

In tribute to Malka, Lisa and the Messiah
Tazria-Meztora

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Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

A popular morning radio talk show host, Don Imus, has a routine which he calls: "which of the following belong and why?" In this comedy routine he mentions a series of names where all have something in common with one exception - and you are supposed to choose the exception. I am going to begin this morning by asking: "Which of the following belong and why: Ken Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, Jack Abramoff, Tom Delay, Barry Bonds, and Malka Me-Zahav? Which one doesn't belong and why? The answer is, of course, Malka Me-Zahav!. Now for those of you who are not from around here and might be asking yourself – Who is Malka Me-Zahav – well, Malka Me-Zahav has been our Educational Director here at Temple Beth Sholom, and we are all preparing for a wonderful evening of celebration on Sunday, commemorating 25 years of dedication and accomplishment – and why is Malka Me-Zahav different from all those other names that I mentioned? Because these leaders, in business, politics and sports – they all disappointed us. Their great accomplishments in their respective fields are all clouded by one or another scandal that threatens to overshadow all the good they did, all the positive they accomplished – while Malka is our shining star, and as she approaches her retirement she is as wonderful and remarkable today as she was when she first came here. What is her secret? What does Malka understand that all these other greats seem to have missed and why is our recognition of her accomplishments these past 25 years here at TBS truly a celebration worth embracing?

My intention this morning is not to embarrass Malka – we'll have plenty of opportunity to do that Sunday night – no my intention today, is to try and highlight a fairly simple truth that is being lost on too many of our generation. I fear we are raising an entire generation whose education is critically defective missing a leadership gene if you will that makes them accidents waiting to happen.

So, I speak this morning to the parents of all the future little Barry Bonds, Jack Abramoffs, and Ken Lays in our midst – and I do so in the hope that our children – your children – do not grow up to be the next in a long list of contemporary heroes and leaders that will achieve great things and then disappoint us by doing something embarrassingly wrong. I wish to focus on the secret to Malka’s success in the hope that you will come to understand, as I have come to understand the essence of true greatness.

There is no doubt that Barry Bonds has a greatness, Ken Lay has enormous business acumen, Jack Abramoff has politically savvy and on and on.

But they all share the same fatal flaw – they get so caught up in their own greatness, they come to believe their own press to the extent that they think that the rules that apply to regular people, do not apply to them. They come to do the most outrageous things and none of them think they have done anything wrong.

In each and every one of them – the problem is not one of talent, ability or smarts it is one of attitude, it is one of perspective. Their talent is undeniable, their ability is beyond debate, their intelligence is indisputable – it is their attitude that needs an adjustment and it is their attitude that leads them astray. Allow me to elaborate.

Today's Torah portion, Tazria-Metzora, offers insight into the necessary attitude of a true leader.

In today's reading, the Torah explains how a koheyn, a priest was to examine an Israelite suffering from tzara'at, a degenerative skin disease: "When a person has on the skin of his body a discoloration, a scab or a shiny mark, and it develops into a scaly affliction on the skin of his body, it shall be reported to Aaron the koheyn, or to one of his sons, the kohanim. The koheyn shall examine the affliction on the skin of his body..."

In addition to posing a medical trauma, the metzora, the sick person, also entered a state of ritual impurity. Medicine was the purview of others in the Biblical view, perhaps of the prophets. But even when healed of the illness, the metzora still required the religious attention of the koheyn, who would examine the metzora and then supervise the steps leading back to full participation in the religious life of the community.

Midrash Vayikra Rabbah records surprise that someone as august as Aaron, the first Koheyn Gadol, is expected to dirty his hands and sully his status by poking around the sores of a metzora. It records the saying that Rabbi Levi transmitted in the name of Rabbi Hama ben Rabbi Hanina: "Moses was extremely aggravated by this matter, saying: "Is this the honor of Aaron, my brother, that he should be the examiner of the sick?"

Moses, it seems is taken by his family's status and authority. The most humble person in the entire Biblical panoply and yet, success seems to have gone to his head. At least in this Midrash, Moses reveals his humanity by succumbing to the perks of his office. Somehow, it strikes Moses as unbecoming that his brother should have to perform such a demeaning and unpleasant task. Our hero is in need of an attitude adjustment and God himself comes to deliver it. "Said the Holy One to Moses, 'Doesn't Aaron enjoy the 24 donations to the priesthood?'" God reminds Moses that Aaron doesn't complain about all the benefits he derives from his position of leadership, so he can hardly complain about the added responsibilities either.

Success seems to do something to people's attitudes. Their perspective tends to get out of whack. Leaders today, like long ago, have a tendency to get things backward - they tend to embrace the privileges of being a leader and start to believe that they really are special, different from everyone else. Isn't this, precisely what gets people like Ken Lay, Michael Jackson, Barry Bonds, Tom DeLay -- and the list goes on and on—isn't this what seems to get them all in trouble?

The swelled head seems to be the natural consequence of success. And once you begin to believe you are special – you come to believe that the rules that apply to, “the little people” – well they just don't apply to you – and it is a small step from there to the scandals that fill our newspapers and television screens daily. It is human nature to think to come to think this way – but fortunately just as Moshe was about to make this very human mistake, he had God to get his head on straight, to slap him back into place. And we – well we do have God's torah to remind us. When we start to get taken with our own brilliance, we have the torah to slap us back into place. And the Torah, as exemplified by today's reading, would have us remember that to be a true leader one must embrace the responsibilities and be careful with the perks.

It should therefore come as no surprise, when the Talmud observes that the Messiah can currently be found bandaging the wounds of those afflicted with tzara'at.

The greatest human who will ever walk on the face of this earth, the one who will usher in an era of true peace and justice for all mankind - what is he doing while he waits for God to give the signal? How does she occupy herself until her designated moment arrives? Does he sit at God's side; enjoying the perks of privilege - no says the Talmud - she can be found bandaging the wounds of the afflicted. True greatness, the Talmud teaches us, is manifest in a willingness to serve.

True greatness is being manifest each and every day – but it is a greatness that is not celebrated in our society that worships at the altar of stardom and success. We put down our newspapers, we turn off our TV's and we sigh bemoaning the lack of true leadership and real greatness in the world today – when in truth it is all around us – it is just not being celebrated or televised. The rabbis wanted us to change our perspective. In looking for the messiah they struggled to get us to stop gazing at the stars and beginning looking in the low places. The rabbis taught us that if you want to find true greatness stop looking up and start looking down. If you want to experience real greatness – the messiah will be found bandaging the wounds of the leper – who would have ever thought to look for greatness there?

But, every time I get depressed by the lack of greatness on the broad stage – I am confronted by incredible acts of heroism in places we unfortunately over look day in and day out. The hospice nurse who quietly and patiently ministers to those desperately in need of hope – I stand in awe of their goodness. This past week we all bid a sad farewell to a special member of our congregation Lisa Kabram as her funeral was held in this sanctuary. For those of you who may not know her name – Lisa was the young woman who came – almost every Shabbat and sat in her wheelchair right there in the last row of the pews. She always had a smile on her face and she considered her Temple Beth Sholom family one of the most rewarding parts of her life. Lisa had Distonia – one of the Jewish genetic diseases that results in a dysfunction of the voluntary muscle system – meaning that although her intellect was completely intact – the kinds of things that you and I take for granted – lifting, sitting, standing, moving – were beyond her capability. But, my intention at this moment is not to sing Lisa's praises – although there is so much there to sing about and she will be remembered in this sanctuary for a long long time to come – no I bring up Lisa because I want to tell you about Rosaria, and Malvena – the aides who made Lisa's life possible. Many of us got to know them a little bit as they dropped Lisa off or picked her up at one or another Temple event – and Malvena came up to me at Lisa's funeral and said: “Rabbi – you know Lisa was a very special person – “

“Yes I know,” I replied. ““No, rabbi, I mean she was a very special person – she had God in her heart and in her soul.” And as I looked into the face of this incredible woman who worked day in and day out to make Lisa’s life possible – helping her to feed herself, dress herself – with love and compassion helping her to do the most intimate and private things with dignity and love – I thought to myself of the teaching of the rabbis – “The messiah can be found bandaging the wounds of the tzaraat” – and I felt that I might be looking at the face of the messiah herself. A woman, a black woman, a modest, unassuming, undemanding, unpretentious black woman – whose goodness and righteousness and greatness overwhelmed me. “I want to be like Mike?” forget that, I want to be like Malvena and that is certainly what I want my children to be like? How about you?

Oh, and don’t misunderstand me – I am not suggesting that you have to be small to be truly big – big people can be great too – but their greatness comes in doing the small things not the big ones. I was touched by a recent report concerning the new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Prof. Arnie Eisen. He speaks of a transformative moment in his life as a young college student when he had the opportunity to interview Abraham Joshua Heschel. If I understand Dr. Eisen correctly what touched him most was not the great philosophers ideas but the fact that he was there for him, that he took the time for him that he was wholly present for him in a way that validated his search and identity. It was a moment shared rather than books published that transformed his life.

Ask anyone why they admired Pope John Paul II and rarely will they speak of his policies, beliefs, or even his accomplishments – in fact many people admired him despite his beliefs and policies – but they will refer to some small act of kindness and gentleness that impressed them, that made him truly great.

Which brings me back to Malka-- I know she was desperately hoping I was not going to get back to her... but that is precisely my point. I want to be like Malka... why, what has Malka done that is so great? Oh nothing more than spent the last 25 years here at TBS and many years before that in other educational venues – she has patiently, lovingly, and brilliantly taught our children. She has fashioned a school of excellence and love. She has modeled that true greatness is found not in the high places of human accomplishment but in the simple acts of human decency that we perform day in and day out. True greatness, Malka has reminded us – involves a willingness to extend oneself – to go the extra mile – to take on the onerous tasks and the necessary responsibilities that make up life day in and day out. Patiently sitting with a child and teaching them the alef bet, calmly telling a parent that their child is precious even though they may have real challenges ahead of them, fighting for teachers and standing up for principles – this is the stuff of greatness – and this deserves our admiration and celebration.

What do Barry Bonds, Jack Abramoff, and Kenneth Lay have in common? Too much, I am afraid. Maybe it is time that we stop being disappointed by such "leaders". We look for leaders in all the wrong places. We turn to our sports heroes, our politicians and business titans - and they constantly disappoint us. We sigh and say there are no leaders, no one worthy to follow. But greatness is all around us. True greatness is being manifest each and every day by countless righteous people who demonstrate a tireless willingness to serve. Malka Me-Zahav and today's Torah portion have both come to teach us that true leadership involves a willingness to extend one's self, to take on the onerous tasks - yes, the Messiah can currently be found bandaging the wounds of those afflicted with tzara'at. - Our sacred torah teaches that, Malka understood that - do we have the wisdom to learn from both of them?