

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's Parsha Vaera, we read about the beginning of the redemption from Mitzraim - Egypt. The Sages tell us that our enslavement in Mitzraim was a preparation for our receiving the Torah and becoming a nation at Mt. Sinai with our receiving of the Torah. We went from becoming servants to Pharaoh to servants of Hashem. We can see from here that Hashem has a plan for the world and specifically for us Jews. The following narrative as told by a Chabad Rebbetzin, Esther Kosofsky, illustrates this concept.

"Did you hear the one about the Chabad Rebbetzin, the Muslim cleric and the Buddhist monk? No, this is not a new joke; it is a true story that happened to me. I was contacted by the Southwick, Massachusetts, middle school and asked to participate in a religious diversity day when the students would be exposed to a variety of religions.

Realizing that I had been handed an irresistible opportunity, I agreed to attend, rather relieved to find out that the students would be split up and rotate from room to room to hear each representative individually.

As the day approached though, my apprehension grew and I wondered what could I say that would impact the students, not just give them the answers they needed to fill out the charts the teachers had prepared. These charts asked the typical questions about special foods, places of worship, holidays, significant books, and of course politically correct questions.

Southwick is a blue-collar town with very few Jews, so how could I reach out to them? The more I thought about it, the more concerned I became. How could I leave the students with any meaningful information beyond terms such as synagogue, rabbi, gefilte fish and matza? How could I move them and inspire them to live more meaningful lives? I finally hit upon one of the great equalizers, sports and for this time of year, football.

The first group of students shuffled into the room clutching their important papers and pencils, [and I was eager to see if they would] fill in the blanks under the "Jewish" column. While I certainly did not look like the religious leader they expected, they were not sure how to relate to a Jewish woman. They looked relieved that I did not have an accent, but they truly were not prepared for what I was about to describe.

"Imagine that you are a football coach" I began. Southwick is New England Patriots football country and the Patriots won two Super Bowls in the past three years, so when I saw some eyes light up and kids seemed to be paying attention, I knew it was a good beginning.

"Imagine," I continued, "you are the Patriots coach, coming off two world championships in two years. You are looking for a new challenge and are being offered two new options for coaching. Option A is to coach a team of hand picked all stars, players with instant name recognition. I am sure this team would include some famous players from the past - like Terry Bradshaw, Lynn Swann, Johnny Unitas and Earl Campbell - and several current ones. "With this team you could sit back and watch the players work together in harmony. All you would have to do is plan the Super Bowl victory party; the rest would be done for you. Just agree and you will go down in history as the coach of the best team of football players ever assembled. You will not only be the coach of the year, you might well be the considered the best coach ever.

"Option B would be to coach a team of, shall we say, misfits. This group of athletes is not quite in their prime, not quite as skilled and certainly not as talented as the first team. These players want to play but can't seem to get it together. These players have name recognition only with their mothers. They know the rules, but somehow come up short in execution. These are the players who might catch the ball and run towards the wrong goal and think they are actually scoring for their team. "But do you know what qualities these players have? They have heart and they have the drive to win. With hard work and constant practice, with coaxing, convincing, and consistent leadership, there is a chance that these players might be able to be groomed into a winning team. If you can teach them the fundamentals, if you are committed to working with them and will give them a clear and attainable goal, it would be the greatest challenge but you might just surprise the world.

"So you have a choice, Option A, the dream team or Option B, the not ready for prime time players. And now," I asked the students, "which team would you rather coach?"

The overwhelming response was Option B and the reasons given were obvious: this team presented a challenge for the coach. If you are going to invest time and effort into a project, you want to know that you helped make a difference. If you believe in your squad and are willing to put up with them as they follow their learning curve, there is a slim possibility that you will see amazing results.

As I scanned the room and saw that the students were with me to this point, I was ready to help them make the leap into the next part of our discussion. "Imagine you are G-d, and you want to coach a team, or in G-d's terms, you want to create a world. You already have a dream team; they are called angels. Angels don't fight, they don't get sick and they don't die. Angels listen to the word of G-d and carry out His request without question; in other words, they are perfect. But G-d wanted more. "There is no challenge in 'coaching' angels. So what did G-d do? G-d created humankind, He created you and me and gave us a game plan, a guidebook that teaches us how to live a champion life. We might not get all the plays right, sometimes we think we are doing the right thing but then realize that we were confused and end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. We often stumble. Yet when we manage to overcome all of the setbacks and touch the divine within us, when we commit ourselves to a life of love and light, this causes the greatest satisfaction to G-d, the Creator of the universe." While I may not have covered all the facts in my 30 minutes with each class, hopefully I gave them something to think about the next Sunday during kickoff: that we can all do something not only for ourselves and the world, but also for Hashem." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**