

Happy Father's Day!
Rabbi Kunis

FATHER'S DAY 5768

Who was the greatest Jewish teacher the world has ever known? Undoubtedly it was Moses. That's why we call him *Moshe Rabeynu*, "Moses our teacher." Moses was the most amazing teacher, yes, but as a father, the Torah seems to indicate otherwise. In an amazing and almost cryptic comment in today's parsha we can almost taste the weakness of Moses' fatherhood (Numbers 11:27): *Vayaratz hanaar vayageyd l'Moshe vayomar: Eldad uMeydad mitnab'im bamachaneh*, "And there ran a young man who came and told Moses that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." This young man was trying to defend the honor of Moses. But who was he? The Rabbis in the Midrash *Tanchuma* (12) say that it was Gershom, the son of Moses. But that cannot be, since in the very next verse we read, *Vayaan Y'hoshua bin Nun m'shareyt Moshe mib'churav*, "Joshua, the servant of Moses since his youth spoke up." In other words, from the context of passage, it was Joshua.

So why did the rabbis of the Midrash say that it was Gershom? Because they felt sorry for the sons of Moses, who were so left out of his career—almost never mentioned in the Torah—who neither helped him nor shared his work. So when they saw a ripe opportunity, they tried to insert one of their names. Nice good try, but it doesn't work!

What actually happened to cause this rift, this distance and this estrangement between Moses and his sons? Some commentators say that it was the fault of Tzipora, his wife. After all, she came from a pagan background. Perhaps she couldn't give them a warm and sincere attachment to Judaism. Others have placed the blame on the boys themselves.

From my reading of the text, it seems more likely that the fault lay with Moses himself. He was called from the fields of Midian—where he had fled from Pharaoh—to free the children of Israel from Egypt and make them a sacred people. What did this task require? 24/7 devotion! Like so many of us—whether I, as a rabbi, or any of you who are businessmen, attorneys, physicians, nurses, teachers, accountants, salespersons, whatever—while you must have a minimum of intelligence, you must have a maximum of persistence, diligence and devotion to succeed.

Moses was successful. What a leader! But this also resulted in the almost complete neglect of his children. Look at the interesting comment when after the Israelites leave Egypt, Yitro, Moses' father-in-law comes to meet him with Tzipora, Moses' wife, and Gershom and Eliezer, their 2 sons. It's an amazing scene. After not seeing his family for so long, Moses runs out to greet who? Yitro! Not a hug; not a kiss; not even a word greeting to family. (Ex. 18:7)

He was so busy with his public business, his communal responsibilities greeting Yitro as head of state of the Midianite people that he had no time for his children and his wife. You can almost taste the scene and picture it in your mind. There they all stood, hoping for an embrace, a kind word, something...But it never came!!!

Moses achieved so much in his lifetime. He came closer to the presence of Gd than anyone else has—ever—but he failed in being close to his sons. However, Moses is not alone. There are too many others—successful by the standards of the world because of fame, fortune and attainment, but failures as fathers and spouses because they neglected, and in some cases, even lost their children’s love and respect.

And so today, in honor of Father’s Day tomorrow, I want to pay tribute to one father today, a father who was not a failure as a father and in the process taught the world what it means to be a father. My vote for “Father of the Year” this Father’s Day goes to Derek Fisher. (With gratitude to R. Jack Reimer for introducing me to Derek Fisher) This week, Derek Fisher won the “Magic Johnson Award,” given by the Pro Basketball Writers Association to a player “in reward for his performance on the court.” Last night he played in game 5 of the NBA finals. So Derek Fisher is, by any means, a success in his profession.

Last year he played point-guard for the world champion, Utah Jazz. Derek Fisher has an almost 2-year-old daughter named Tatum. Last year at this time, Fisher and his wife found out that Tatum had cancer of the retina in her left eye. And so, Derek Fisher and his wife left Utah on the eve of the playoffs and went to Sloan-Kettering in New York to seek medical help for their child. And this is the way a sports reporter who covered the story describes what happened:

The Fishers sat in an office at Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, across from Dr. David Abramson and Dr. Pierre Gobin, listening to the diagnosis of their daughter’s condition. “They really had only 3 choices,” Dr. Abramson said. “Remove the eye, remove the eye, or remove the eye.” An advanced case of retinoblastoma, a cancerous tumor of the retina, was diagnosed in Tatum’s eye. Removing the eye is the most common way to remove the tumor.

There was one other option, but it seemed too risky. Last year, these 2 doctors, Abrahamson and Gobin, had begun research on a procedure called intra-arterial chemotherapy, which allows them to treat the disease without removing the eye.

Derek Fisher asked about this new experimental treatment...Abramson and Gobin have only used intra-arterial chemotherapy on 14 patients so far...Derek Fisher and his wife, Candace, made a joint decision to go ahead with the procedure. The doctors explained that they would have to inject a high dose of chemotherapy into the artery that leads to the child’s left eye...

The procedure was scheduled for Wednesday morning but Dr. Abramson knew that the Jazz had a playoff game Wednesday night. Abramson is not a basketball fan, but he was an alternate on the United States swimming team in the Olympics, so he understands the pull of athletic competition. He knows that players eat, sleep, and breathe for the big game that it takes over their lives. And so he said to Derek Fisher: “If you wish, we can try to push the procedure back a week or so.”

“Absolutely not! Just do what’s best for my child. How many games I miss in the playoffs is totally irrelevant.”

Dr. Abramson was still not totally convinced. “I understand, but this is the pinnacle of your career. Maybe we should make an adjustment in the schedule.”

“Absolutely not!” Fisher said again.

The procedure went off as scheduled. Abramson and Gobin did not rush, but they said afterwards that they were aware of the clock. Gobin had graduated from UCLA, and he remembers rooting for the Lakers, when Fisher was their point guard.

Late Wednesday afternoon, Abramson and Gobin met with the parents and told them that they believed that the procedure had been a success and that they had saved the girl's eye. After the meeting, the parents went to the airport, and boarded the team's private jet, which was waiting for them there. On the way west towards Utah, they picked up time. And Derek began focusing for the 1st time on Utah's opponent, the Golden State Warriors.

The team had arranged for a police escort from the airport to the arena. Fisher got a standing ovation when he walked through the tunnel and entered the gym. It was the 3rd quarter of the game. Instead of going to the bench, he went straight to the scorer's table and checked in, and then went onto the floor.

It was a good thing that he got there when he did, for his replacement, Deron Williams, had just picked up his 4th foul and been benched, and his back up, Dee Brown, was in the hospital with a neck injury...

It had been 4 days since Fisher last touched a basketball, but he caused a key turnover in the 4th quarter, and he sank a clutch 3-pointer from the corner in overtime, which sealed the victory and put the Jazz ahead 2-0 in the series.

"Sometimes you don't want to offend people who don't believe in Gd," Fisher told the reporters after the game, "but I definitely think that we won tonight with some form of help from Gd."

And then, immediately after the game, Fisher stood in front of a national television audience, explaining the nature of retinoblastoma, and urging parents everywhere to get their children's eyes checked annually. Fisher found a way to make an obscure, almost unknown, disease part of the playoff subtext...

It was a vintage moment for Fisher. He has been in the NBA for 11 years, and he has won 3 championships, and has served as the president of the players' union. He spent the last 2 years playing for the Golden State Warriors before being traded to Utah, and so even the Warriors were happy for him.

Tatum and her parents returned to the hospital for surgery and 3 more chemo treatments and it was successful. Derek Fisher says that he still couldn't relax and so he even ask to be released from his \$21 million contract so he could be closer to where his child could receive the best medical care. In the end, he was picked up by the LA Lakers for \$14 million contract--\$7 million less. And Derek's response to all that took place was: "I think at this point in my career, and in my life, really, not just as a basketball player but as a man, more than anything—learning how to be a husband and learning how to be a father—those are the sacrifices you make for your family, and you just work it out."

Derek Fisher has his priorities in order—as a father and as a star basketball player. Those of us who are not professional athletes can't begin to imagine how much internal and external pressure an athlete is under when an NBA Playoff draws near. You practice hours on end, and you lie awake at night, planning and re-planning the game. You live with this and only this, on your mind. And then a child of yours gets sick—and all of a sudden, the game no longer matters. And you focus every bit of yourself on one thing and one thing only: doing whatever you can to save your child.

Derek Fisher put it very simply. When the doctors offered to push back the medical procedure until after the playoffs, he answered: "Absolutely not! Just do what's best for my child. How many games I miss in the playoffs is totally irrelevant!"

Let's listen to that sentence and inscribe it on our hearts. You who have such an important business to run...you who think that the company can't get along without you for a day...you who think that being a rabbi is the be-all and the end-all of your life—hear these words of Derek Fisher, which he said during the NBA Playoffs: “Just do what's best for my child! How many games I miss in the playoffs is totally irrelevant!”

Now you see why I nominate Derek Fisher as the “Father of the Year” this Father's Day. I do so because he teaches every one of us who thinks that we are so busy, who think that our work is so indispensable, and that it all depends on us that our children and family come 1st, and that nothing, nothing, nothing at all, not our careers, not our bankbooks, not our fame, not anything at all takes priority over them. And this is the point of Father's Day, is it not?

And so, if you still have a father alive, say thank you on Father's Day. And if you are a father, then use this day to reorder your priorities and to understand what counts the most in life and what does not. Learn from Derek Fisher to hug and kiss your loved ones on Father's Day and everyday. Hold them tight and make each moment with them count, for that is what really matters. Amen!

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