TORAH OF TED LASSO
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Let me state from the beginning that I am very much aware that sermons about pop culture, particularly a TV show have a shelf life of about 5 minutes. As I look back on sermons I have given about movies and TV shows over the course of my rabbinic career, West Wing, The Brady Bunch, Star Wars, Bull Durham, Leave It to Beaver – the shows, while iconic hardly have the lasting influence of great Jewish literature or sacred texts. Yet as I have discovered over that same period of time, sometimes we know pop culture at a level of depth and detail that the rabbis, past and present always hoped the Jewish people would Torah and Talmud.

This sermon idea came to me last week while I was home with COVID, binge watching season 3 of the hit comedy Ted Lasso. It's possible that it should have stayed in my mind and is still not ready for prime time, but I committed to the topic so here goes.

First by way of background for those who have been otherwise occupied or distracted over the last 3 years Ted Lasso is an AppleTV comedy starring comedian Jason Sudekis as the title character. Coach Lasso is a good-hearted, optimistic Kansas football coach who moves to London to manage a soccer team; a sport confusingly called "football" in the UK.

Its your typical fish out of water story, American transplant in the heart of British football lore. Coach Lasso knows nothing about soccer, but what makes him so endearing and what made the show such a breakout hit at the start of the COVID lockdowns is his emotional intelligence and good nature, awe shucks attitude makes him an excellent coach and positive influence on the people around him.

Sudekis describes the character as: "Mr. Rogers meets John Wooden." Wooden being the legendary UCLA basketball coach that was known as much for his coaching philosophy as he was his championship seasons. Wooden might be considered the Rambam of basketball.

Coach Lasso's secret weapon: his positivity. His coaching strategy is not to drill and demand but to teach his losing players to believe in themselves and each other... The antithesis of the archetype of the Drill Instructor sports coach who demands perfection from their team often with disregard for their humanity or mental anguish. Lasso's catch phrase is "Believe in Belief" it's actually Maimonidean in its simplicity and its transformative power.

Maimonides or the Rambam as he is known by his students, could I say players? Famously taught of 13 articles of faith ranging from belief in the existence of God as creator to God communicating with humanity through prophecy and the unity and singularity of God.

For Ted and Rambam the act of belief is self-actualizing, to believe in something, what those in recovery would call, "a power greater than yourself" is the key to living a life of purpose and

meaning. Believing gives life direction, it's impowering and when shared by a group it can be world, or at least game changing. For the players on Ted's team, they will be good on the field once they believe they can be good on the field, mind over matter so to speak. It's been a truth taught by every sports phycologist and good coaches since kids first took the field for little league or soccer.; and its very Jewish. It centers on hope, HaTikvah – the clarion call of the Jewish State – voiced in the Israeli National Anthem but also threaded throughout our Torah.

In a few weeks we will read the story of the 12 spies that enter the biblical land of Canaan. 10 don't believe that we can conquer and settle the land, their despair becomes toxically infectious; but two Joshua and Caleb – declare.

עָלֹה נַעֲלֶה֙ וְיָרַ֣שְׁנוּ אֹתָ֔הּ כִּֽי־יָכֹ֥ול נוּכַ֖ל לָֽהּ׃

Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

It's the same as when Ted gathers his players in the locker room mid match, they are losing badly, he points to the sign he placed above his office door with the single word believe and sermonizes like Moses to the Israelites at the base of Mt Sinai after they create the Golden Calf in another instance of despair:

Ted: So, I've been hearing this phrase y'all got over here that I ain't too crazy about. "It's the hope that kills you." Y'all know that? I disagree, you know? I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief. Now, where I'm from, we got a saying too, yeah? A question, actually. "Do you believe in miracles?" Now, I don't need y'all to answer that question for me... but I do want you to answer that question for yourselves. Right now. Do you believe in miracles? And if you do... then I want y'all to circle up with me right now. Come on. Let's go.

In my COVID idled mind, and even today – essentially recovered – that's pretty Jewish! Believe in belief, have faith in faith. That is part of the Torah of Ted, and Judaism.

The second teaching that leapt off the screen and into this sermon for me while watching the show was wonderful scene in season 2 when Ted is challenged to a game of darts by the former owner and nemesis Rupert. Rupert is cast as a billionaire playboy who wants only to see his former team, now owned by his ex-wife Rebecca fail at every opportunity. He challenges Ted to a game of darts in the Pub and Ted, a friend and admirer of Rebecca the club's new owner takes up the challenge. Pride and bragging rights are on the line for all involved.

Rupert is a master dartsman and when its Ted's turn he is well behind needing two high scores and a bullseye to win the game.

Ted with dart in hand launches into the following monologue directed at Rupert but in earshot of the whole pub:

“Guys have underestimated me my entire life and for years I never understood why – it used to really bother me. But then one day I was driving my little boy to school and I saw a quote by Walt Whitman, it was painted on the wall and it said, **‘Be curious, not judgmental.’** I like that.

(Throws triple 20).

So I get back in my car and I’m driving to work and all of the sudden it hits me – all them fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. You know, they thought they had everything figured out so they judged everything and they judged everyone. And I realized that their underestimating me – who I was had nothing to do with it. Because if they were curious they would have asked questions. Questions like, ‘Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?’ (Throws triple 20).

To which I would have answered, “Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from aged 10 until I was 16 when he passed away. Barbecue sauce. (Throws triple bullseye to win).”

The idea that we would judge a person but outward appearance and not by what is inside them is antithetical to Judaism. In Pirkei Avot we are taught “Don’t look at the container, but at that which is in it” (4:20). The container or vessel the rabbis would have us understand has little to do with what is inside of it. The bottle could be beautiful, and the wine be terrible, just as the bottle could be plain and simple yet the wine is superb. Perhaps said another way, don’t judge a book by its cover.

Rabbi (Rabbi Yehuda haNasi) said:

אַל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בַּקַּנְקַן, אֶלָּא בְּמַה שֶּׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ

“Don’t look at the container, but at that which is in it.”

Like the great Rabbi to whom the whole of the Mishnah is attributed Ted implores us to ask questions, open-ended questions to learn more about people, to be curious, and to show empathy, not judgment. In modern parlance to not judge a book by its cover, a person by their appearance. The ream of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, that one day we will live in a nation where children, “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

This teaching also has a corollary that also speaks to the Jewish values that underly interpersonal relationships. Coach Lasso is telling us to be curious, not judgmental towards those we meet, friends, family, even strangers… even ourselves.

We live in a time with an ever-increasing amount of depression and anxiety, we too need to be curious of our actions, not judgmental. What does it do for our self-esteem or confidence when we screw something up or make a poor decision only to scold ourselves or call ourselves stupid. The same lesson that we should “be curious, not judgmental” still applies. Be curious about why you did something, take a moment and honestly think about, but to cast judgment does little good to help us grow from the experience. I’ve taught before that I think it is sloppy theology to

say that everything happens for a reason, as though all events are part of some divine and master plan. Rather I think the Jewish response, the Ted Lasso response is to say that, "there is a reason for everything that happens" there is a back story. Be curious about that, about the underlying cause and effect; understand that and you will have empathy, compassion and ultimately insight into the root cause of the challenge facing you, another, or a group. Shalom is found when you follow curiosity to its just and right conclusion.

Lastly – because lessons come in threes in last week's episode one of the most beloved members of the team has his restaurant vandalized. The furnishings are trashed, the previously packed guest list has been scared away and every piece of glass and cook wear in the kitchen is in shambles. The player is crestfallen and heartbroken, not only for the financial loss, he does have insurance but for what this act of hate, motivated by his social media post against xenophobia and bigotry tells him about the people he thought were his fans.

His whole team shows up at the restaurant one evening and begins to clean and repair the damaged business. When asked by their teammate what they are doing this, why they are helping the response is a powerful reminder of an age-old Jewish teaching. They reply: "We know what, this situation needs: It needs every single one of us."

It is no accident that the Jewish people call ourselves "Am Yisrael"–"the people of Israel"—rather than "Dat Yisrael," or "the religion of Israel." A sense of peoplehood has long been the defining characteristic Judaism.

The central experience of Jewish history–the only event that demands an annual retelling–is the exodus from Egypt. Though wrapped up in an encounter with divinity, the exodus was primarily an experience of national liberation, rather than a moment of religious awakening.

On the everyday level, this focus on peoplehood is translated into an emphasis on the community as the primary organizing structure of Jewish life. Wherever Jews have lived, they have built synagogues, established communal organizations and created systems of communal governance.

Jewish texts treat participation in communal affairs not as an option, but as a religious obligation. One midrash likens removing oneself from the community to destroying the world. (Midrash Tanhuma, Parshat Mishpatim 2) another admonishes every Jew, "*Al tifrosh min hatzipur /* do not separate yourself from the community". Why? Because of all people a people destined to live and dwell apart from the majority of every society we have lived in we have learned that the Jewish answer to the age old question, am I my brother or sister's keeper is YES, yes we are. What does it take for our people to not only survive but also thrive it take in the words of Ted Lasso, and of the Jewish tradition, "it takes every one of us"

- "Believe in Belief"
- "Be curious, not judgmental."
- "What does any situation need: It needs every single one of us."

Three lessons from Torah, from the Torah of Ted Lasso. The show may indeed be only a passing fad, already falling out of favour with some, moving off of your PVR cue for the next Real Housewives of someplace somewhere – but those three lessons – they are timeless – their wisdom eternal.

Shabbat Shalom