

With Jessie and her chatan-to-be Adam graduating from JTS and Columbia last week, Rebecca graduating from CJHS and Joshua from Solomon Schechter in the next two weeks, and Matthew graduating from Maryland next December, I've spent a lot of time thinking about graduations lately. So, it's an interesting coincidence that through an unforeseen schedule change my turn for giving a dvar torah got switched from June 12<sup>th</sup> to today, Kol Sasson's graduation Kiddush Shabbat.

One of the things I've been thinking about is how Lauren and I decided to enroll Jessie in the inaugural class at CJHS. We had always assumed our kids would attend the Academy. In fact, when Lauren and I informed Jessie that she would be going to CJHS, she burst into tears and defiantly said, "But I've been planning to go the Academy since I was fetus!" Jessie denies ever uttering these words but it makes for a good story and frankly our assumption, whenever it was conceived, was no different than hers.

However, one night in the summer before Jessie entered 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Lauren and I attended a CJHS parlor meeting out of curiosity, nothing more. But by the time meeting was over, without having said a word to each other, we both knew that CJHS was the right place for Jessie. Though the school at that point had no building, no teachers, little money and a grand vision, that in retrospect seems almost delusional, it was a single sentence about halfway through the presentation that was my "You had me at hello" moment. Roz Stein, who would become the first Head of School said: "Our goal is to produce the next generation of Jewish leaders."

Any school can teach a student how to conjugate a verb or solve for X, but to produce the next generation of Jewish leaders... well, this was a chance to participate in something extraordinary. Neither Lauren nor I could think of a single reason to not take advantage of the opportunity. And here it is, 10 years later, CJHS has delivered on its audacious vision. Not every student becomes a leader, of course. But those who aspire to leadership roles—in the classroom, on the field of play, in the synagogue and community—find an environment that allows them to explore and express the innate qualities that distinguish them from their peers.

One lesson every aspiring leader learns is that leadership is a heavy burden or, as Shakespeare famously put it: "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." In today's parashah we see how uneasy, when Moshe experiences what looks, shockingly, like a nervous breakdown.

The scene is somewhere in the desert. The Jews, notwithstanding the countless miracles God has performed on their behalf, are restless again. They come to Moshe and cry: "We're sick of manna. We want meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic like we had in Egypt." They point out the Egyptians provided this food free of charge, although the protestors conveniently overlook that they were slaves at the time. Rashi tells us that what they really meant is that the foodstuffs of Egypt came free of the obligation to perform mitzvot and were

therefore preferable to the manna which came at the cost of serving God on the interminable trek through the desert.

And poor Moshe, the reluctant leader who, you will remember, begged God to choose Aaron to lead the people in his stead. This time, Moshe has simply had it with this ungrateful, unworthy rabble. He wails in despair:

*11 And Moses said to God: 'Why have you done evil to your servant? Why have I not found favor in Your eyes, that You place the burden of this entire people upon me?'*

*14 I alone cannot carry this entire nation, it is too heavy for me.*

*15 And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now if I have found favor in Your eyes and let me not see my evil!*

Can it be that Moshe's depression is so bottomless he sees no escape from it but death? The image of our greatest leader struggling to deal with his emotions is jarring for its pathos but also for how common it makes Moshe seem. Not to be insensitive, but this is a man about whom we say: "never in Israel has there arisen one like Moshe, a prophet who beheld God's image." We expect, perhaps unfairly, that a man of Moshe's lofty stature should be able to handle any circumstance with equanimity.

However, Moshe is not the only Biblical figure to have succumbed to seeming depression. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that there are at least three other occasions in the Tanach, where our leaders have prayed for death as an antidote to their sadness. In Malachim Aleph, Perek Yod Tet, Queen Jezebel issued a death warrant for Elijah after his successful confrontation with the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. Elijah was afraid and fled to Beersheba. When he arrived he dismissed his servant and trekked into the desert alone. He sat down under a tree and prayed for death, saying "I have had enough, Lord."

Next is the prophet Jonah who, displeased and angry with God for forgiving the inhabitants of Nineveh their wickedness, says. "Now O' Lord take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

And finally, after the Nation rejects the prophet Jeremiah's message and publicly humiliates him, Jeremiah says: "O Lord, You enticed me, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me . . . Cursed be the day I was born!...Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?"

The simplest way to appreciate these strikingly similar instances is to say that the Tanach wants us to understand how fragile man is, even the best among us. To know that Moshe Rabbeinu, of all people, struggled to deal with the pain of rejection, allows us to connect with him in an intensely personal way.

But, Rabbi Sacks provides a deeper insight. He says: “Despair can be part of leadership itself. When the prophet sees himself reviled, rebuked, criticized; when his words fall on stony ground; when he sees people listening to what they want to hear, not what they need to hear—that is when the last layers of self are burned away, leaving only the task, the mission, the call.”

The idea that despair can be useful and is perhaps necessary to uncover greatness, is as satisfying as it is counterintuitive. A leader who has dealt with emotional crises is one who can identify with his followers and they with him. And by finding a way to survive the pain, the leader becomes inured to it. His pain becomes the foundation upon which great achievement can be built.

There is a famous quote by Theodore Roosevelt that might have helped Moshe, Elijah, Jonah, and Jeremiah to hear: “It is not the critic who counts. Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, Or where the doer of deeds could actually have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again – Because there is no effort without error and shortcomings – But who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows great enthusiasm, great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly – So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

What a message for our Kol Sasson graduates to take with them as they forge ahead to new schools, new communities, new opportunities. Enter the arena. Strive to do the deed. You will win some and lose some, but always dare greatly.

I’d like to end, as I often do, with a poem I wrote called “My Daughter Graduates From a Jewish High School.” It begins with the following epigraph: “For Jessica, who came home very late one night.”

## **My Daughter Graduates From a Jewish High School**

*For Jessica, who came home very late one night*

And we have taught them well, these graduates of ours,  
these boys and girls whose noses we wiped  
with a sleeve or corner of a shirt-tail.  
They were little once, but grew quickly,  
adding inches, pounds, and curves without our permission,  
pleading to drive our cars on Saturday night,  
and putting on makeup.

But we have taught them well.  
They know the atomic number for Nitrogen.  
They know how to solve for  $x$ .  
They excel in Word and PowerPoint.  
They can conjugate and calculate.  
They know how to ask where the facilities are  
in Spanish.

And they know other things too, these sons and daughters of Zion.  
Some see things in shades of gray, but in their eyes,  
the world's primary colors are simply blue and white.  
They have learned the bittersweet history of their people,  
feel its weight upon them. They navigate carefully  
the bloody rivers of time, covered in the ashes of children,  
falling from the sky like snowflakes that never melt.

But today, history is theirs to make. They  
will cure diseases, feed the hungry, write  
books that will change the world. And they  
will understand their children's problems,  
and never yell at them, or make them feel bad  
for coming home at 5am one time,  
because if they wanted to do anything bad,  
they wouldn't have to wait until 5am, would they,  
and parents should just trust their kids, you know?

On this day, graduation day, anything is possible.