Weiner's Problem is Our Problem Too
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There is much to say about the exploits of Congressman Anthony Weiner, none of it very kind and much of it inappropriate for synagogue let alone polite conversation. But a question needs to be asked; why would a successful, 40 something married man, albeit a Jewish man, with a baby on the way flirt with younger women online?

That is fundamentally the question that has been asked about this sad incident since the congressman took the podium and so publicly confessed his sin of sexting. The answer I have found tends to fall into two camps.

One group, made up largely of married women of his generation and older men and women respond with three words, "What an idiot". When asked to explain what they mean, they offer that he is a sad, impish man-boy who never grew up and accepted the obligations and responsibilities that come with adulthood. He's not a man – one married mother of three wrote on her Facebook page.

The second group which is largely younger single adult men & women and married men of Weiner's generation respond with the same three words, "What an idiot" but when asked what they mean is, "What an idiot he is for getting caught." As Time, Newsweek and any afternoon Dr. Phil like TV conversation on a couch have shown us, sexting, flirting, internet chats, online porn, facebook friending and far more traditional and egregious intimate encounters are the worst kept secret of the internet age.

There are entire websites dedicated to this very activity, of facilitating married adults (overwhelmingly men, but not exclusively) in the act of stepping outside their marriage for experiences along a whole spectrum of adulterous activity. No not everyone is doing it, but a lot of 30-40-50 something guys are, enough to support a whole industry and to cover the airwaves and internet with weekly examples of some married guy getting caught doing something salacious with another woman.

So a second question compels, "What is wrong with middle aged men in the 21st century?" Why are they not satisfied in their relationships, why do they seek validation from other women? To be sure it is a complex and uncomfortable topic.

It is complex because we don't really know what is going on in another person's marriage – but we know enough to know that marriages are always a work in progress and because they involve other people there are seldom simple.

Its uncomfortable because we know a lot of 30-50 something married men, they sure look happy and responsible, and with the exception of fascinations with Fantasy Baseball and Video games they appear to be grownup and mature individuals. But beneath that accomplished, easy going exterior there is a crisis brewing with the American Male – he is broken, defeated and unhappy.

I don't make a statement like that out of thin air. I have spent the past 8 years of my rabbinate working with men of this certain age in a monthly men's group in my home, on retreats, in counseling and writing about the challenges men face. I can tell you that I hear a lot of pain out there. I hear men pulled in a hundred directions at once, with immense expectations placed upon them to succeed and provide since the beginnings of adulthood.

The modern man, like the modern working mom is expected to bring home the bacon, and fry it up in the pan, and change the diapers, fix the gutters, coach the soccer team, help with home work and drive carpool. The problem is two fold, one women sought this equality of gender roles, for large part men never did. They wanted to be more involved than their own fathers but they didn't want to become their mothers. The second problem is where women largely have social networks where they can discuss the complex and competing emotions of being a bread winner and a sandwich maker, men don't talk about those things with other men. We talk about our jobs, we talk about sports – we don't talk about balancing the work family divide – not easily and not with other guys anyway.

Physiologist Warren Farrell points out that this brokenness comes because men are not allowed to be human **beings** anymore and instead are conditioned to be human **doings**. Conditioned by society toward the endless pursuit of wealth and success – the modern middle age man is under so much pressure to success, produce and provide that he is looking for escape at every turn.

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach writes in his book, 'The Broken American Male'. "We have created a hyper-competitive society where the worth of a man is judged by one thing and one thing only: his professional success, measured in how much money he has, how much power he wields, and how famous he's become." And so as Rabbi Shmuley explains men escape:

- They escape these pressures by rooting for other men, more successful men in bright colored uniforms as they compete against each other in sports.
- They escape into their work, under the misguided assumption that if they can accumulate enough wealth, power or success they can escape the burdensome expectations that society has placed upon them.
- They escape to the Internet and the anonymity that extramarital affairs, real or imagined provides them.

Which brings us then to a Jewish response and this week's Torah portion. In it the Israelites complain to Moses that they are tried of the daily servings of manna that is falling from heaven, they remember longingly, if inaccurately the varied and delicious menu of slavery in Egypt. Moses hearing this complaint petitions God for meat for the Children of Israel and then adds. "[God], I cannot carry this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If you would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg of you, and let me not hear their complaining anymore." (Numbers 11:14-15)

God hearing Moses' plea does two things. First he provides quail to satiate the people's physical hunger, and then he tells Moses to gather 70 other men in the tent of meeting so that, "I will come down and speak with you there and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them, they shall share the burden of the people with you and you shall not bear it alone." (Numbers 11:17). God heals Moses' emotional burden by giving him a group of guys to share the load. So that he is not alone, so that rather than escape in isolation he can experience a camaraderie of sprit and purpose.

I don't know the specifics of Congressman Weiner's problem, but I am confident that at its core this man like so many men his age lacked good male friends and role models that he could confide safely confide in and open up to. That is the work our men's group, our brotherhood and our congregation have been trying to do over these many years and it is the work we must encourage the men in our life to do going forward. If Moses can ask for help and form a support group of 70 other men, so can we!