mildly, was a bad apple. How did parents like Isaac and Rebecca produce a man who became known as *Esav haRasha* -- Esau, the wicked?

A husband and wife were enjoying an evening at home. An action-packed adventure movie was playing, and the bad guy was being chased by a police officer down a spiral mountain highway. As the speeds increased to an uncontrollable level, the wife said, "I bet you dinner at a fancy restaurant the criminal goes over the cliff." "It's a bet," said the husband. Just then the bad guy lost control on a curve and drove over the cliff.

Realizing he had just lost the bet, the husband asked, "Where do you want me to make dinner reservations?" His wife looked over at him and said, "'I feel guilty collecting on our bet. I've seen this movie before."

"So have I," the husband sheepishly responded, "but I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to drive off the same cliff twice."

People make mistakes! Sometimes, people don't learn from their mistakes. But even smart people make mistakes, because -- Nobody is perfect. How did Isaac and Rebecca raise an Esau? R' Shimshon Rafael Hirsch says it was because they made a mistake.

Jacob was an *ish tam* -- a studious, scholarly young man from the earliest of ages. But Esau was an *ish sadeh* -- an exuberant, outdoor type. Isaac and Rebecca gave both Jacob and Esau an education that was perfect -- for Jacob! Both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment. Both were encouraged to have the same habits and hobbies, and to become the same type of person.

It was an educational philosophy that worked marvelously for Jacob-- and was a disaster for Esau.

Isaac and Rebecca ignored the great law of education: *Chanoch l'na'ar al pi darko*, bring up each child in accordance with its own way. Rebecca and Isaac neglected to treat each child differently, with an eye to the slumbering tendencies of their children's nature, and to allow each of their sons to develop his special characteristics.

Isaac and Rebecca were great people. Immeasurably and unimaginably great people. Then how did they make such a mistake?

Nobody's Perfect.

Understanding that nobody's perfect means, as Jim Joyce, understood, that we have to begin with an honest look at ourselves.

First, we should try at least on occasion to say what may be the most difficult phrase in the English to utter: I was wrong. Ethics of the Fathers (5:9) presents seven traits of a *chacham*, a wise, cultivated person. One trait is *modeh al ha'emes*, he acknowledges the truth.

Emperor Frederick the Great visited Potsdam Prison. Each man he interviewed proclaimed complete innocence. They were victims of a frame-up. Some else was to blame. But at last, one fellow with his head hanging down, never looking up, said, "Your Majesty, I am guilty and richly deserve my punishment." Frederick called for the warden. "Come and free this soul, and get him out of here before he corrupts all then noble, innocent people in this prison!"

A second lesson from the realization we're not perfect comes from management consultant Peter Drucker. Drucker said, "The better a man is, the more mistakes he'll make, for the more new things he'll try."

A famous story illustrating this point involves IBM founder Thomas Watson and one of his vice presidents who took the initiative on the development of a new product. The product was a risky venture that ended up a colossal failure and cost the company \$10 million. Watson called the executive into his office saying there was something he wanted to discuss with him.

Sure he was about to lose his job, the young man blurted out, "I guess you want my resignation?"

Watson replied, "You must be kidding. We've just spent \$10 million educating you."

Anyone making a multi-million dollar mistake had to learn something that would help him do a better job next time. Drucker's comment that people who are not making mistakes are sure to be mediocre is comforting to those of us who make mistakes as a part of our daily regimen. We need to learn from your mistakes

A third aspect of understanding we're not perfect comes from a story surrounding Ralph Waldo Emerson's daughter when she was attending school far away from her home. In a letter to her father, she indicated that she was concerned about a past mistake that continued to haunt her. Emerson wrote the following to his daughter:

Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; but get ride of them and forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day You should not waste a moment of today on the rottenness of yesterday."

Sounds like great advice for dealing with the small as well as big mistakes that will inevitably enter our lives.

Nobody's Perfect also means that, like Armando Galarraga, there are important things about others we need to understand.

Sometimes we think that the main obstacle to understanding and empathy is our persistent belief that everybody is exactly like us. And they're not. What's the solution?

A *Business Week* article tells how designer Patricia Moore, moved by her arthritic grandfather's challenges, was prompted to do an unusual experiment. Then only 25, she reconstructed herself into an elderly woman with bound joints. She padded her back into a hump and wore contact lenses smeared with Vaseline. To complete her make-over, she wore support panty hose and a fuzzy wool coat.

Moore found herself being ignored in stores, struggling to complete simple tasks, too slow to cross the street before the light changed and encountering people apathetic to her circumstances. As a result of her experiences, several companies became more sensitive to the needs of the elderly.

Moore challenged people to try their own experiment: "Play tennis until your muscles ache; put on gloves with a couple of fingers sewn together; wear sunglasses with scratched lenses; then go make yourself a bowl of soup. It won't be easy but you'll learn what life often is for people with arthritis and cataracts."

From Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

That's exactly what Patricia Moore did, and it enhanced her compassion for the circumstances elderly people face. There's a whole world of people out there hoping we will step into their shoes ...even if it's only an experiment. Nobody's Perfect. In the words of our rabbis (Ethics of the Fathers 6:6), *Nosay b'ol im chaveiro* – literally "carry your friend's burden." In other words, be aware and share the pain of others. Show understanding and empathy.

A final implication of knowing that when it comes to others, nobody's perfect:

A fable tells us of a King who wanted to discourage his four sons from making rash judgments. At his command, the eldest made a winter journey to see a mango tree. When spring came, the next oldest son was sent on the same journey. Summer followed and the third son went. After the youngest had made his visit in the autumn, the King called them together to describe the tree.

The first son said it looked like a burnt stump. The second disagreed, describing it as lovely, large, and green. The third son declared its blossoms were as beautiful as the rose. The fourth said that they were all wrong; it is fruit like a pear.

"Well," said the old King, "Each of you is right." Seeing the puzzled look in his sons eyes, the King went on to explain, "You see, each of you saw it in a different season, thus all of you are correctly describing what you saw. The lesson for you is to withhold your judgment until you have seen the tree in all its seasons."

Nobody's perfect. *Vehevei dan es kol adam l'kaf zechus* (Ethics of the Fathers 1:6).
Give them the benefit of the doubt.

In Conclusion: As hard as it is to imagine, nobody is perfect.

Nobody's perfect means;

- 1) I make mistakes
 - a) admit your mistakes
 - b) learn from your mistakes
 - c) Move on

- 2) Others aren't perfect. Act with patience, grace, dignity and good sportsmanship
 - a) Show empathy
 - b) Show understanding
 - c) Give people the benefit of the doubt

Jim Joyce and Armando Gallaraga have just come out together with a book. Guess what it's called? Nobody's Perfect. Not umpires. Not rabbis. Not parents. Not teachers. Not Isaac and Rebecca. Not even you and me.