

Parshat Ki Tisa
March 10, 2012
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

*Little Jack Horner
 Sat in his corner
 Eating his Christmas pie
 He stuck in his thumb
 And pulled out a plumb
 And said, "What a good boy am I!"*

Really – do you think that makes Little Jack Horner a good boy? I think it makes him a clever boy, maybe even a smart boy if I knew his age – I mean that is a bit impressive – using your thumb to pull out a plumb but does that make you a good boy? For a long time now we have equated cleverness and goodness and I believe that needs to stop. Being smart does not necessarily make you good. And I think we live in a society that has come to value smarts over integrity. So did James Q. Wilson who died this past week. Who you ask was James Q. Wilson? He was a social scientist, he taught at Harvard for the last 20 years. He was best known as the author of the “broken windows” theory of police enforcement, - the idea that if you pay attention to the simple things – like turnstile jumping and broken windows in a community – you can actually affect the more serious things – like rape and murder. When society is concerned about the little things – it also develops a concern about the big things as well.

This philosophy was embraced by Mayor Rudy Giuliani and his then police commissioner William Bratton. In Mr. Wilson’s metaphor when a window is broken and someone fixes it, that is a sign that disorder will not be tolerated. But “one unrepaired broken window,” he wrote, “is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.” But, Professor Wilson was responsible for much more than his theory on broken windows, writes David Brooks, he believed that character was one of the most important elements in the construction of human society. For Marxists, material forces are where you have to look to understand how to influence mankind, Darwinians looked at competition as the key to understanding social order, but for Professor Wilson, it was all about character.

How important do you think character is in explaining the state of affairs of our current society? If you want to get to the core of why people do what they do – do you think we should look first and foremost at economic factors, social factors, or do you think we should consider character?

Liberals tend to minimize the importance of character and conservatives tend to emphasize it and on this one I think I side with the conservatives. I think character is critical in understanding why people ultimately do what they do – and I think our contemporary trend of minimizing the importance of character goes a long way to explain why things are in such a mess in so many areas of our modern world.

4000 years ago, our Bible placed character front and center as the primary consideration for understanding human motivation. Take today’s *parasha* as an example – although this preoccupation with character can be found all over the Bible and in almost every *parasha*.

The Torah reading for this morning recounts the dramatic episode of the *egel hazahav*- the golden calf. No sooner did we receive the Ten Commandments than it appears that we violated the first of those commandments: the prohibition to worship other gods. Moses comes down the mountain after spending the last 40 days and 40 nights in seclusion with the Holy One Blessed Be He, and he is greeted by his people dancing around the golden calf. Moses is shocked and God is outraged. Moses hurls the tablets to the ground and God prepares to destroy the entire people and begin again with just Moses himself. Recognizing what is at stake, Moses quickly subdues his own frustration and disappointment and turns to God to plead for the lives of his people. Some of what he says is recorded in the Torah itself - but the most interesting part of this conversation is found in the *midrash* - the literary musings of the rabbis who clearly saw in this dramatic moment an opportunity to make a point. In a fascinating passage, the Talmud reports that at this crucial moment Moses turned to God and said: "*Ribono shel olom!* Master of the Universe - you know, You really do have to take some responsibility for this terrible transgression..." One can only imagine God's reaction to this statement - but in my mind - this surely must have given the Creator of the Universe pause. I imagine God doing a John Stewart sort of double take, "Wha....?! Me? You want to blame this on ME? - This I gotta hear." Or at least this is the way God says it in my imagination. So, Moses, having at least bought himself a few seconds and stopped God from zapping his people right there on the spot, wipes his brow and gathers his thoughts - and for the first time in recorded human history begins to argue a defense that will be repeated by defense attorney's for generations to come. Moses begins to argue why his client, the Israelites, could not possibly be responsible for this terrible desecration.

"Uh, look", stammers Moses as he begins to build up some confidence arguing before the highest court in the universe, and then he decides to try the Marxist defense, "after all, it was You Lord who gave the children of Israel the gold and silver in great abundance when they left Egypt. Had it not been for all of this gold and silver, which YOU gave them, they would never have been able to make the Golden Calf and they could not now have been participating in this terrible travesty!" Warming to his argument, you can almost see Moses' voice rising to a crescendo as he drives his argument home: "O' Lord, (clearly playing to the crowd now) had YOU not given all of these riches to them in the first place they would have nothing out of which to make the Golden Calf, and they could not have gone astray from the worship of YOU."

Heads immediately turn to God - is He buying it? The Israelites wait with baited breath as God takes a second to think it over and then responds: "No way Moses. Unacceptable. If to any extent I am responsible - it does not mitigate their culpability one bit, it does not diminish their guilt at all. It was their choice, their call - and they made the wrong one. They are guilty as charged!"

Now, you know how the story ends. Ultimately Moses does appeal to God's compassion and the children of Israel are not destroyed there on the plains of Sinai - but it is not this argument that saves them. This one just will not fly. God rejects once and for all the argument of mitigating circumstances, the concept of passing the buck. Defense attorneys be forewarned - maybe these tactics will get you some dollars here in earthly courts - but don't try this argument before the Highest court - God just does not buy it - never did, never will - God holds us accountable for our own behavior -for God, it is all about character.

Think how different our Bible might have turned out had it not been written by God but by say, Scott Turow. In a chapter probably entitled “Presumed Innocent”, the Garden of Eden story would come out something like this: God confronts Adam and says, “Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?” Adam’s attorney immediately steps forward and says to Adam - “don’t answer that question, in fact don’t say anything - you have the right to remain silent.” “Uh” whispers Adam to his attorney, “this is God asking the questions, you know Creator of heaven and earth - are you sure that pleading the 5th is the right approach here?” “Trust me” says his attorney - I’ve been here before. “Your honor, I mean your lordship, my client is not guilty - Eve gave him the fruit of the tree to eat - it is her fault not his!” The crowd in the court room gasps, all eyes turn to Eve and before her attorney can even respond she jumps up and says - “Hey it wasn’t MY fault, the serpent duped me, I was framed!”

But the Bible was not written by Scott Turow, and while it clearly understood this human propensity to pass the buck, to flee from responsibility - it would have no part in it. The very next verse has God passing His judgment - there is no evasion of responsibility here - none at all. “*Ki asita zot, arur ata* - Because you did this cursed shall you be!” Each of the participants is held accountable - each is given their punishment - each is expected to accept responsibility for their own character. Things work a little different in our bible. And in this difference is highlighted the contrast between our values, that demand acceptance of responsibility and focus on character and the value system of a contemporary culture that seems to advise the avoidance of responsibility at all costs and cannot see the value of character as part of the contemporary conversation. In America if we can make *them*, whomever “them” may be - just a little bit responsible, we can make us a lot less responsible. In Judaism the focus is entirely different - if you are the slightest bit at fault you are wholly responsible.

School was once a place where character was formed. The point of education was to develop good character. If as a child I messed up on a test – I would appeal to my teacher for understanding: I didn’t get enough sleep, my grandfather died and I was distracted, I had the measles – whatever but the reply would always be – this is a good opportunity to learn that life will always have its challenges – use this poor test grade as a learning opportunity, my teacher would say – a growth experience. I had a lot of “learning opportunities” and “growth experiences” when I was a kid. But not so today – today’s parents have no time for learning opportunities and growth experiences – not in today’s super competitive environment – no sir – any argument for character is swept away in the relentless concern for grades and the ruthless competition that has become our classrooms – character development has been sacrificed on the alter of college acceptance. And so our precious children emerge from High School clutching the vaunted prize of the exalted GPA – so what that they have lost their souls along the way – small price to pay for an Ivy League acceptance.

In *Pirke Avot* Chapter 3, *mishna* 11, it states: *kol she-yirat heto kodemet l’hakhmato, hakhmato mitkayemet; v’khol she-hakhmato kodemet l’yirat heto, eyn hakhmato mitkayemet*. “When a person’s wisdom is given priority over his fear of sin - his wisdom will not endure. But, when she gives priority to the fear of sin over her wisdom - that wisdom will endure.”

The message is clear - and it could not be more relevant. A wisdom that is not grounded in moral responsibility has no future. Wisdom and reason will serve any master with equal loyalty. If the *Shoah* taught us nothing else, it taught us that the most advanced society of its day could still be morally corrupt. The Nazis marched to the poetry of Goethe and the music of Wagner. The eye reports what it sees; the heart responds with desire; it is only *yirat elohim* - the fear of God that acts as a brake.

When Adam and Eve committed the very first sin in human history – they hid from God. They were naïve enough to feel shame. They had sufficient character to be embarrassed. And God asks one simple question: *Ayeka* – “Where are you?” The first question that confronts man is one of personal accountability. Character is where it begins and where it ends. This must be our question today – *Ayeka* – “Where are you?” – I am less interested in the grade – then in the nature of the child that achieved that grade. I am less interested in the candidate who wins then the character of the candidate who wins.

Parents, it is time we stopped acting as our children’s attorneys and started acting as their educators. Our challenge is not to help them evade responsibility but to learn how to accept it. Sesame Street can teach them the letters and even the words - but only religion can teach them the tune. That is why this place and its role in the life of your children is so crucial.

Raysheet hakhma, yirat adonai - The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord! - my friends, it has become too much about being smart and not enough about being good. At least Little Jack Horner *wanted* to be a good boy – even if he mistakenly equated it with cleverness.

It concerns me to see a generation of parents who would settle for nothing short of the finest secular education - but have no hesitation to minimize religious education and the development of character. I am proud to participate in what I believe is one of the most important moments in the educational life of our children. Every Friday, when we take our TBS nursery students into the chapel, we open the ark and sing with them - “*Shma Yisrael...*” I think we are teaching them something vital. You don’t have to have a rabbinical degree to decide that you will teach your children two things. When they go to sleep - say the *Shma* with them - one line - *Shma yisrael* - and when they wake up teach them one line: *Modeh ani lefanekha melekh hai v’kayam* - I am grateful to You, God - who has blessed me with life. That is not so hard. But is no doing we have the power to teach our children that the beginning of wisdom *is* humility and gratitude that goodness does matter, even more than smarts.

It was Abraham Joshua Heschel who said it best: “When I was young I admired clever people - but as I grew old I came to admire kind people.”

This is what we need to teach our children, it is what Professor James Q. Wilson thought we should be teaching our children, it is what *Parshat Ki Tisa* and the Bible taught us so long ago: *Raysheet hakhma, yirat adonai* - more important than wisdom, certainly more important than cleverness - is kindness and goodness and the fear of God.

Little Yankel Horowitz sat in a corner
 Eating his hamentaschen
 He stuck in his thumb
 And pulled out a plumb
 And said – “Could someone please help me get this mess off my thumb?
 Boy, I hope some day I’ll grow up to be a mentsch”

Think you can do better? So go ahead and write your own version– just make sure it ends with a mentsch.