OUTLINE

You're not special

1. YouTube sensation, David McCullough Jr. a HS teacher at Wellesley High School a public HS in the northeast, 1.9 million views on YouTube. In his commencement address to the graduating class of 2012 he had the audacity to inform all of them that contrary to what they had been told by parents, coaches, tutors, rabbis, etc. they were not special.
2. The remarks raised quite a stir, but not perhaps as you would imagine, much to Mr McCullough's surprise most everyone agreed with him and thanked him, particularly the parents of the graduates, who by there own admission had been guilty of fostering this inflated sense of self in their children through countless hours and interactions where they saw there parental role as cheerleader and fan club president, rather than the more traditional mentor, limit setter and life coach.
3. In his 12 minutes address he implores the graduates and all assembled to:

i. *"Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air, and behold the view. Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you. Go to Paris to be in Paris, not to cross it off your list and congratulate yourself for being worldly. Exercise free will and creative, independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them. And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. The sweetest joys of life, then, come only with the recognition that you're not special. Because everyone is."*

4. Mr McCullogh goes on to observe and describe a societal obsession with accolades and over-achievement. That rather than focusing on win or lose or how one plays the game, he has noticed in his high school students of the last decade a growing emphasis on what do I get, no matter my effort. Which he points out cheapens worthy endeavors.
5. He illustrates it this way, "if everyone is special then no one is, if everyone gets a trophy then trophies become meaningless."
6. His comments speak to me, they strike a cord, and they mirror the lessons of this weeks Torah portion Korach.

7. This week's parsha tells the tale of yet another rebellion amongst the Israelites again Moses and Aaron. Korach a Levite, his sons, and 250 elders and leaders of the community challenge Moses and Aaron, saying specifically, "The whole community is holy, what makes you holier than us? What gives you the right to be the leader?"
8. Moses is stunned
9. Moses responds, God will decided who is holy, furthermore you are special, you are Levites…
10. Our Rabbis look at this text as they would look at Mr McCullough's commencement address and reach the same conclusion, if everyone is special then no one is. And if the motivation for actions is accolade and specialness then it is sinful and cannot endure.
11. Because where does it end, if the goal is specialness and that is shared by everyone, then as McCullough points out trophies have no meaning.
12. Mishnah – Don't be like the servant who serves the master on condition of reward, but like the servant who serves the master not for reward but for the sake of heaven, for no other reason than you love it, believe in it and know it is right. *L'shem shamayim*

13. Our rabbis go to great lengths to make clear that Judaism is not against specialness. Every human being is valued and cherished by God, we are born *k'dai* we are born worthy of being created in God's image. But that is not what makes us special, it is what makes us cherished and valued. What makes us special is what we do – how we live Torah and its values in the world.
14. Korach wanted to be Moses simply because he wanted to be Moses and wanted the power/accolades. And McCullough rightfully points out that many of our teens and children today are being told they are special just by being. It reminds me of Garrison Keillor's distressing description of Lake Woebegone, where every child is above average. For those who miss the irony - its statistically impossible for everyone to be above average.
15. Being does not make you special, what you do and why you do it does. Awards and accolades have no value, no meaning if they are just handed out to everyone instead of earned by those who are truly deserving.
16. Moses was special, he saw the suffering of the people, he saw the power of God and conveyed it even of limited speech, he endured the chastisements and the

kvetching and mostly kept his head and his temper. He was wise, reflective and willing to grow. He stood up to Pharoah, to the cruel task master beating the Hebrew slave when everyone else sat down or ran away.

17. But most of all what made Moses special was that he didn't want to be Moses – he didn't want to be special - but did it anyway. He was a reluctant leader, who shunned the spotlight and took up the mantle of leadership because it was the good and right thing to do, because it was pleasing to God, not that it would look good on his resume. And was just the opposite of Korach – and why he lost.
18. Who is truly special in our society today, those who are selfless, who strive *L'shem shamayim* for the sake of heaven, because it is good and right and needed and pleasing to God – not for the sake of being noticed, rewarded, or accolade or trophy.
19. We know people like that, but not that many, not everyone and that is what makes them truly special.