

PARSHAT SHEMINI
APRIL 22, 2017
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Many of you have met our son-in-law Avi Kaufman who is married to our daughter Shira. Avi's sister Ilana is married to Adam. Last Thanksgiving Avi's parents, Carol and Joel Kaufman, invited us and Adam's parents, Arthur and Barbara Dean, as well as our children, to their place in the Berkshires to celebrate the holiday. We had a wonderful time with everyone and Artie and I spent some time talking. It turns out that we had both recently published books. We agreed to send each other the book we had written after the holiday and since then we have been in touch sharing our recent writings.

I sent Artie my book *Encountering Torah* and Artie sent me his entitled *My Two Cents: A Collection of Short Stories*. Artie is a wonderful storyteller. He writes for the *Southeastern Connecticut Jewish Leader* and *The Waterford Times*. He has even published stories in *The Conservative/Masorti Judaism Magazine*. Many times Artie uses sports metaphors to teach important concepts as he highlights some of the lessons that sports can teach us about modern times. In one of his articles entitled *What's Happened to our Heroes?* he writes: "Human nature demands that we follow leaders. Fortune awaits those who can sink a buzzer beating three point shot in the NBA finals, or catch a Hail Mary pass in the end zone. We pay for tours of the homes of Hollywood stars, and elect political leaders whose words inspire. When they are exposed as cheats and liars we feel betrayed, but can't stop watching."

Many times we are disappointed and we find that those who are our leaders or heroes have great foibles. I was told that during the Second World War many Jews idolized Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Later when they learned that he had agreed to close the borders of this country to Jewish refugees fleeing from Europe they simply did not want to believe it. We have recognized that every modern president has had great weaknesses and that politicians and sports heroes are not even close to being perfect. When we think of the former Governor of New York, Eliot Spitzer, who was famous for stamping out corruption, do we remember that or his list of call girl clients? When we mention the name Governor Ron Blagojevich, what did we immediately think of? Artie mentions these individuals as well as Pete Rose who we remember not for his prowess on the field, but for his gambling problems. And so it goes.

Perhaps it is summed up by Artie best when he quotes Tiger Woods at a press conference after he was found to have had many indiscretions all over the country, Woods stated: "I thought the rules didn't apply to me." That was truly revealing. He learned the hard way that they apply to everyone. It was Charles Barkley, the basketball player and now basketball analyst, who made the comment in a 1993 Nike commercial that he should not be seen as a role model and is not paid to be one. Unfortunately, whether he or others like him, like it or not, they are. Barkley did finish off the commercial by stating that parents need to be role models, and in that he was not most assuredly correct.

In our Torah reading of this morning we learn a little bit about leadership and its responsibilities. Following the ordination of Aaron and his sons and the appearance of G-d's presence at the newly consecrated Tabernacle, the story is told of the untimely death of two of

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. Having made an improper incense offering in the Tabernacle, they were struck down by G-d's fire. The story serves as an admonition and as a lesson to us all.

Following their untimely and tragic death, Moses has to speak to his brother, Aaron, and tell him the horrible fate of his two sons: "Then Moses said to Aaron, 'this is what the Lord meant when he said: 'For those near to Me I show Myself holy.'" Baruch Levine in his JPS commentary on the section states: "Priests who would adhere to the regulations of their office and protect the purity of the sanctuary sanctify G-d; and, in turn, the sanctuary is favored by G-d's presence. When, as happened in this case, they flout G-d's will, He exercises his punitive power, compelling all to recognize His authority." In other words, Nadab and Abihu were asked to follow certain instructions. They were the leading Priests of their time and decided, on their own, to make their own rules rather than follow those that were prescribed by G-d. The Da'at Zekeinim, a compendium of Torah commentary originating with The Tosafists, disciples of Rashi, in the 13th century, interpret Moses' words as follows: "Through the death of Nadab and Abihu, I, G-d, will be sanctified and exalted in the eyes of the people. The nation will draw the inference that, if I have punished those near to Me in such a fashion, how much more careful must the people as a whole be in guarding their own behavior; and they will fear Me." In other words, it is the responsibility of leaders to lead and those who take those leading positions must serve as proper role models. If and when they do not do so then an entire community suffers as both they, through their actions, as well as the people who look to them for advice, counsel and leadership, follow their example.

Rabbi Naftali Herz Weisel, an 18th century German Jewish Hebraist, wrote a commentary on the Book of Leviticus, criticizing Nadab and Abihu for their actions, and especially for their lack of humility: "It was seemly for those who had been sanctified by G-d to be humble, fulfilling the injunction to 'walk humbly with your G-d' and to fear approaching the sanctuary with anything less than moral rectitude." Nadab and Abihu should have known better, they should have lived up to a higher standard, they needed to show the rest of the community what was considered to be proper conduct and as leaders be concerned not only with their own needs, but with the needs of an entire community. As Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century German Orthodox scholar, wrote: "The more a person stands out from among the people as a teacher and a leader G-d seems to be saying, the less I will show indulgence when that person does wrong." As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: "Prominence leads not to privilege but to responsibility."

I believe this lesson is important for all of us, whether we are in the public arena or in our own private domain. Everyone serves as a hero, an example, and a model for someone else. For that reason we all have responsibilities for our actions and for those who look up to us. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky in their book *Leadership on the Line* write: "By making the lives of people around you better, leadership provides meaning in life. It creates purpose. We believe that every human being has something unique to offer, and that a larger sense of purpose comes from using that gift to help your organizations, families, or communities to thrive. The gift might be your knowledge, your experience, your values, your presence, your heart, or your wisdom. Perhaps it's simply your basic curiosity and your willingness to raise unsettling questions."

All of us bear gifts, all of us have talents. The challenge is to use them properly and appropriately and show others by our behavior, our words and our actions, that living by a higher standard can make for a better family life and a better community. We tend to look up to our leaders and heroes as exemplars of certain kinds of behavior and when they fail us we are crushed. Artie suggests: “Maybe we should be more selective in our adoration. Let’s honor the teacher who helps their students achieve. Let’s honor parents who sacrifice for their children. Let’s put academic excellence on the same pedestal as sports figures, and pay homage to those who take care of us when we are sick. And, let’s realize that fame and fortune isn’t the only way to measure success.”

Yes, we are all leaders, we are heroes to many people. That creates for us a great challenge to live up to the highest of standards and serve as exemplars of model behavior. Whether we like it or not, whether we are cognizant of it, we are all role models – in our families, in our businesses, in our communities, and yes, even here in the synagogue. It is our task to live up to the challenges of leadership recognizing that though we may not be perfect, we have to do the best that we can under all circumstances.

Nadab and Abihu stepped out of line. They could have been leaders in the Israelite community and could have served G-d and the Priesthood in a most exemplary fashion. Instead, many of the commentators suggested that they were worried more about their own glory, honor and prestige, and that did them in.

Let us not be concerned about honor or prestige, but let us live up to the challenges of the day to serve as models and exemplars so that those who look up to us who will see us as their personal heroes as we model a life based on the highest of standards of our tradition and our society.