

THE IMPACT WE CAN MAKE
Rabbi Roger C. Klein
Yom Kippur, 5775/2014
The Temple-Tifereth Israel

From time to time over the years I have walked down the hall to our religious school wing to spend some time with our Ganon Gil preschool children. My general plan is to spend the first ten minutes or so presenting something Jewish and, for this, I bring in one of our beautifully hand-woven Torah covers to show the children the exquisitely-rendered symbol that it displays: a tree of life on one cover, the split Red Sea with the dry ground down the middle on another, the Mt. Sinai moment with its dramatic thunder and lightening, Jerusalem of gold. Or perhaps I will read them a story or bring in the striking Shalom of Safed picture that hangs in my office as we discover together Joseph and his brothers, and Joseph's coat of many colors, and the sun, the moon and the eleven stars of Joseph's dream. But I have cooked up a surprise for the children, as well. Concealed in my pocket is a yo yo which I will bring out when I finish telling the story of Moses or Joseph or of lovely Jerusalem. This is what I've done now for several years and I freely admit that these moments are among the most enjoyable and precious of my rabbinate. It's a chance to be with the kids, to bring them the

beauties and energies of our tradition, and to stamp dramatic images on their memories. And then ... the yo yo tricks ... walk the dog, the creeper, loop the loop, over the falls, rock the baby, around the corner ... the standard repertoire of tricks that all yo yo lovers know. The children relish these yo yo moments even as they are mesmerized by the glorious Torah cover images or the bright colors of Joseph's coat.

Well, it so happens that, on a certain morning, the day after one of my Ganon Gil visits, I met a mother in the foyer of the Temple on her way out of the building after having dropped her child off at the pre-school. "Are you Rabbi Klein?" she asked. "Yes," I replied. "Well" ... and then she began to tell me a brief story. It seems that at dinner the night before, this mother asked her daughter what had happened in pre-school earlier that day. "Rabbi Klein came into our class," the little girl replied. "And what did Rabbi Klein do in your classroom?" the mother inquired. "Yo yo tricks," was the answer. Nothing about Torah, nothing about Joseph and his brothers, no Jerusalem, no Moses, no Mt. Sinai. "Yo yo tricks" ... that was it.

I confess that this answer tickled me. In retrospect I wondered just why this little girl's summary delighted me so. I am, after all, a teacher of Torah and one of my joys is to bring the splendors of our tradition to people

of all ages. To bring to life Judaism's ideas and values and wisdom and aspirations; to awaken wonder and encourage commitment ... all this is central to my sense of vocation. Yet, on this occasion, what stood out for this little girl ... and I dare say for the other children, as well ... were the yo yo tricks. Partly, it was the brightly-colored yo yo itself. And who can resist a yo yo climbing the string or buzzing on the floor or rocking in the cradle? But I like to think ... and, in fact, I deeply believe ... that other elements of those moments together captivated her as well: the rabbi at play, the spontaneous and light-hearted interaction between the children and me, the sheer fun of it all. It was, in a word, a moment of joyous connection between us ... unpremeditated in its details, natural and tender. Yet, as I have reflected further on this magical moment, a different feature of that situation struck me: for my experience with the children, as beautiful as it was, was not an interaction among equals. After all, these were shared moments between an adult and children, between a teacher and students, between a rabbi and his young congregants. And adults and teachers and rabbis have roles and important obligations that children and students and young congregants do not have. And so I want to suggest to you that *both* features of this interaction ... the magical connection and the role

differentiation ... are crucial to our understanding of the power and significance of relationships like this.

What specific role do we adults ... parents and grandparents and teachers and rabbis ... play in the lives of our charges? We are their mentors, their guides, their role models. Our duty is to send them down the right paths in life. We have obligations to them that they do not have to us. Indeed ... and I know you will agree with me ... unless certain norms and values and procedures are communicated to our young people ... and communicated effectively ... no individual, no group, no society, no community, no tradition can flourish and endure. Effective communication of rules and values and objectives ... and sound, practical counsel ... is the special role and the distinctive task of parents and grandparents and teachers and rabbis ... and, for that matter, in different ways, of doctors and employers and political leaders ... all those people who can have, must have, a decisive and positive impact on others.

But the question is: how can those of us charged with this task carry out this awesome responsibility persuasively? How do we transmit crucial information ... necessary values and the “rules of the game” ... to our children and grandchildren and students and congregants and patients and employees and fellow citizens? And this brings me back to my Ganon Gil

experiences. I dare to think that that playful interlude, that spontaneous fun, that genuine human interaction, those moments when rabbi and children met with one another as human beings, had two powerful effects. First, it was a precious moment of presence and caring and joy ... with intimations, however dimly perceived, of life's sweetness and what human beings can mean to each other. Secondly, these precious moments point out, quite paradoxically, how interactions like this ... void of authority and void of "lessons" ... can make possible the crucial *work* of authority and the transmission of lessons. To say it more forcefully: it is the genuine display of our basic humanity in the presence of others ... our vulnerabilities, our emotions, our playfulness, our enthusiasms ... that makes possible the serious teaching roles we authorities have. Conversely, by coldly insisting on the primacy of our authority and placing our lessons front and center, we risk having our important guidance fall from our lips stillborn.

Permit me now to illustrate what I mean. I begin with a failure ... my own failure to heed what I have been driving at. Now, I know it won't surprise you to hear that I am a person who loves to impart "lessons", especially when I believe that I am in possession of good ones. And so, throughout the years that I was a parent of young children, I was often intent on putting the lesson front and center.

I recall, with some embarrassment, a situation in which one of my children, then a teenager, asked me the following question: “What is the point of studying Algebra?” It’s a good question, the kind of query that all of us parents have been asked from time to time: “What’s the point of studying math ... or history or chemistry? After all, I’m never going to *use* it.” And when one of my daughters asked me the “why math” question, I was ready ... believe me, I was ready! I can still picture the conversation that followed. Well, the word “conversation” may not be the best description of our encounter. “*The father pontificating*” would be more like it. Because my response to her question took the form of a list ... with elaboration and with growing conviction and enthusiasm ... a list of nine reasons why math is important. And I can still recall two impressions that began to force their way into my mind as I was providing all those jewels of wisdom: first, that my response was really quite wonderful, brilliant even. I was impressed with myself. But secondly, that I was having *absolutely no impact whatsoever* on my child. She had tuned me out from the outset and was just biding her time until I finished the harangue. (She is, by the way, now almost 43 years old and she is here in this sanctuary as I speak.) And, over the years, she and I have referred to this moment from time to time. All she remembers is her ponderous, lesson-intoxicated father, absorbed in the

task of making his points. For all my cleverness and even, I dare to say, insight, I failed miserably to get my point across to her because I failed to remember that the goal of a conversation is communication, and that the prefix of the word “communication” is “com” which means “together” which suggests some kind of mutuality, some kind of give and take, and not just of information but also of ourselves as human beings. As an attempt at persuasion, I couldn’t have been further off the mark because I blinded myself to the fact that the essence of effective communication is not the cogency of the content but the warm-heartedness of the person presenting it. The content will most likely be given a hearing if the person presenting it is gracious, attentive, sympathetic and open to the needs, capacities and responses of other person. In that situation, I put my authority and seriousness first, and my relationship with my daughter second. I would have given the same response to a perfect stranger and I sense that she knew it. We parents and grandparents and teachers risk missing precious opportunities if we don’t put our humanity ahead of our lessons and suffuse our lessons with our humanity. And this applies, I believe, to authorities of all kinds.

I love the following definition of culture: “Culture is what remains after we forget everything we learned in school.” Culture embodies the

sediment of education: our deep values, our enduring sense of the world in which we live, our convictions about what we as individuals and communities can and ought to do. Now, I don't remember much of the calculus that my high school math teacher taught me but his humanity reverberates in my soul to this day. I still feel his energy, his love of mathematics and his love for us, his students. He taught math but he taught us something even more precious. He came into the classroom before the bell in order to chat with us. He played bridge with us during lunch, laughed with us, partook of the easy banter that sanctified those moments. He did it because he enjoyed our company, loved us as individuals. And his ability to be a human being among human beings, totally natural and uncontrived as it was, made a powerful impression on us: we witnessed in him the startling power of a person in an authoritative role who was willing and able to be truly and unselfconsciously a whole person in the presence of his charges. This is why he was such an effective teacher ... of mathematics and of life. We were eager for his guidance and his wisdom and we were wide open to the mathematics he was imparting. The editors of our class's yearbook had the brilliant idea to cut a record to accompany the yearbook itself. The ebullient voice of our math teacher, in full bloom, fills moments of that recording. Here he is, even today, energetic and fully absorbed ... *in love*,

living his love ... tripping over his words, his excitement unmistakable and deeply moving. “What is the age of the human soul?” the narrator of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* asks, rhetorically. And though he is long dead, the soul of my teacher, Jim Bristol, continues to speak forcefully to me ... and he remains one of the ongoing and guiding spirits of my life.

A very good friend of mine once told me about his doctor of many years ... and about the relationship that has developed between them. “My doctor is smart and a caring guy and he is sensitive to my needs,” my friend reports. “He knows when to draw serious attention to a situation and when to put me at ease with some lightness.” And my friend goes on to say: “There are times when I have been frightened enough to have cried in his exam room but he is always open and candid while, at the same time, reassuring.” There was a time when I was frightened at what I was experiencing and he told me, calmly but decisively, to come see him [right now], *today*.” [emphasis added] “My relationship with my doctor has often taken on a light tone [as we engage in conversation about a passion that we share. And he often initiates conversation about the things we both love and in fact just recently asked me to autograph something which I brought in for him ...something he loved. That autographed piece of paper now hangs on a wall in his office.]”

Here is another authority figure ... someone, a specialist, a person who has something vital to impart ... who holds some of the keys to, we pray, sustained health. I am sure that my friend would listen to him even if he were all business, all seriousness, all about presenting the results of his training to his receptive patient. But this physician knows better; he knows, as a matter of instinct and as a matter of principle, that if he keeps his humanity front and center, his experience with his patient will be richer for him and more productive for his patient.

And so, the parent who simply lays down the law will miss a precious opportunity. The teacher who simply presses on with his or her point of view will talk past the students. The doctor who coolly moves right to business without expressing, authentically and in languages both spoken and unspoken, the need of his patient for humane contact, will be less successful during that visit and less called upon in difficult moments between visits. The employer who always insists on “his way or the highway” will most likely have compliant but resentful employees with predictable consequences for both morale and productivity.

I don't know the name of that little girl who told her mother “yo yo tricks” when asked to tell her about my visit. I like to think that all the four-year olds whose classroom I visit would have the same answer for their

fathers and mothers. And I like to think that, when I work with these children on their Bar or Bat Mitzvah preparation nine or ten years later, that those early and ongoing exchanges, those moments of joy and connection, have made my work as their rabbi, as their teacher, as their guide all the more effective. We parents and grandparents and teachers and rabbis have the obligation to give direction to our children, grandchildren and students. May we have the insight and the resolve to take these responsibilities – our precious trust – seriously, and then find the means to discharge them with graciousness, with humor and with humanity.

Amen.