

Misbegotten Gains
D'var Torah for Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5780 (2019)
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Grey material omitted from spoken presentation.

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחִק

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had borne to Abraham playing.

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרְשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בְּן־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:

And she said to Abraham: Throw that woman and her child out, for this handmaiden's son must not inherit along with my son, along with Isaac.¹

In this scene from today's Torah reading, Sarah sees Yishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, as a threat to Isaac, Sarah's son with Abraham. Sarah calls for the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael. Abraham is deeply upset by the suggestion and accepts this course of action only after God assures Abraham that everything will turn out all right for Yishmael.²

One can't help but be disturbed by Sarah's actions. Her focus seems to be clear – she wants what is best for her son, and in order to achieve that goal she is willing to act very harshly toward Yishmael, her husband's other son, the product of a relationship between Abraham and Hagar that had been Sarah's idea in the first place.³ The rabbis seem to struggle with this issue, doing their best to explain how serious Yishmael's misdeeds had been⁴ and referencing Sarah being a more powerful prophet than Abraham.⁵ But Abraham is still profoundly disturbed by Sarah's demand⁶ and, taking Sarah at her word, it seems that Sarah's primary concern was her son's financial future, as she says, "for this handmaiden's son must not inherit along with my son." It is not at all surprising to see a mother looking out for what's best for her child. It is only natural for a mother to want to give her son a leg up. But sometimes that support can step over the line.

This year's headlines provided a stark example of parents going over the line in trying to help their children succeed. In the college admissions scandal, parents worked to falsify their children's accomplishments in order to get their children into certain colleges, presumably knowing full well that they would be taking those spots away from other young people who would have gotten them if the competition were fair and honest.

¹ Gen. 21:9-10.

² Gen. 21:12-13.

³ Gen. 16:2.

⁴ Rashi on Gen. 21:9 references opinions of Yishmael's misdeeds including idolatry, incest (this might imply child sexual abuse of Isaac, although that is not the way this suggestion is understood in Tosefta Sotah 6:6), and murder (Tosefta Sotah suggests Yishmael intended to kill Isaac).

⁵ Rashi on Gen. 21:12 (based on Shemot Rabbah 1:1).

⁶ Gen. 21:11 "וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹנֶת בְּנוֹ" and the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's eyes for the sake of his son".

The obvious point that this story demonstrates is that we can't let our aspirations for our own success or for the success of our loved ones go too far. But I think that behind the surface of this story lies an even more important question: What is "success," and can we really achieve it through underhanded means? Let's say, for instance, that some parent got away with this scheme and his or her child went on to a successful career due, in part, to admission to the college that the child got to attend quite unfairly. Is that "success," or is it failure?

Sometimes we think of achieving success almost like it's a game. Our goal is to set the high score - for example, to accumulate the most money, the most relationships, or the most power. But success isn't only about what we achieve, but about how we achieve it. And success isn't only about how much money or power we accumulate, but about what we do with those blessings. Let's examine those two points.

Success isn't only about what we accomplish, but about how we accomplish it. The rabbis teach that one cannot achieve spiritual success while holding on to misbegotten gains. The rabbis notice that the biblical commandment of a sin offering⁷ immediately precedes the commandment regarding the holiest of offerings, the עולה, the burnt offering.⁸ Moreover, they note that the commandments regarding the sin offering require a person to divest of any of the advantages that the person has received by sinning, for instance by returning a stolen item, before bringing the sin offering. In *Midrash Tanhuma* the rabbis explain:

והיה כי יחטא ואשם והשיב את הגזלה אשר גזל (ויקרא ה כג), ואחר כך זאת תורת העולה, אם בקשת להקריב קרבן לא תגזול לאדם כלום, למה כי אני ה' אהב משפט שונא גזל בעולה, ואימתי אתה מעלה עולה ואני מקבלה, כשתנקה כפיך מן הגזל. אמר דוד מי יעלה בהר ה' ומי יקום במקום קדשו נקי כפים ובר לבב (תהלים כד ג ד)
"And should a person sin and realizes one's guilt, the person shall return that which is stolen" (Lev. 5:23). Then [the Torah says] "This is the law of the burnt offering." [Thus, God indicates] if you want to sacrifice a sacrifice, do not steal anything from anyone. Why? "For I am the LORD who loves justice and detests robbery with a burnt offering" (Is. 61:8). When should you bring a burnt offering such that I would accept it? When your hands are clean from thievery. David said: "Who may ascend the mount of the LORD and who may stand in His holy place? נקי כפים ובר לבב [One] who is of clean hands and pure of heart" (Ps. 24:4).⁹

Sometimes people think they can achieve spiritual greatness through failures of honesty and integrity. Too often, we hear about allegedly religious people who, for instance, defraud their government in order to help support their yeshiva, synagogue, or church.

⁷ Lev. 5:23-26.

⁸ Lev. 6:1-6. Note that the relationship of this d'var Torah to Lev. 5:23-26 and Lev. 6:1-6 allow this d'var Torah to work for Shabbat Vayikra or Tzav (the d'var Torah also references a verses from the Haftorah for Tzav, Jer. 9:22-23). One who wishes to use this idea in a d'var Torah for Sh'mini could use the Leviticus 9:7 noting that the sin offering precedes the burnt offering in that verse.

⁹ Midrash Tanhuma (Buber) Tzav 2.

The midrash teaches that spiritual achievement is only possible through the most upright of means.

The same is true in regard to our other achievements in life. If we earn our money by stealing from others, is that success? In this regard, it is important to understand that achievements born of “gaming the system” are equally misbegotten. The rabbis teach of the concept of גניבת דעת, stealing knowledge, which basically means taking unfair advantage of another person’s lack of knowledge. This concept can include planting false knowledge in another, such as lying to college admissions officers. In the eyes of Jewish law, the parents who got their children into certain colleges this way literally stole those opportunities away from other students.

Just as we can’t genuinely achieve through improper means, we also can’t truly count ourselves as successful if we don’t use our success for the right purposes. Our goal in life should not be merely to accumulate wealth or power or relationships or whatever else, but to use whatever we are blessed with for good. In the Book of Esther, Esther becomes the queen at a time of persecution of the Jewish people. Esther expresses concern that if she approaches the king without permission she could be killed. Mordechai responds in part “וְיָדַע אִם-לְעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת” who knows, maybe you arose to the throne for a moment like this.”¹⁰ Mordechai told Esther that her ascent to the throne wasn’t only about her personal success – it was about the opportunities that success provided her.

If we take all of our achievement and merely put it into our own pockets, that isn’t success. If we take our accomplishments and merely seek to parlay them into advantages for our loved ones, that isn’t success. On the other hand, if our accumulation of money affords us opportunities to provide charity for those who are poor; if the friends we have made and the loved ones with whom we are blessed provide us with the opportunity to most meaningfully care for people when they are in physical or emotional need; if the power we achieve empowers us to advocate for those whose challenges are greater than our own – THAT is success.

This is not to say that we can’t enjoy our own success or even allow some of that success to inure to the benefit of ourselves and our loved ones. Self-interest is an important part of life. The sage Hillel teaches in פרקי אבות (Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers) “אם אין אני לי מי לי”¹¹ “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”¹¹ A midrash on the creation story tells us that the creation of self-interest, the יצר הרע,¹² was an important part of creation, because without it, no one would build a house or get married or engage in business.¹³ But our self-interest must be tempered by our altruistic nature. As Hillel says, “אני לעצמי מה אני?”¹⁴ “When I am only for myself what am I?”¹⁴ Even as we achieve

¹⁰ Esther 4:14.

¹¹ Pirkei Avot 1:14.

¹² יצר הרע is often translated as “the evil inclination,” but it seems to represent less an evil inclination per say but a person’s self-interest, at least in this midrash.

¹³ Genesis Rabbah 9:7.

¹⁴ Pirkei Avot 1:14.

in life and as we try to guide and support our loved ones toward success, we should always remember that the ultimate goal is to live a life that has a positive impact on others.

As we review our lives in the past year and express our aspirations for the coming year, let us reflect on what a good year *really* looks like. Will our greatest successes in the year to come be achieved justly and fairly? Will we use our achievements not only to our own advantage but to enable us to perform more acts of charity, to advocate for justice, and to take more time to care for people in need, both friends and strangers? As we seek success for our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, spouses and parents, will we impress upon them, both in word and through our deeds, what we think it means for them to genuinely become people of accomplishment?

As we ring in 5780, I pray that we have a year of true and worthy achievement. When in another year we look back at 5780, may we be able to take rightful pride in ourselves, as articulated by the prophet Jeremiah:

נְהוּ אָמַר יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהֵי-יִתְהַלֵּל חֵקֶם בְּחִכְמָתוֹ וְאֵלֵי-יִתְהַלֵּל הַגְּבוּר בְּגִבּוּרָתוֹ אֱלֹהֵי-יִתְהַלֵּל עֲשִׂיר
בְּעֲשָׂרוֹ: כִּי אִם-בְּזָאֵת יִתְהַלֵּל הַמְתַּהַלֵּל הַשֹּׁכֵל וְיִדְעֵ אֹתוֹי כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹנֵק עֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד מִשְׁפָּט
וְיִדְקָה בְּאַרְצֵךְ כִּי-בְאֵלֶּה חִפְצֵי נַאֲם-יְקֹנֵק

Thus said the LORD: Let not the wise take pride their wisdom, nor the mighty with their might nor the wealthy with their wealth. Rather, in this may a person take rightful pride: Be wise and know me, for I am the LORD who does kindness, justice, and righteousness in the land, for this is what I desire, declares the LORD.¹⁵

CLOSING PRAYER FOR END OF SERVICE

Dear God, once again, your people gather to beseech your mercy and to ask that we may be inscribed for a good and sweet new year. Teach us, Oh Lord, so that we may understand that the sweetest thing in life is to follow in your ways. Guide us to seek success in ways that are honest and forthright and inspire us to use our successes for the betterment of the lives of all those who are around us. "ותשלם משלאין דלבאי וליבא דכל" עמך ישראל לטב, ולחיים ולשלום, Fulfill the desires of our hearts, and the hearts of your entire people Israel, for good, for life, and for peace." Amen.

¹⁵ Jer. 9:22-23.