

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Terumah

Ok, I have to admit that I am biased. I am a University of Kentucky fan. What I have to share, though, is not rooted in this fan bias. Tuesday night, I watched the basketball game played against Mississippi State University. The pre-game hype was a little twisted. Somehow, the personal cell phone number of one of UK's player circulated through the MSU campus. This African American player received the ugliest and most racist of text messages. With the horrific Civil Rights legacies tied to acts of terror in the state's history, this was beyond bad sportsmanship. Hate speech is not a matter of sportsmanship, it is simply a matter of hate. In panning the crowd during the game, the posters seemed to celebrate the text messages. Additionally, there was one individual in a monkey suit, taunting this UK player. Had I been an NCAA official, I would have ordered MSU to forfeit the game. No the team is not responsible for the student fans, but the school is. For letting people in with these costumes and posters, and letting them continue to act that way unfettered is a travesty for which the school should feel humiliated and be punished. Were I one of MSU's players, I would have felt humiliated, as well. At a minimum, the referees should have ordered that all posters be canned, awarding the brandishing of any one of them a technical foul. The ultimate display of disrespect came as the fans threw empty bottles onto the court at the players and the referees. All of this, of course, in the name of "good spirited competition," as the NCAA claims to foster.

Ok, having gotten this off my chest, I have to share that watching this unfold caused my heart to absolutely sink. I had just watched some of the worst human behavior, and an even worse lack of response. I turned to the task of my real job, and before calling it a night, worked on preparing for a funeral scheduled for the next morning and looking at the week's Torah portion. It was in this moment that I felt the weakest. I read the first lines of the portion, the portion that begins the building instructions for the Tabernacle in the wilderness. "Take for **ME** gifts from all whose hearts are moved to give." This is God's instruction to Moses. These are the gifts that will be used to build and furnish the place where Israel will meet God in the wilderness over their forty years of wandering. This becomes the blue print for the Temple in Jerusalem. Allegorically, this is the blueprint for how we maintain God's "Temple" even in our own day. Khasidism teaches that this is God's home, and our charge is to make it one where God can partner with us in creating peace. The command was not made to Israel to give, rather it was to Moses to take whatever it was that Israel was willing to give. Whether the gift is gold or goat hair, somehow, Moses needed to find a way to take the gifts, and use them in a way that gave as much dignity to the one who gave the goat hair as to the one who gave the gold. God was reminding us that it is our heart that matters in giving, far more than the value of the gift itself.

Our obligation is to give from our hearts, to offer the fruits that our dear to us. The great Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught, "God is essence of good, and the nature of good is to bestow goodness. But goodness cannot be bestowed when there is no one to receive it." It is this goodness that gives us the strength to change the world, and motivates the intention behind the gifts that we bring to the Tabernacle. The building of God's home results directly from our appreciation of this strength. Where we see the relationship with God as valueless, the gifts we bring will also lack the value of spirit. Where there is no one paying attention, God's "goodness" cannot be known, and the power that brings our lives to change the world lays wasted at our feet. This was the despair I felt after the game Tuesday night. Yes, it is just a

game, but that people would stoop so low into racism just to influence a game is indeed a sad commentary. Sadder still is the lack of attention it has garnered in any media, university, or NCAA conversation. The university is supposed to provide students with guidance and education to help make the world a place that makes more sense. Athletics are rooted (or supposed to be) in the ideal of sportsmanship. And most certainly, humanity is to be held to a much higher standard than any imposed on the MSU fans or school that evening. Had they won the game, they would have taken pride in their behavior, having gotten into a player's head with the "distraction." And, this ugliness is not isolated to the confines of this game, it plays itself out in politics and in so many other venues -- people demeaning each other for personal gain. How can this be the way we build God's house? How can these be the best fruits we have to offer? Were this an isolated instance, we could condemn the handful of people who acted badly, but it is not, and the national silence on the matter only makes it worse. As I see it, we have a lot of work to do. IF we expect God to do it on God's own, we will all be sorely disappointed. As Dr King taught, and as I have echoed, "God cannot do what man will not do." We need to demand a whole lot more from each other. Certainly, if we hope to give our children a world better than the one we found, we have a lot more learning and teaching to do. I hope to see you along this sacred journey. Shabbat Shalom.