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The Hazing in Northbrook

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It was a Tuesday afternoon and I was on my way to drop off Rebecca for her gymnastics class. We were headed south down Shermer Road, and as we passed Techny I could see that something was happening over at the high school. As we got closer, I saw a swarm of news vans and camera crews from the local TV stations. All of them had their broadcast antenna up, and their reporters were busy interviewing students.

My heart quickened as I turned off the road and I couldn't help worrying about what was happening. I said a prayer to myself: "Dear God, I hope this isn't another Columbine. I hope that our kids are safe."

And when I found out what all the attention was about, I was relieved. Okay, there had been a problem, a "Powder Puff football game." But no one was dying. It was not a life-threatening situation. Thank God for that.

Of course, if all you had to go on was the media attention, you might have thought that the Powder Puff game had been a massacre – that there were dozens of children, dead and injured. The media coverage was over the top. Glenbrook North and Northbrook were suddenly in the national spotlight, and whether you lived here, New Hampshire or even New Zealand, you heard about the incident and you saw the tape.

Our community, our school, our children had become the national "story of the month." And because there was videotape, there was no news magazine, cable outlet, or morning show that could stay away from it. Even serious journalists, heavy hitters like Ted Koppel, felt compelled to address the issue and judge our community.

We remember what it felt like. We were on the receiving end of a feeding frenzy, and we were embarrassed. Day after day, week after week, the story just wouldn't go away. People couldn't get enough of it. A group of privileged, white, high school girls from an upper-middle class neighborhood, our country's best and brightest, had engaged in a group hazing. Some of the girls had been drinking and a few became violent. Some of them were injured, all of them were filthy, and our high school and community received a black eye and a damaged reputation. Everything that we believed about ourselves, everything that we appreciated about our lives here, was suddenly being scrutinized by those who "knew better." We felt like we were being judged, as if we were being told that we had a sick high school and a sick community, and that none of us were paying enough attention. No one had noticed. And just look where all of it had led.

The hazing touched a chord in our country. And even though the media scrutiny was excessive, even though people in other communities were being hypocritical, and even if there were other stories that deserved more attention, there was still an element of what happened here that left people rightly concerned. Because in their heart of hearts, people recognized that it's not, that an incident like this could only happen in Northbrook. It was, if it could happen in Northbrook, it could happen anywhere. It

could happen in my town too.

And the fact is that events like the hazing do take place in our country every week. It's just that, unlike the Powder Puff game, there's no videotape. Indeed, if last year's event had taken place, as it had for dozens of years before, and there had been no videotape, we might never have known about it.

Perhaps there would have been a little article in the Northbrook Star, perhaps not. If there was no videotape, no pictures of what had happened, I'm not sure there even would have been a story.

And yet, while we can complain about the unfairness of the media coverage, it would be a serious mistake if we didn't look back and see what we could learn from what took place. Our community was stained by this incident, and we owe it to ourselves and our children to make sure that we identify our issues and begin working to fix them.

Before we do this, however, we need to start by recognizing where our kids are at. Now I know it's true of my kids, so I would imagine that it would also be true to expect that high school kids would test our limits.

As a matter of fact, I think that this might very well be the job that all kids have. I imagine that when we decide to have children, God looks down, smiles, and sends us someone who can really challenge us, really test our limits. Kids will push and push until they get what they want. And they keep pushing, until we make it clear to them that they've crossed the line. And if we don't make it clear, then the line disappears. It doesn't exist. And they'll do whatever they please.

If we want our children to be successful in life, then they need to learn that there are limits. Kids need rules. They need to know what they can and can't do. And it's our job to tell them. That's why we're called parents, and not friends. Our children need directions on how to get through life, on how to live in our society. They haven't been here before. So they rely on us to show them the way. They might not always appreciate our directions. They might not always get to go where they want to go. But if we work hard, and keep at it, we will end up with children who can find their own place in the world, children that we can be proud of.

We live in an age when technology has extended our ability to interact with the world. It used to be that you could send your child to his room for a time out. Now, between cell phones and the computer, when you send a child to his room, he could very well be having a conversation with any number of friends, and visiting anyplace in the world.

Our children have more freedom, more access to information, to education, and to trouble, than people have ever had before. And we need to set limits for them, guide and guard them, so that the decisions they make will be ones that they can be proud of today as well as in the future.

A second fact that we need to remember is that high school can be a very difficult place. Every high school has a culture. Every high school has its cliques. And when you're 14 years old, every single year of school feels like an eternity. (It's hard to remember this when you're 42 and the years fly by at breakneck speed.)

But when you're in high school, being on the outside is not a good place to be. A child who is ostracized, or even just ignored, can feel very lonely. A child who is ostracized or ignored may start to hurt herself or others. She might develop an eating disorder, or cut herself. Boys have been known to lash out, sometimes in very serious ways. Being on the outside in high school is not an easy place to be.

So it's not all that surprising to think that some kids will go to extremes, that they'll do a lot of things that they wouldn't ordinarily think to do to become a part of the crowd. Even smart kids from good homes might submit to a hazing if they believed that it would bring them the acceptance of their peers for a year at school.

You know, I wish there was a way of communicating to our children, so that they would understand that the years they spend in high school and college, are honestly just a small part of their lives. That, God-willing, they still have 60, 70 or 80 plus years ahead of them. I wish we could help them understand that they don't need 20 or 30 best friends to be happy; that life's not a popularity contest.

I wish our kids would understand that if they don't have the chance to do everything they want when they're 15 or 16, it's not too late. They still have time. I wish they'd have the hindsight to see that the kids who are most popular in high school, the kids whose approval they seek, are not always the happiest, most successful people after high school. If only our kids would understand in their hearts that what other kids think about you isn't as important as what you think about yourself. And last, if only they would remember that we love them as they are, for who they really are, not for who they "think" they need to be.

We need to keep telling these things to our children. It is hard to be a teenager. It's hard to be in high school. It's hard to deal with the pressures we place on them, be they social pressures, family pressures, or schoolwork. Being a teenager is a hard job. But we all do it, and we all go through it. High school is not the end of our lives; it's just a beginning.

These are some of the lessons that we need to speak about to our children. These are some of the lessons that we need to remember.

There is one more subject that I need to discuss tonight. And that is that mistakes happen. I know this from personal experience. I know that I've made mistakes. I made them when I was a child. I made them in high school and college. And every once in a while, I make them still. And so do you.

If we all had to live in the glare of our mistakes, if every time we did something wrong we had to wear it as a sign upon our forehead, we would all have very depressing lives. No one is perfect. In fact, it's not our job to be perfect. It's our job to be human. And that means that sooner or later, we will make mistakes.

And that's where Judaism comes in. Because what Judaism teaches, what this day teaches, is that mistakes should be learning experiences, opportunities for us to grow. We do this by seeking atonement.

There are four steps to the process of atonement. The first is to recognize that we have made a mistake, by acknowledging our action and apologizing for it. We must speak directly with the person we have harmed and acknowledge our mistake.

In the book Revenge, by Laura Bloomenthal, a book which discusses her year-long journey to take revenge on a terrorist who shot her father in Jerusalem, Laura explains that one of the greatest motivations for revenge is a desire, not to be a nameless victim, but for an attacker to at least acknowledge that you are a human being. By acknowledging our misdeeds to the ones we have hurt, by recognizing what we have done to them, we deflate the power of our sin to multiply in their heart. By acknowledging that we have harmed another and apologizing for it, we pierce a self-contained wound, and allow anger to escape and begin to dissipate.

Putting a band-aid on an infected wound will not allow it to heal. First we need to treat the infection. And with a sin, acknowledging our mistakes is how we begin to drain the wound.

On the other hand, if we ignore our mistake, we allow an infected wound to fester and grow.

Over time, our initial act may come to be seen as insignificant in comparison to the pain that we caused, when we failed to acknowledge our actions. This is why directly acknowledging our mistakes is the first step on the road to atonement.

Our second step is to do whatever we can to restore a situation to how it was before; to make restitution. If I made a mistake, I must fix it. If I broke a window, I must replace it. If I damaged a car, I must repair it. If I demeaned someone, I must lift him up. If I tore someone down, I must build her up.

If we are serious about taking on this challenge, we will quickly realize that there is no way for us to make amends for everything that we have done wrong. Because, while broken things can be fixed, broken people cannot always be healed. Those who have suffered from our actions or been harmed by harsh words, can have wounds that are not easily healed. In these cases, the best that we can do is to express our regret for the pain we have caused. We cannot fix everything that goes wrong, even if we wanted to. But we must, at the very least, acknowledge the damage that we have done. For this too, helps one who was hurt to heal.

The third step is perhaps the most difficult, because it requires us to be honest with ourselves. If we wish to atone for a mistake, after we have made restitution, we must resolve not to repeat our actions. Saying “I’m sorry” time and time again, doesn’t do it. If we truly wish to be absolved from our sins, if we sincerely wish to make atonement, we must learn from our past and grow.

And how do we know if we have been successful? When we encounter a situation where we fell short in the past, and act differently. When we learn from our past, we grow.

For many of us in Northbrook, the sin that we committed last year, and for many years before, was turning a blind eye. As a community, as parents, as neighbors and friends, we looked away from what our children were doing. Those of us who knew about the powder puff game said: “Kids will be kids.” We said, “No one will get hurt.” We said, “Let’s not make too big a deal about it. Let’s not get involved. It’s not worth it.” And we were wrong.

When we see something happening that is not right, we have an obligation to speak out about it. This is not the easiest task to take on, but it is the right one. This is the lesson that we must learn from what happened last May. That we must not sit idly by while our neighbor bleeds, or while our children humiliate one another.

If we should find ourselves in a similar situation to what happened last year, then we need to respond. We cannot wait for another videotape to turn up. We cannot wait for the TV cameras to return. We need to stand up and make a change in our community on our own. And it is only then that we will know that we have atoned for what happened here last May.

Finally, there is one last action that we need to take. An action that’s applicable to all of us. We must remember to forgive.

When a person who has harmed us asks for forgiveness, we are commanded to grant it. And why are we told to forgive someone who has wounded us? Why should we give them that kindness?

We forgive them because they are human, and everyone makes mistakes. But we also forgive them because, when we carry a grudge, when we carry a burden, it leaves less room in our hearts for joy. When we carry a wound, it leaves less room in our hearts for health. When we carry a hurt, it leaves less room in our hearts for love.

We forgive as an act of kindness to one who has harmed us, and we forgive as an act of kindness to ourselves, so that we can move on, grow, and live. “To err is human, to forgive divine.” Forgiving is an act of selflessness, that renews the life of one who has harmed us, and allows us to live up to our own potential. We must let go of our grudges, release our hurts, and open up our hearts to live.

As individuals, as families, and as a community, we have gathered together on this Day of Atonement to become one again. One with ourselves, one with our community, and one with God. On this Day of Atonement, may we find peace in our hearts, make peace with one another, and become one with God.

May this New Year be a good year for us, for our community, for our people Israel, and for our world. May we be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.

May this be God’s will. Amen.