

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Va'etchanan

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

16 Av, 5782

The Fax of Life

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August 13, 2022

GOOD MORNING! Humanity, it seems, has an obsession with rankings. From U.S. News & World Report's rankings of Best Colleges to Forbes' lists of World's Largest Companies and the World's Richest People – we all love our lists. "Top Ten" lists are particularly popular; where to live, where to eat, the best jobs etc. It gets a little ridiculous. In fact, I once saw a magazine article titled: The Top Ten Worst Top Ten lists of 2010.

Of course, anything we innately desire the power of technology magnifies and delivers to us by a multiple of ten or more. Every time we ask Google a question millions of possible matches are instantly ranked and delivered. Why are we so obsessed with rankings? The answer, according to Nobel laureate Dr. Daniel Kahneman, is laziness.

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman divides our thought processes into two categories: 1) fast and intuitive 2) logical and rational. According to Kahneman, the brain doesn't like to take the more difficult second path and will therefore use whatever shortcuts it can. Rankings, and the apparent differences between listed items, seem like one such shortcut.

This laziness even extends to our Google searches; the results listed on the first page of Google have an almost 30% greater chance of being "clicked on" than results listed in the following pages. Of course, this is also why SEOs (Search Engine Optimizations) are so crucial to the success of any online marketing campaigns; humanity's innate laziness prevents us from regularly looking past the first page of results.

Obviously, most rankings in and of themselves are also just a lazy approach to categorization. A classic example: we define someone who is rich as "successful" – the implication being that the more money one has the more successful they are. This is one of our society's great lies – being a success in life has nothing to do with how much money one has accumulated.

Even in the field of education it is very complicated to apply a uniform grading system to all students. Many years ago, when we first founded our primary school, I remember my father asking the teachers to grade students primarily on their effort and not to base the majority of a student's grade on test scores.

After all, there are varying levels of native intelligence and innate strengths and weaknesses. A child who is highly creative may fare poorly in linear subjects like math or science and yet will excel in music and art (subjects that weren't part of the curriculum). Being compared to other students and even ranked against one another is a disservice to many students whose efforts are harder to quantify. Still, this is difficult to achieve and I cannot honestly say that my father's vision for how to grade our students was completely realized.

In life it is also hard to compare effort with ultimate achievement. Those who work hard are not necessarily those who get paid the most. In fact, it is often quite the opposite. As the humorist Ogden Nash once pointed out, "People who work sitting down get paid more than people who work standing up."

Ultimately, my father is, of course, right. In life we really should be graded on our efforts and not necessarily on the trappings of what others measure as a success. But there is still one arena where we are given credit for both our effort and our intent.

This summer I sat in on a class given by Rabbi Bezalel Rudinsky. Rabbi Rudinsky, is the Rosh HaYeshiva (head of school) of Ohr Reuven, a rabbinical school located in Monsey, New York. After the class we spoke for a few minutes and he told me the following story.

Some years ago a young married man came to speak with Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, of blessed memory, who – until his passing in 2012 at the age of 102 – was considered one of the premier Torah luminaries in the world. The man told Rabbi Elyashiv that he had experienced a very difficult year, having lost his father and suffered financial hardship.

These pressures had been a source of some tension between him and his wife and he decided that during the summer he would take his wife on a holiday to try and relax and regain some balance in their lives and relationship. The only place that they could afford to go was to the port city of Haifa, and they took a small apartment there for three days.

Shortly after arriving, the young man realized that there was no consistent *minyan* (daily prayer service) anywhere in the vicinity. The young man, who was saying *kaddish* (a prayer recited in synagogue for the deceased) for his father was in a quandary, as he needed a full quorum for the three daily prayer services in order to recite the *kaddish*. To make matters worse, the nearest regular *minyan* was almost an hour away. Dutifully, the young man traveled every day for many hours to attend the services and fulfill his commitment to say *kaddish*. Upon his return home he asked Rabbi Elyashiv if he indeed had been obligated to travel those many hours every day to say *kaddish*.

Rabbi Elyashiv replied, "No. You were not obligated to go to such great lengths to say *kaddish*." "But," continued Rabbi Elyashiv, "I am extremely jealous of your commitment to fulfilling this *mitzvah* and final gift to your father; that of saying the *kaddish* even under such extraordinary circumstances."

Rabbi Elyashiv continued, “For the rest of your life, every time you recite the *kaddish*, you will be given credit by the Almighty as if you had sacrificed many hours to say that *kaddish* because you showed what that *mitzvah* means to you, and to what great lengths you were willing to go to fulfill it!”

Rabbi Rudinsky used this story to illustrate a point he had made in the previous class. During his lecture he had quoted a teaching from the famous 19th century sage, Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad – also known as the Ben Ish Chai (1835-1909), the name of his seminal work on the weekly Torah portion.

In a collection of special lectures published under the name Ben Ish Chai – the Ben Ish Chai gives the following parable: Two men appeared before the king each bearing a gift from their date orchards. One man presented a large basket of dates piled high above the rim of the basket, to the point that some dates had begun to tumble out and fall onto the floor.

The king said to him, “Tell me, are these dates from your orchard?” The man replied, “Yes, your majesty.” “And tell me,” continued the king, “What is the production capacity of your orchard?” The man responded, “1000 bushels, your majesty.” The king turned to the minister of his treasury and ordered him to give the gift bearer an amount of gold corresponding to 1000 bushels of dates.

The second man then presented his gift – also a basket of dates, but while it was full it wasn’t piled high and overflowing with dates. The king turned to his finance minister and ordered him to weigh the dates and pay the man their worth.

The king’s servants didn’t understand the discrepancy in the reward and questioned, “While it’s true that the first gift bearer gave more, it wasn’t **that much** more!” “Why,” they asked, “was he given what amounted to 1000 times the reward of the second man?”

The king answered, “You don’t understand. The first person showed me that he wanted to give all that he had, but was merely constrained by the size of the basket. (The Ben Ish Chai explains that the custom was to only give one basket to a king.) So, I didn’t reward him for what actually he gave me, I was rewarding him for what he **wanted** to give me. But the second man simply desired to give me a basket of dates – so I paid him the worth of the basket.”

“**This,**” continues the Ben Ish Chai, “is how the Almighty rewards us. He judges and rewards us not just on what we do, but more importantly, on what we desired to do.”

The point is, like everything else, the Almighty is keeping track of what we do and what our intentions are, and grades us accordingly. That young man who traveled for many hours to say *kaddish* for his father will always receive the same “extra credit” whenever he says *kaddish* – even if he only walks one block to the synagogue – because he demonstrated what that *mitzvah* meant to him and to what lengths he would go to fulfill it.

TORAH PORTION: Va’etchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11

Moses pleads with God to enter the Holy Land, but is turned down. (Remember, God always answers your prayers -- sometimes with a “yes,” sometimes with a “no” ... and sometimes with a “not yet.”) Moses commands the Children of Israel not to add or subtract from the words of the Torah and to keep all of the Commandments. He then reminds them that God has no shape or form and that we should not make or worship idols of any kind.

The cities of Bezer, Ramot, and Golan are designated as Cities of Refuge east of the Jordan river. Accidental murderers can escape there to avoid revengeful relatives. They then wait there until tried.

The Ten Commandments are repeated to the whole Jewish people. Moses expounds the *Shema*, affirming the unity of God, Whom all should love and transmit His commandments to the next generation. A man should wear *tefillin* upon the arm and head. All Jews should put a *mezuzah* (the scroll is the essential part) upon each doorpost of their home (except the bathroom).

Moses then relays the Almighty’s command not to intermarry, “for they will lead your children away from Me” (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 6:50 Miami 7:40 Cape Town 5:56 Guatemala 6:08 Hong Kong 6:40 Honolulu 6:45
Jo’burg 5:28 LA 7:24 London 8:13 Melbourne 5:23 Mexico 7:48 Moscow 7:54 New York 7:39 Singapore 6:56 Toronto 8:07

“**QUOTE OF THE WEEK**”: Education costs money. But then again so does ignorance. — Sir Claus Moser

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Arty & Amy Finkelburg



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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