

Do you remember a song somewhat popular in the 1980's called 'Short People' - written by Randy Newman? It made quite a stir, when it was released. Even though Newman's lyrics were meant to satirize prejudice and stereotype – the lyrics, taken out of that context, were seen as quite offensive to Short People. It went something like this ...

Short People got no reason
Short People got no reason
Short People got no reason
To live

They got little hands
Little eyes
They walk around
Tellin' great big lies
They got little noses
And tiny little teeth
They wear platform shoes
On their nasty little feet

Well, I don't want no Short People
Don't want no Short People
Don't want no Short People
`Round here

Short People are just the same
As you and I
(A Fool Such As I)
All men are brothers
Until the day they die
(It's A Wonderful World)

Short People got nobody
Short People got nobody
Short People got nobody

To love

They got little baby legs
That stand so low
You got to pick 'em up
Just to say hello
They got little cars
That go beep, beep, beep
They got little voices
Goin' peep, peep, peep
They got grubby little fingers
And dirty little minds
They're gonna get you every time
Well, I don't want no Short People
Don't want no Short People
Don't want no Short People
'Round here

People were up in arms protesting the song, claiming (rightly so for it was Newman's original intent) that there was nothing wrong with being short. Well, from the words of another songwriter, Bob Dylan, the Times they are a changing.

This week NPR ran a series discussing the approval by the FDA to use human growth hormone in making healthy, short children taller. A mother spoke about treating her son's shortness as a medical condition ... one that caused him emotional and physical distress. She clearly saw helping her vertically challenged son overcome this deficiency as an important tool toward helping him to face the bullies of the world and protect his self esteem.

First the lyrics of Randy Newman's song came to mind ... I wondered if he would one day have to rewrite it since shortness seems to be on its way out. More significantly, there was something about the story and the mother's reaction to treating her son's shortcomings (no pun intended) in this manner. It felt that by taking away this aspect of her son's make-up – even though it may have been a source of pain or discomfort for him - that she was possibly depriving him of other things as well.

In this week's Torah Portion, Ekev, we continue our sojourn through the book of Deuteronomy. As we discovered earlier – the Torah describes a few of the hardships faced by the Israelites as YISURIN SHEL AHAVA – CHASTISEMENTS OF LOVE. Somehow, in the Torah view the trials of Israel' as ways that a parent may help a child grow.

Our tradition surely wrestles with the idea of God meting out punishments or chastisements in such a manner. Especially in the context of a test!

The Rambam, Moses Maimonides, suggests that the test was not for God's benefit, but for the benefit of the other people's. In this way of thinking, these tests and the Israelites reactions showed others Israel's faith and how God provides for those who are devoted to God – a divine marketing campaign, if you will.

Another interpreter, Rav Yaacov Zvi Mecklenberg, takes the idea of test in another direction. He asks that given the fact that the Almighty is omniscient, what is the purpose of testing anybody since God already knows in advance if one will pass or fail the test? Rav Mecklenberg really explains the purpose of a test in all of life's situations. The test results are to be a lesson to the individual being tested – the individual learns to recognize his/her inherent strengths and weaknesses. The hardship, the test is about a human being knowing and realizing his or her potential.

The question that finds its way into my mind as I ponder the nature of such test/hardships and their role in our evolution as human beings is ... how important are these hardships to our own development and self-awareness? How, if at all, does a mother's decision to treat her healthy, short son with human growth hormone deprive him of developing certain skills, worldviews or strengths that are a part of being short?

I admit that there is a very troubling aspect to this portion and the idea of God's tests. The thought that God is sending hardship after hardship to train us or to teach us ... is not a God-concept that I am ready to embrace, nor address at this time. Lets consider these difficulties that we find in ourselves and our lives are God-neutral – they are neither from God or even controlled by God. Let's accept, for the sake of this discussion, that they are not good or bad, they simply are things we face.

If these things are neutral ... whether they be aspects of our physical or emotional character ... our height, our temper, our shyness ... whether they be painful or embarrassing experiences ... choose whatever The concept that you may identify and ask the question: is it possible that this potentially painful or anxiety producing thing is/was/can be an important part of your evolution as a human being? If you were excused/saved/preserved from this or other painful events or aspects of yourself, what would have happened to you? Truly, honestly ask and respond to that question ... what would you have missed out on?

Jewish psychologist, Wendy Mogel, has written a book called the Blessing of a Skinned Knee. After I read it last summer, I wanted to buy a copy and make it required reading for every parent at The Davis Academy. (Now that I am a parent, I know that I need to read it again.) Her basic premise, and the reason for the title of the book, is that many parents today deprive their children of the most powerful tool of learning and growth – pain. She suggests that parents go to such extremes to help their children avoid any sense of pain or anxiety – that instead of protecting a child in the short term, that parents are weakening their children in the long run.

In her book she actually uses God as an example of this model. Early on, when the people are slaves, God regularly provides ‘miracles’ for them ... for they are unable to do so for themselves. As they mature, God withdraws further and lets the people take a lot of false steps and mistakes. As she says, ‘We learned from our mistakes and became a

resilient people, strong enough to endure for more than three thousand years ... as our children mature, we need to withdraw from smoothing their path ... by giving them some chance to survive danger, we teach them how to survive the bumps and knocks of life. This is the only way our children will mature into resilient, self-reliant adults. By continuing to make miracles on demand, we are unwittingly slowing down the development of our children's strengths." Our tradition suggests and Dr. Mogel suggests, that there is serious value in some degree of pain and hardship.

On Nov. 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches.

To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an unforgettable sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down, slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

By now, the audience is used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently

silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play.

But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap - it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do.

People who were there that night thought to themselves: "We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage -- to either find another violin or else find another string for this one."

But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity, as they had never heard before. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head.

At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every

corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task is to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

From the limits that Mr. Perlman's faced that evening, he discovered a beauty that would not have been revealed if would have approached that situation a bit differently. I dare say, that some of his strength and courage developed over the years of his life as he learned how to face the pain and hardship of his physical condition. When we avoid these difficult things, or help our children or loved ones do the same – yes, we help them to forestall some pain, but there is something critical potential that also avoid. What would we be as a people without those trials? What will that boy not learn because he will not be short? What are you without the painful lessons of life from which you have learned?

I pray that when each of us faces those moments, experiences or aspects of ourselves that may wound us or harm us ... that we find the strength and courage to endure them AND if there is part us that may be able to grow and mature from its existence, embraces the that opportunity as sacred. AMEN.