

Practice the Way You Want to Play

Rabbi Barry M. Lutz

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In my meetings with our Bar and Bat Mitzvah students one of the points I continually remind them of is their need to practice out loud. I emphasize to them how very important it is that they practice at home in the same manner that they are going to lead this congregation in worship. To illustrate my point I often tell our kids the story of my own high school basketball experience. Practice, as many of you know, can get pretty mundane ... and teenage boys will be teenage boys. So every once in a while we would - well, go in a slightly different direction than our coach had in mind. Nothing serious mind you ... just trying to add spice to the dull routines of running drills. Of course, eventually Coach Wiemer would catch us in the act. "Lutz" he would scream ... (actually) "Lutz" was surrounded by plenty of other words, none of which would be appropriate to recite from the *bima* on Yom Kippur, "Lutz," gosh darn it, heaven help me, sufferin' succotash (or something like that...) "practice the way you are going to play."

"Practice the way you are going to play." Great advice that has stuck with me for over thirty years. Coach Wiemer has been gone for many years now, I honestly can't remember much of our offense, or for that matter our defense ... but I certainly remember those words. And I always wonder what he would think if he knew that I used those words to help students prepare for their Bar and Bat Mitzvah. Or what he would say if he knew that I was sharing these words with you on a day such as today?

I don't know if he ever thought about these words beyond the basketball court. I never really knew anything about the rest of his life. But, I can't imagine that these words ... which he found himself repeating to us so often ... did not impact other aspects of his life. Did he, in life, practice the way he was going to play?

That, it seems to me, is the challenge placed before each of us today. The words of our prayerbook, the readings from our Torah and Haftarah all come down to Coach Wiemer's words - asked in language equally as decorous ... although much less profane.

So, let me ask you: Are you practicing the way you want to play?

Let me introduce you to another coach, Jim Loehr. Mr. Loehr is a clinical psychologist and was a tennis coach. Many years ago he was working at the now renowned Nick Bollettieri tennis camp. While trying to help the teens he was working with to become better tennis players, he analyzed lots of tape of professional players. He hoped to discover what differentiated the successful from the unsuccessful. He knew that at the professional level the difference in skills was minimal. So, why did some succeed where others failed? The significant difference he found was not in their technique but, rather, in how they handled themselves between points. One of the most important aspects the champions all had in common was a ritual they had all perfected of letting go, calming down, refocusing.

Over time this simple ritual these men and women went through had ingrained in them a mind set that had built a belief about who they were and what they were able to accomplish. So, Loehr started experimenting with his students. He had them cheering after each point they played, whether they won or lost. In just a short time, he witnessed dramatic improvement in his charges in their attitudes and beliefs about their own abilities. Loehr paraphrasing Coach Wiemer explained his experience, “We are what we repeatedly do. [Excellence isn’t an act, but a habit.]”¹ We are what we repeatedly do. That is not just a lesson for the tennis court. What we practice in our daily lives, determines not only how we play, but more importantly who we are.

Over the course of human history this lesson has been taught repeatedly. It has been expressed differently at different times, in different places and different contexts. But, the underlying message is the same. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, warned that, “A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. ... [And] That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshiping we are becoming.” We are what we repeatedly do.

So, what game are we playing? What are we practicing? What god’s are we worshiping? Who are we becoming? These are essential questions that we are asked today. We are urged to refocus, to take control of our lives and to set our sites on those things that we most value and then to build our practice around them. Our Torah portion puts all of this most succinctly urging us simply to choose life. We are challenged to act in such a way that we choose life over simply trudging through an existence that has no direction and purpose; where foreign gods are worshiped and rule. We need only recognize the potential that exists within us and commit ourselves to practicing in a way that builds meaning and purpose that truly gives life to our existence. The Torah urges us on by noting that this is not as hard to do as we might imagine. What we seek for ourselves is not found in the heavens, or, for that matter in some distant land across the sea. Rather the meaning we seek is as close to us as our own breathing, as close as the beating of our hearts. And so, we are the ones that must decide through our practice in which books our names will be written in the coming year.

There is a story told of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin who was a well known scholar. Even though a very bright student, he was, in his younger days a very uninterested student. In fact, one day he decided that he no longer wished to study at all. Chaim announced to his parents his intention to leave the *yeshiva* in order to attend a trade school. His parents, reluctantly agreed.

Then one night the young man had a dream. He saw an angel holding a stack of beautiful books. Chaim asked the angel, “Whose books are those?” “They are yours,” the angel replied, “if you have the courage to write them.”

Do we have the courage to stand face to face with the questions posed by this day about who we are and who we might be? There are always easy paths that we can take in our lives ...

¹Psychotherapy Networker, September/October 2003, Living on Purpose, by Katy Butler.

but to be who we are truly meant to be means paying attention to our dreams and being willing to commit ourselves to the hard work and practice that will enable us to write those dreams in the book of our lives.

When I am trying to ingrain in our bar and bat mitzvah students the necessity of establishing regular patterns of practice I ask them, 'How often have you heard your parents say, "When I have time I will ..." There is usually a unanimous raising of hands. Then I ask the students what they have learned happens when their parents make this statement. "Nothing," comes the response, without pause. 'They are never going to do it.' "Why?" I ask. "Because they will never have time," comes the answer. Exactly, because we never will have the time unless we make the time.

Making the conscious choice to start down a new path is an important beginning. But, it is only a beginning. It is then that the hard work really begins. It is not so much what we do today, as what we will do once we have returned to our daily lives. The prophet Isaiah tells us as much when he admonishes us that our true worship is "freeing the oppressed, breaking bread with the hungry, clothing the naked and bringing the poor into our house." Coach Wiemer might say, "If your practice in the sanctuary does not influence the way you play the game when you return to your daily lives, then your practice here is meaningless."

To paraphrase that famous Thomas Alva Edison line about inspiration and perspiration, today is filled with inspiration, the words of our prayerbook, the challenge of our Torah and Haftarah, the beauty of the music. Should we take up the challenge, we have taken one step towards true change, towards *teshuvah*. But, the other 99% we will achieve only through commitment to the perspiration of repeated practice.

As I was preparing these remarks the question was raised about practice. After all, life is not a game, we don't get practice time. We just have to play.

That is exactly the genius of religion. A religious life is filled with opportunities for rehearsal and practice of the ideals that will shape the way we live our lives. Jewish life is filled with rituals that provide us with the opportunity to let go, calm down and refocus. Each week we are given that opportunity with Shabbat, a day on which we can practice the life we want to have, based upon connections to family, with commitment to higher ideals, with a relationship to something larger that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. When we practice Shabbat, it can only influence the way we conduct our lives when we are playing the game the rest of the week.

With our celebration of Passover we practice our commitment to freedom for all those suffering oppression; with Sukkot our relationship and dependency on the environment. Chanukkah rehearses the recognition of the strength, dignity and miracle of the human spirit. And then there is this day which can help us learn to love with a deeper love, to speak with a sweeter voice and most importantly to give the forgiveness we have been denying.

When we build our lives around the practice of Jewish ritual we cannot help but see the world differently. "We become what we repeatedly do." We become more aware of the oppressed, more conscious of the fragility of our world, more grateful for the daily miracle of the

human spirit.

When we are deliberate in our practice, when we use ritual in order to help us define the way we play, we elevate even the ordinary experiences of our daily lives. We become aware of the world around us and awake to the sacredness of creation that surrounds, living each day as if it was a gift. Through our practice, we begin to live purposeful, intentional lives. We become the husband or wife that too often we are not. We become the friend a friend would like to have. We become alert to the sanctity of any given moment, purposeful in our actions and in the decisions in our lives.

Coach Weimer used to love to spring different game circumstances on us to see how we would respond, to see if we were paying attention and were prepared to face any given situation. He did this, obviously, because real games aren't scripted. There is no way to know what might happen. And how true is that of our lives. We all know that there are moments in our life that are sprung on us unsuspecting. Moments of blessing and moments of curse. Moments that make us ask questions about our life and whether we are playing it the way we intended. In such moments we are often overwhelmed by those troubling questions, "Have I done all that I could? Have I been the child, the parent, the spouse, the friend that I should have / could have been?"

Practice and ritual help us to face those situations with the comfort of knowing that we have done our best, that we are lovingly supported by our community and that we are blessed by a Presence that gives larger meaning and context to all of life's surprising circumstances.

Today, in the quiet reflection of this moment we are given the opportunity to ponder the practice of our lives. As we do so let me offer some practice tips for creating the kind of lives we all seek²:

Start by thinking like an athlete. Any athlete knows that to stay in form takes continual training. It's not a one shot deal. Just as building physical skills takes an investment of energy - so too spiritual skills. Our emotional and spiritual muscles need continual exercise and training. Without regular exercise, they will atrophy.

Second, take care of yourself. Our physical, emotional and spiritual states are all affected by each other. In order to be our best, we need to feel whole and healthy in all areas of our lives. So eat well, exercise and get some rest. You can't practice if you're exhausted. If you want to play well, you have to feel good. The great Rabbi Hillel, once said, "you have a solemn obligation to take care of yourself because you never know when the world will need you."

Third, take the time necessary to connect with your deepest values. Envision who you are when you are at your best. Identify three qualities you admire in someone that you highly respect. And then think about this, what sentence would you like inscribed on your tombstone?

This is the ultimate motivator, isn't it? When we walked off the court having won or

²Psychotherapy Networker, September/October 2003

having lost, Coach Wiemer wanted us to feel victorious because we had given our all. When we leave this world, that's exactly what we want others to remember about us. We want to be victorious. And in our heart of hearts we all know that victory in life lies not in that which we have accumulated, but rather, in who we have become. What do you want written on your tombstone? The old saying really is true, it is how you play the game.

A song recently released by that great sage of Nashville gives a beautiful twist to Coach Wiemer's simple, motivating wisdom. And so, as we look deep within, considering whether we are practicing the way we want to play, what we are ultimately writing in the book of our lives, I invite you to listen to some good ol' country western wisdom.

Live Like You Were Dying

Tim McGraw

lyrics by Tim Nichols and Craig Wiseman

He said, "I was in my early forties,
with a lot of life before me,
when a moment came
that stopped me on a dime.
I spent most of the next days
looking at the x-rays
talking 'bout the options
and talking 'bout sweet time."
I asked him when it sank in
that this might really be the real end?
How's it hit you when you get that kinda news?
"Man what'd you do?"
and he said,

I went sky diving.
I went Rocky Mountain climbing.
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named
FuManchu.
And I loved deeper; and I spoke sweeter.
And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying.
And he said
"Someday I hope you get the chance,
to live like you were dying."

He said "I was finally the husband
that most the time I wasn't
and I became a friend
a friend would like to have.
And all the sudden going fishin',
wasn't such an imposition
and I went three times that year I lost my dad.
Well I finally read the good book,

and I took a good long hard look
at what I'd do
if I could do it all again,
and then ...

Like tomorrow was a gift
and you got eternity to think about
What you'd do with it? What did you do with
it?
What did I do with it? What would I do with
it?

Sky diving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named FuManchu
Then I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter
and I watched an eagle as it was flying
and he said someday I hope you get the
chance
to live like you were dying.