YOU NEVER GRADUATE
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- I have been watching Hard Knocks – documentary on the NFL Jets training camp. Last night the starting QB was having a hard time getting his passes right.
    - He was horrible, whistle, after whistle calling the plays back (blow whistle)
    - Hung his head low, got down on himself for messing up
    - His teammates were encouraging him, say he'd get it, not to worry we'll try it again
    - And only made him more embarrassed, now he felt he was letting them down as well as himself.
    - It got to the point that he just stormed off the field. The coach blew the whistle two times (blow whistle twice) and everyone took a knee
    - The coach ran after his player, took him aside and said three things to him that I thought were worth sharing tonight.

1. He said: Hold your head up high – you're a starting QB in the NFL. You have made it this far and that counts for something, it counts for a lot. I criticize you because I believe in you. Not to tear you down but to build you up. I wouldn't waste the breadth if I didn't think you couldn't make the adjustment and improve.
    a. Constructive Criticism comes from a place of love, a belief that the person can improve if only they could see their mistakes from a different perspective. Sometimes it takes an outsider looking in.

2. As this big strong all American QB hung his head and kicked at water coolers I became embarrassed for him – he was having a tantrum and there is nothing worse than watching a 6' 4" professional athlete in helmet and shoulder pads throw a tantrum. The coach put his arm around him and said:
    a. "We never graduate, not on the field, not in life." You think just because you made the cut you have nothing else to learn, no room for improvement? All of our lives are a work in progress. The goal of life is of course for that to be forward progress not backward. Constructive criticism helps us achieve that goal.

3. The third observation happened in my mind not on the TV screen. I began to wish life came with football coaches. There was no vindictiveness in the coach's criticism – only a desire to help his player do better. Sometimes criticism is vindictive and that can sting and hurt. We feel most vulnerable when our competence is questioned. The successful student in life and QB on the field has to take what sounds good and discard the rest. Some parts of the criticism might not be useful to you; but as a whole, it can offer some ways to

resolve a particular problem you've had or enhance something you've only hinted at.

- Constructive criticism comes from a place of love, a belief that you can do better. It's a statement of confidence in you - we should be thankful our friends and colleagues believe in our potential enough to make us worthy of criticism.
- You never graduate – life if a work in progress and we seek progress not perfection. We can always improve, we can always do it better. Indeed when we think we have it nailed, have achieved perfection that may be just the time that we need to set new goals, so we can reach new heights.
- Not all criticism comes from a desire to help – sometimes people criticize as a way to build themselves up while tearing you down. And sometimes people give bad advice. You're still the QB in your own life – you call the plays.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are commanded to do hesbone hanefesh to examine our soul, our actions our behaviors of the past year. We are commanded to look inward to see what we have done that is good and what we done that needs improvement. With a keen and discerning eye we are commanded to criticize ourselves. Not out of Jewish guilt – but out of Jewish pride. Because the great blessing and gift of our being created in God's image is wasted if we don't learn from our mistakes, if we don't constantly seek to try again, to do better.

The month of Elul is spring training, the high holy days, exhibition games. The season starts, kickoff begins when the gates close at nilah and the final whistle or shofar blast is sounded. Now is the time to hear the voice of the coach that resides with in and resides above. Now is the time to prepare for the big game, not of football but of life. (blow shofar)