

Rethinking Our Priorities

This is the 1992 Yom Kippur Sermon that Rabbi Jeffrey Leynor delivered at *Congregation Beth Torah*. Rabbi Leynor graciously allowed me to reprint it in our newsletter so it could be shared with Discovering the Bible's readers. I was in the synagogue that day and witnessed a classic "Rabbi Leynor presentation" – he combined his "Leynor humor" with "Jewish wisdom." He very quickly had everyone's attention!

I would like to share a letter from a college student to her parents:

"Dear Mom and Dad,

It's been three months since I left for college. I am sorry I have not written before, and I apologize as I wish to bring you up to date now. Before you read this letter, please sit down. The skull fracture that I got when I jumped out the window of my dormitory shortly after my arrival, is pretty well healed now. I can see almost normally after spending two weeks in the hospital. Fortunately, the fire in the dormitory and my jump were witnessed by the attendant at the gas station near the dorm. He visited me in the hospital and since I did not know where to live because of the fire, he was kind enough to share his apartment with me. He is a very fine boy and we are planning to get married before my pregnancy begins to show. Yes, mom and dad, you're going to be grandparents!

Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you that there was no dormitory fire, I did not have a skull fracture, I was not in the hospital, I am not pregnant and there is no young man in my life; but I did get a "D" in history and an "F" in science and I wanted you to receive this news in the proper perspective.

Your loving daughter..."

We laugh at this story, but the young lady is sending out a message which is loud and clear. Look at all the machinations she went through to tell her parents she received poor grades.

Recently, a friend of mine gave me an article which appeared in the Wall Street Journal this past summer. It concerned a cheating epidemic at Taylor Alderdice, a top high school in Pittsburgh. The sub-headlines seem to say it all;

*"Students Exhorted to Compete, Cross Ethical Barriers,
A principal changes grades."*

Alderdice students talked of widespread, unpunished, systematic and even brazen cheating. They described offers of money for homework, routine stealing of tests, open dictionaries during college entrance examinations and wide use of programmable calculators as electronic cheat sheets in math and science. Even worse was the lack of action by the Pittsburgh school board. What was more upsetting to me as I read the article and saw the pictures of the students, were the

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names of the cheaters; *Berlin, Greenberg, Galanter, Buchwalter, Grinberg, Rutman, Zasloff... and on and on*. It sounds like a Jewish who' who!

In the 1940's, about 20% of college students questioned anonymously, admitted to cheating in high school. That percentage has soared to 75%. Students say cheating in high school is for grades, cheating in college is for a career.

Think about that the next time you need the services of any doctor, lawyer, architect, etc.

Allerdice has long been viewed as a model of public secondary education. It is the flagship of the Pittsburgh public schools, a training ground for the Ivy League. The doctors, academicians, executives and others who send their children to Allerdice prize school expect success above almost anything else. At the school's top tier, getting a "B" means failure, and getting into college isn't enough – it must be the best college. *In this school, grade point averages go out to the fourth decimal place.* Even the best and the brightest, who were bound for success anyway, cheated.

Grades and class rank became more important than learning.

One incident in the article was very disheartening in particular. A certain physics teacher at the school has very poor vision, and could be classified as legally blind. Students from other classes took advantage of his poor eyesight to steal his test.

I seem to recall a very strong message from the Torah which says, "do not put a stumbling block before the blind, do not curse the deaf." This not only means someone who has physical disadvantages, **but don't take advantage of a person of whom you know you can take advantage.** Another teacher felt so hurt and deceived that they elected not to teach for a year.

As if what the students were doing was not bad enough, it turns out that the principal of the school went about changing grades of transcripts. *He believed that to stay in his position, he had to satisfy a key constituency*, the professional and upper-middle class parents with children in the top scholastic programs.

What about the parents? Their responses were, "My child cheat, not my child?" But there must really be something wrong because most responded with, "No comment!" In one case, a student's parents sent a teacher an expensive gift just before first semester grades were issued. Those parents were then irate because their son received a "B" for a grade in the course.

So, we have students, most of whom in this case are Jewish, who have no idea of what academic integrity and ethical behavior means. A principal with no principles, and parents who only appear to want their children to excel by hook or by crook, total missing the whole point of education.

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Maybe things would be at least a little different if Jewish parents understood what our tradition has to say about "**cheating**" on all levels. But it is not surprising that our children act unethically, because their parents are ignorant of Jewish values and as I mentioned on "*Rosh Hashanah*" -- parents do not stress enough what is right and what is wrong. How many parents say to their children, "*do as well as you can, get good grades, but let them be your own work, and not someone else's.*" How many parents say, "*You don't have to go to Harvard, you can go to UTD (University by of Texas at Dallas) and become Phi Beta Kappa.*" How many parents say, "*It's not the grades that really count, because in the real world, it's what you know and what you can do that is important.*"

The only way we can know what our true capabilities are, and what our potential holds, is by not being cheaters in life. And though the old adage is trite, that cheaters only cheat themselves, it is very true! How? If a person is a cheater, they will never know their own limits; *essentially, they will never know themselves*. They will never fully feel the self-esteem that comes to one who has struggled long and hard to accomplish a goal. There is a midrash about a Reb Zusia. His students inquire, "What will God ask when we stand before Him?" Reb Zusia responds, "God will not ask why we were not Moses or Maimonides. God will want to know why you were not the best possible 'you' that you could be."

Cheating does not have to be relegated only to a discussion of school. There are many ways in which we cheat ourselves and hurt others. There is the story of the rabbi who asked his first graders which of the ten commandments they remembered. One little girl responded, "**Thou shall not omit adultery.**" The reason the Torah does not "omit adultery" is because this type of cheating destroys trust, destroys marriages and destroys families.

There is no substitute for truth, honesty, and trust in a relationship.

What about coveting? Our tradition says it is wrong to want something and to do anything to obtain it, just because our neighbor has it.

It is ok to want things, as long as one is willing to work for them and earn them?

Things are different today, less stable. Family bonds have weakened. Our children are not growing up in real "neighborhoods." The position of teachers has changed. They used to be more respected, now we hear, those who can, "do," while those who can't, "teach." This profession, which should be one of the highest paid, is one of the lowest paid. Many people teach today because it is steady work. They do not bring real caring motivation and creativity into the classrooms. But we cannot blame just the teachers and administrators, the fault lies in the lack of teaching and guidance which occurs in our homes.

The essentials of being moral ethical people, who are motivated to do good in the world, these concepts are rarely heard. And our society reflects these things. ***It is***

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geared to making people feel that they are not good enough as they are. They're not rich enough, smart enough, thin enough, and beautiful enough. They don't smell good enough, they don't dress well enough, their faces aren't clear enough, their teeth aren't white enough! ***It should be very obvious that the world is not working out with these priorities.***

Maybe we have to rethink what is important.

- Teach our children by example, show them that when everyone else acts in an inhuman manner, that is when they are required to be *menshes*.
- Teach them that they have a tradition which determines what is right and what is wrong, and that **they have access to that tried and time tested wisdom.**
- Teach them to seek the truth and to be honest in their dealing with others and more importantly, when they look at themselves.
- Teach them that grades without knowledge are worthless, because life does not come with cliff notes.

At times, it is alright to fail.

Many of the greatest human achievers have been failures at one time or another. But their failures meant something because they used these experiences as a valuable tool. They learned more about themselves and their own limitations.

These are the lessons we should strive for in the years ahead. To be able to see things in their proper perspective. To ask God to help us accept ourselves as we are at the present time and grant us the strength and motivation to reach our own human potential in the future as committed Jews and honest, ethical, compassionate people.

Rabbi Jeffrey Leynor graduated from Rutgers University in 1983, *Magna Cum Laude*, *Phi Beta Kappa*, *Who's Who in American Universities and Colleges*, and a *Rutgers Honors Program Scholar*. Jeffrey studied Jewish history, philosophy, language, Hebrew Bible, midrash, Mishnah, Talmud and many other near eastern subjects and cultures including Christianity and Islam. He was accepted at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, which only accepts students from the top 5%. The first year there was a concentration on the Hebrew language, grammar and texts from all different historical periods. His second year was spent in Israel on a dig with Professor Stieglitz and in a Hebrew immersion course called an "Ulpan." He also attended seminary classes and classes at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1989 Jeffrey graduated with a MA and was ordained as a rabbi. He took a pulpit position as the rabbi of Congregation Beth Torah in Dallas (1989-2005) and at Congregation Beth El Binah in Richardson (2006-2010). He has been a chaplain and counselor for a number of local organizations and counseling programs, including the Plano Police Department. He was a co-founder of the TOV Center, Inc. with Jim Myers.