

Sermon Parashat Emor 5766
May 13, 2006
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On September 20, 1973 Willie Mays announced his retirement from baseball - he stopped playing five days later. This event in and of itself is not all that important. Willie Mays was one of the greatest all around baseball players and he also added so much to baseball entertainment, a sport that can be just plain boring to watch. However, a player retiring isn't all that notable.

I remember watching my brother watch Willie's retirement on T.V. and start to cry. He was about ten at the time and I don't remember ever seeing him that upset about anything. It struck me so deeply. My older brother was really upset about something that seemed so far from my life. I remember thinking to myself, "he must have really liked him." It was such a brief moment of our childhood, but it stuck with me - just like the sudden, unexpected caress of a loved one, or a knowing, connective glance across a room. These small gestures leave a dramatic and indelible imprint on our character. That day my brother taught me to care and to care deeply about something. Care and concern are evident not in the broad strokes of daily living, but in the small gestures. Love and commitment are not conveyed through flowers and gifts, but through words and signs.

Tomorrow we celebrate Mother's day - a day more sacred than most. It is the day in which every one of us, who has a mother, feels tremendous pressure not to just acknowledge the day but also to recognize that no matter what we do it will simply not be enough. O' to feel guilty as only a son can feel on mother's day. That is the greatest gift we can offer our mother's, to feel guilty for being such rotten children. I think that's all they really want - plus flowers and a card.

All kidding aside, what mother's day does is remind us we have to care and we must show it, because even the smallest effort goes a long way.

For example, after an enormous blowout two people want reconciliation but, like so many of us, they just don't know how to get there. Remember, a small attempt goes a long way. We are so guarded, so protective and so fortified that we can't even give just a little smile. In fact, we can't even move an inch out of fear that we will get *shmised*. We walk with our eyes down, not acknowledging other people because we are afraid of getting clobbered. We are also cheap with our smiles and compliments, as if we once we use them up there will be no more.

In today's reading we are reminded of a principle originally brought to us in the book of Exodus. The Torah teaches that when we are no longer a nomadic people and have inherited land and learned to work the soil, we will have fields that will produce great bounty. We must not forget those who are without, people who have less than we do. We are to give them food. We should also cut a corner of our field off to permit those less fortunate than us to collect produce for themselves. *Peat ha'sadeh*. The corner of the fields has been made famous by our "corners of the field" food drive done around the High Holidays. At this time of year we want God to take notice of us, so we must take notice of others. At this time of year when we want God to have concern for us, so we must show concern for others. Today, the mandate to leave a part of what we have for others is a value often lost. Our generation just doesn't know how to give and it may be because we are selfish. I believe the problem is more fundamental than just with our resources, we are stingy. We are a generation of people who just don't give.

I'm not sure if we don't know how to give or we just don't want to. Is it because we are afraid of what will happen in our lives and, therefore, we are making sure that if all of our savings are wiped out by some national or international economic turn we will **not** be left bankrupt? Maybe the instability of the world right now is evident in our own personal lives and we are unwilling to share our resources with those less fortunate. However, I would dare say we are already bankrupt. We are bankrupt because we believe we just don't ever have enough to share. As Pirkei Avot teachers, "Who is wealthy – the one who is content in his portion?" .

What I really don't understand is that the previous generation, the one that lived through the great depression, was far more charitable than we are. People who lived through some of the worst living conditions in the history of this country are far more generous than we are. The people who had to stock-pile food because they were concerned where their next meal would come from, are now marginalized role models for us today.

We are stingy with ourselves, we are stingy with our material resources and we are stingy with our kindness. So the Torah teaches, "Leave the corners of the field for those less fortunate." The concept doesn't end there, not only does the law require us to leave a corner but when collecting produce, if any should fall, we are to leave that as well.

"You must leave a corner of your field, *and* whatever falls off, the gleanings should be left for the poor, and to the stranger..." (Leviticus 23:22)

Rashi draws our attention to the context asking, “What is this doing here amidst a discussion about the holidays?” His answer is, “This comes to teach us the importance of the commandment to take care of those in need, and it is as if we built the Temple.” Rashi teaches that we have the ability to build people up and we can build them up with just the gleanings, those small pieces left behind. We can change a person’s life with just a small nod to the hardships they must endure.

Just as the Torah is about to describe the varied holidays, the text aligns our priorities. Just as the Torah is about to instruct us as to how to find joy and celebration in our lives, the text says take a step back and think of others. It is precisely this connection, the nexus of physical need and emotional joy that brings us to a unique lesson today. As much as we need food to survive, we need happiness to live. As much as we require provisions to persist, we need enjoyment to exist. This context reminds us that it is not just the corners of the fields that we must reserve for those who lack the material possessions to exist, but we must also offer the gleanings. The little pieces that fall off and might not be missed mean a great deal to the finder.

This week I received a proclamation from the President of the United States. It read as follows:

“When the first Jewish settlers came to this land, they sought a place of promise where they could practice their faith in freedom and live in liberty. During Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate the rich history of the Jewish people in America and honor the great contributions they have made to our country.

As a nation of immigrants, the United States is better and stronger because Jewish people from all over the world have chosen to become American citizens. Since arriving in 1654, Jewish

Americans have achieved great success, strengthened our country, and helped shape our way of life. Through their deep commitment to faith, family, and community, Jewish Americans remind us of a basic belief that guided the founding of this Nation: there is an Almighty who watches over the affairs of men and values every life. The Jewish people have enriched our culture and contributed to a more compassionate and hopeful America.”

Signed by GEORGE W. BUSH

Make no mistake; this proclamation will not bring a screeching halt to the anti-Semitism that exists. This public statement will not change the way the rest of the world views us - or get the masses to understand the benefits we bring to the societies in which we live – but it is a significant statement and one we must appreciate and value. I don't want to make more of this than reality demands, but it is gesture that makes a clear statement. When the President of the United States puts in writing and widely disseminates the quantifiable positive involvement we have had in making the nation great, we all benefit.

Gestures are important. They mean a great deal and we ought to be generous and distribute them. Pirkei Avot teaches, “Greet every person with a cheerful face.” (1:15) It is hard, our days are long, our demands are great and we are tired, but we must find a way to dig deep and share a smile, share a kind word and offer a sincere compliment. See something good in each person. I promise you it goes a long way - and it all starts with a gesture.