

Early December 2010

Dear friends,

I carry a notebook. In it are not just the things I have on my "to do" list or things I have to remember - but it is full of authors names I want to check out at the library - ideas I want to share - birthdays - random sticky notes - and comments and ideas I may wish to pursue. Months ago I was listening to Frank Deford on a podcast - since he's one of my favorite sports writers - and a few of his words went in to the notebook. Now I want to share them with you.

Deford was being interviewed at a time when a number of sports "heroes" were being exposed as personally flawed or worse. The interviewer was lamenting that sports stars used to be looked up to - even revered - by sports fans. He asked Deford what he thought about the importance of athletes as role models and how we could recover that attitude for "the children." Deford's response was one that I have thought about often in the context of Torah study but he summed it up in one brief sentence. He said simply: *Role models don't have to be good.*

We need to remember that when we look out at the world and try to learn from it. He's right of course. We have a long history of cautionary tales in Western culture. Watching the fall from the heights teaches us that there are consequences no matter how famous or wealthy or talented we may be. Certainly it is sad to discover that the emperor has no clothes or that athletes break laws or legislators don't know what's in the Constitution - but it does teach us a lot about ourselves and our attitudes toward right and wrong.

Torah gives us the same practical approach to heroes. Our biblical ancestors often fell short on our current personal behavior scales. If we look at the texts and ignore the exculpatory commentary added later - almost all the heroes in our history have been flawed. I know that sounds as if I'm a literalist - but I'm the furthest from that. That fact doesn't stop me from being awestruck by the writers of the texts we call godly. How could they know eternal truth? Rabbinic midrash may enlighten but Torah is a brilliant teacher standing alone.

Back to our biblical heroes: Abraham sells his wife to a king in order to gain safe passage on his journey and gets her back through no effort on his own. Rebecca cheats Isaac by substituting Jacob for Esau so Jacob gets his father's blessing. Rachel steals her father's household idols and lies about it. Jacob's sons attempt to kill their youngest brother, Joseph, but ultimately just sell him into slavery. Moses murders an Egyptian guard and later on forgets that he's not really in charge. David sends the husband of a woman he covets to the front lines in a battle so that he will be killed and he can take Bathsheba as his wife. Samson, who is a sworn Nazirite, committed to celibacy and avoiding violence, certainly fails to live up to his promises to God. What a shock that is to those of us who only knew the stories, without ever reading the Book.

We do need role models, however, and all the people I've listed above were also extraordinary people who put themselves in harm's way for a greater good. The weaknesses they demonstrate teach us as much as their strengths. These people were not perfect and so we are being taught that perfection is not a requirement for heroic action. What is required is a commitment to a path that somehow we know must be traveled, no matter the personal price.

Athletes as role models are in another category of course. Back in the days before the 24/7 news cycle, being able to hit the long ball or pass with a 90% accuracy rating or make a 3 point shot with consistency was enough to put you in the pantheon of sports role models (and gods). The fans weren't aware of the drinking, drugs, girlfriends on the side or any of the other pitfalls that beset the role models we were celebrating. Writers needed to tell us stories about these athletes and so helped us define (sometimes without any real knowledge) who we wanted to be like when we grew up. The chosen athletes were always the stars and they played along. It was good for the team, good for the fans, and extremely good for everyone's financial gain.

Then the curtain was pulled back and reality faced us and we are a little confused as to how to react.

So when Frank Deford casually reminded me of the importance of looking at role models who teach us what not to do, I realized that may be more important than those people who model what we should do. Role models are critically important in understanding a society's values. We can look at Nelson Mandela and instantly know he is a role model. Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, Martin Luther King, Jr., FDR, Woody Guthrie, Sacajawea, Dolly Madison, Bono, and all the thousands of others working to make the world a better place for everyone - are role models. There are sports role models too. Billie Jean King and Muhammad Ali immediately come to mind. We just have to be clear about our definitions.

A bad role model teaches us what we shouldn't do. Deford understands that. I need to add that there is a power in watching "the fall" that can be incredibly compelling. The good role model, no matter what his/her history, is all too often a more boring story because we know how it turns out. So the learning is tough both ways, which could help explain our need for commentary - both the ancient and the modern.

So once again nothing is static or absolute. It's that darned free will again.

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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