

Every year, the Sunday before Hanukkah, I spend some time with the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade students and their parents. We talk about how the custom of giving Hanukkah gifts developed, and then turn to the gifts we give that are intangible, but are even more lasting than the latest fashion or electronic toy. “What,” I ask the parents, “are the gifts your own grandparents gave to you?” More often than not the answer is, “My *bubbe* gave me unconditional love” or “what I remember most about my grandparents was having *seders* with them” or “I still bake a special coffee cake that my Nana made - and whenever I eat it I think of her.” From the discussion of how we can give gifts that matter, we turn to what messages they, as parents, give their children as to what matters the most.

Four words are put up on a board: smart, happy, good, successful. “What is the most important thing you want for your child?” I ask. How would you answer? Yes, of course, we want our children to have all of this in life. It is also true that these are interrelated, so that if we do well in school we have the likelihood of being happy. But if you had to choose, which of these is most important to you? What do you think most people answer? The vast majority over the years have responded that what they really want for their children is to be happy. While I do believe that is what people want, I wonder aloud with them whether or not that is actually the message that their children get.

Tomorrow morning most of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students will take the SAT - the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Beyond being a grueling rite of passage for many High School students, it creates a kind of mania not only in the students, but in the parents. I know because I’ve been caught up in it, for the past two months car-pooling our son and several other youngsters to an SAT prep course. The intensity of the preparation is overwhelming. Five hours every Sunday. An additional five hours of diagnostic exams several times on Saturday. For those who want there is extra time they can spend for four hours every Wednesday. Listening to our son and his friends talk I realize the extent people go to give their child a leg up on doing well. Some parents spend hundreds of dollars an hour for tutors to help their children do well. What is the source of this pressure? Is it really that we want our kids to be happy? Somehow I just don’t think so.

Despite the well-meaning intentions of parents, the message we really give our children and teenagers is that we want you to be successful. In our community, populated with so many people who are themselves driven, prominent and in lucrative careers, the problem is exacerbated. Do we expect our schools to have curricula that develop the moral character of our young people? If so, it is a tangential goal at best. What we really want is for those who graduate to go to the best possible colleges. In this community it is not only the parents who talk about their children who go off to Ivy League schools. I hear many people who boast about how well “we” did getting so many Schreiber High graduates into the Ivies or bemoaning the fact that those same schools are out to get “us” - as if our worth is measured by the success of our students.

When our young people hear such talk do you think they get the idea that all we want for them is to be happy? No. We want our kids to get great GPAs and score high on the SATs so they can go to the right schools. And what do we want for them when they get there? I guarantee it is not to be educated in the world’s great literature or debate the pressing moral issues of our time. We want them to be successful.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to be the best we can. The danger is in placing this as a value above all others, for when we do it becomes a modern idol.

When we mention the word “idolatry” it is easy to think of it as something from long ago and far away. An idol is generally regarded as a statue that people worship as a god, the remnant of primitive faith and immature religion. Some ancient idolaters truly believed the objects of wood and stone they made to be gods, but many did not. More sophisticated thinkers understood that the statues were simply representative forms of values or powers in the world around them. Thus, Aphrodite was not simply the goddess of love, but was a concrete way of focusing the mind on love as an important characteristic.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the best description I have heard of idolatry is that it is the worship of a part of reality instead of the whole. Idolatry says that a piece is holy. Judaism, with its radical focus on God’s unity, says that only all things together - as one - are holy. The belief in one God first promulgated in ancient Israel was a radical rejection of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:36

attempt to atomize the universe, separating and sanctifying the parts of the world as inherently sacred. Where idolatry argued that our lives are the result of competing forces in nature, Judaism saw all things united in God. Idolatry is placing anything - an object, person or desire - above God.

The focus on success is an understandable and natural consequence of a society that is both capitalist and individualistic. Judaism praises making money and lauds individual dignity, but our faith cautions us against seeing these as ultimate goals. Yet success - as the pre-eminent desire of our education system and the ultimate goal of our desire for our children and grandchildren - can (and does) become nothing short of idolatrous. Teens tell me that they think most people cheat - and if they could do so without getting caught they would in order to get better grades. In more and more schools cell phones are prohibited at tests, as administrators find students checking answers on the Web or text-messaging to a friend. Universities now require students to submit their papers to a website called "Turnitin.com" to check that the students have not plagiarized the text off the Web. Rare is a month that goes by when some hedge fund manager, stock broker or business executive is not indicted. Yet all they were trying to do is to be as successful as they could?!

When success becomes the barometer by which all else is measured, should we be surprised that students seek so many ways to do all they can to get ahead? When the greatest profit margin becomes a singular desire, should we be shocked that some will engage in illegal - to say nothing of immoral - behavior to be so successful? Success is not inherently a sin, but when so much else - honoring the dignity of each person, moral virtue, volunteerism, faith and goodness - are lost in process, it is time to worry.

This week's Torah portion, which deals with the building of the Golden Calf, focuses on the idolatrous desire within us.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt - we do not know what has happened to him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them

and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”<sup>2</sup>

After they build the Golden Calf, however, Aaron says that the people should then worship a “festival of the Eternal.”

A number of commentators are puzzled by this. If the Golden Calf was a substitute for God, why would Aaron have them have a holiday to worship God? Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov Sforno, an Italian Bible commentator of the sixteenth century, suggests that the people did not make the Golden Calf to turn from God completely, only to help them get what they wanted. They thought that by building the it they could manipulate the world to their own benefit. His insight is that the statue was not simply a denial of God, but was really just an attempt to seek success for them selves. It is the placing of material and physical benefit above all else that leads them into idolatry

In his book *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry*, philosophy professor Kenneth Seeskin argues that in our age idolatry is a moral error.<sup>3</sup> What he means is that by placing something above God inevitably leads us to act unethically, for the righteousness and goodness demanded by God in the Torah are no longer our guiding principles.

I do want my son to do well in the SAT exam. I hope he will be successful. But my fervent prayer is that he will never judge himself based on his successes - and that his intrinsic goodness will not be compromised because he feels he has to do so to get ahead. Success is a modern form of idolatry. And it is worth challenging in our schools, in our children and in our selves.

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 32:1-5

<sup>3</sup> *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry*, Kenneth Seeskin (Behrman House), p. 17