

Eight Simple Rules For Stating My Dogma

By Michael A. Mogill*

[1] *I had a feeling that the phone would ring, but as end of the non-secular year 5764 drew nearer I was starting to think that maybe someone else would bear this year's burden. On the one hand, I felt relieved, while on the other maybe a bit insulted – after all, I thought my talk last year had gone well!¹ But, as initially expected, the call did come, asking that I once again deliver a holiday sermon, albeit on Yom Kippur in this instance. And again, I procrastinated in my response; after all, I was now being asked to give a talk on the holiest day of the year. What could I possibly add this year, and even more importantly, what fresh ideas could my children share with me? But my fellow congregant persisted with a follow-up message; I once more faced my own personal demons prompted by my ambivalence about religion and innerfelt inadequacies in providing any meaningful words of wisdom. Yet, the evening arrived and, again inspired by the suggestions of Adam, now a recent bar mitzvah, and Sarah, age 11, I supplemented my comparatively meager knowledge about the events of the day. The result was the following remarks, as delivered before Congregation Beth Tikvah on Friday evening, September 24, 2004.*

[2] So we begin with the old story of the Sunday School Teacher who asked her student: “Now, Davie, be honest, did you say your prayers before eating?” “No, ma’am,” little Davie replied, “I don’t have to. My mom is a good cook.”

[3] As was posed to us in a congregant’s earlier talk, do we need to be inconvenienced by this holiday? Why pray if Mom is such a good cook? As before, I asked my children to give me an idea for this talk. And while I would not agree to Adam’s request that I yell the eardrum-shattering, headache-inducing word “GOAL” for

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¹ And ultimately was published in 14 SETON HALL J. OF SPORTS & ENT. L. 101 (2004).

minutes on end, he did say I needed some reference to sports and to Shakespeare, which appeared to offer an interesting combination; Sarah just wanted something said about soccer, whether I shouted a prolonged “GOAL” or not. And as I thought about how to share these ideas, I decided to put them in the context of an event that most recently captured the attention of many nations – the 2004 Summer Olympic games. And ultimately, to put these thoughts in a checklist of “Eight Simple Rules”.

[4] While this talk is certainly not of Olympian proportions, perhaps the task for these ten days of penitence is.² Here we are on the first night of Yom Kippur, and while many of us do not ask any question other than “how much longer before we can eat again?,” our curiosity leads us to wonder just what this holiday means.

[5] Word meanings can be instructive. Let us begin by hearkening back to the time of Shakespeare (there, I said it). In old English pubs, ale was ordered by pints and quarts. So in those days of yore, when customers got unruly, the bartender would yell at them to tend to their own pints and quarts and settle down. From this we get the phrase “mind your P’s and Q’s”.³ Or, again in Shakespeare’s time (I’ve said it twice now!), mattresses were secured on bed frames by ropes. By pulling on the ropes, the mattress was tightened, resulting in the bed being firmer to sleep upon. And so the expression “goodnight, sleep tight” originated.⁴ And then there’s Scotland, where a new game was

² Referring to the ten days between the Jewish High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

³ From “*Where Did That Come From?*,” author unknown, as received in an email from the author’s aunt, on file with author.

⁴ *Id.*

invented and entitled “Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden”, whose name today will later become readily apparent.⁵

[6] And how about Yom Kippur? In Hebrew, the words Yom Kippur mean “Day of Atonement,” the word kippur being traced to the Babylonian for purge, clean, or wipe off.⁶ It is this day which is said to have the firmest hold on the Jewish conscience. At this time, we ask forgiveness of one another for any slights, insensitivities, or injustices we might have committed over the past year, thus allowing each of us to enter onto this holiday with a clear conscience.⁷

[7] In doing so, the central feature is the Confession, repeated several times during the day, involving the listing of no fewer than 56 categories of sin.⁸ For each of these, we beat our breasts, asking for forgiveness and pardon. We are directed to closely examine our deeds and more significantly, our misdeeds, from the preceeding year.⁹ And, for those really serious about this, to both ethically and religiously reassess our lives.¹⁰ This confession of guilt is recited as a collective “we,” not as an individual “I,” with Jews as a community “sharing” each other’s wrongdoings and indicating a general

⁵ *Id.* But *c.f.* Rand Jerris, *FAQ – Golf History Questions*, (Many people believe that the word golf is not an acronym, but rather, is derived from a Dutch word meaning club.) available at http://www.usga.org/questions/faqs/usga_history.html#1 (last visited Jan. 22, 2005).

⁶ LEO ROSTEN, *THE JOYS OF YIDDISH* 444 (McGraw-Hill Book Co. 1968).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 445.

⁹ JOSEPH TELUSHKIN, *JEWISH LITERACY* 564 (William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1991).

¹⁰ *Id.*

responsibility for the inappropriate actions and shortcomings of humanity.¹¹ We feed our souls and our minds, with some abiding through tomorrow's sunset in accordance with another ritual - they will purge through the "fast"- truly an oxymoron if there ever was one.

[8] While this may be perceived as a day of sadness, in partial measure for it being a fast day, or in reality, a very slow one, the goal of Yom Kippur is not really self-denial but, instead, it is to bring about a reconciliation between people, as well as between individuals and God.¹² And when, to use the tritest of expressions, we come to the "end of the day," people are said to have a great catharsis, an alleviation of fears, because if the holiday is observed properly, one will have achieved peace both with everyone he knows and with God. By the time the fast ends, many will exult in a deep sense of serenity.¹³ While the cynic may suggest that this state is hunger induced, the cleansing assists in focusing on the task at hand.

[9] We have probably all seen at one time the poem "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten".¹⁴ While we read instead from the Book of Jonah during this time of the Jewish calendar, I decided to take a different plunge, as it were, tonight. Possibly this updated version, which begins with the similar phrase, "Everything I need

¹¹ ROSTEN, *supra* note 6, at 445.

¹² TELUSHKIN, *supra* note 9, at 568.

¹³ *Id.* at 570.

¹⁴ ROBERT FULGHUM, ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN: UNCOMMON THOUGHTS ON COMMON THINGS (Reissue edition, Ivy Books 1989).

to know about life, I learned from Noah's Ark,"¹⁵ may help us to attend to the difficulties posed by our newly freed up consciences. Given the Olympian amount of time that we spent watching the 2004 Summer Games, perhaps it is best to view our lives in that spirit. To do so, I borrow the name of a television show that I confess to never having seen but which my children watch, dare I say it, religiously: "Eight Simple Rules".¹⁶

[10] First, do not miss the boat. That lesson is illustrated in the attendance at the Games of some 200 nations.¹⁷ As the athletes realize, their window of opportunity is brief and there is no telling if or when another vessel will float on by.

[11] Second, remember that we are all in the same boat. Preferably, rowing in the same direction and largely in unison; it is certainly instructive to follow the lead of the U.S. women's basketball, soccer and softball teams;¹⁸ so, you go Girls! By contrast, hopefully none of us on the boat is a woodpecker, or emulate the dysfunctionality of our men's basketball team.¹⁹

¹⁵ From "*The Woodpecker Might Have To Go!*," author unknown, also as received in an email from the author's aunt, on file with author; see e.g. *The Woodpecker Might Have To Go* at <http://www.drellenrudolph.com/tnc/funstuff/Ark.htm> (last visited Dec. 31, 2004).

¹⁶ The full title of the show is "Eight Simple Rules for Dating my Teenage Daughter". While my daughter may well say "don't go there", I know I will at some point address my own angst and likely come up with at least that many rules in coping with that chapter of life's passage.

¹⁷ *For the Record*, Sports Illustrated, Sept. 6, 2004, at 28.

¹⁸ Each of whom won the gold medal in the 2004 Olympics.

¹⁹ Who displayed erratic and inconsistent form and eventually claimed the bronze medal, the lowest finish for the United States men's basketball team since professional players joined the team in 1992.

[12] Third, plan ahead. It was not raining when Noah built the Ark. Yet failing to prepare is literally preparing to fail. I was reminded of this when we watched the Olympics, admiring those athletes who exhibited the ideals of “faster, higher, and stronger” because of their lifelong dedication to reaching the heights of human athletic performance.²⁰

[13] Fourth, stay fit. When you are 600 years old, as in Noah’s case, you may be asked to do something really big. And, by then, you likely do not want to be seen in the outfits worn by the Olympic beach volleyballers. Or as it is said, it is not how old you are, but how you are old.

[14] Fifth, build your future on high ground. While never an Olympic athlete in the days of strictly amateur participation, the late tennis star, Arthur Ashe, surely epitomized grace, courage and wisdom in trying times. When he contracted the AIDS disease because of surgical complications, he commented, “Should I blame life for the bad things that have happened to me – which I didn’t deserve, and not equally blame it for the good things?”²¹

[15] Sixth, speed is not always an advantage. Remember that the snails were on board with the cheetahs. Israel certainly took its time in winning its first Olympic gold medal. It was in August, 2004 that Gal Fridman won the Mistral competition in Greece, twelve Olympics since the establishment of Israel, a country whose Olympic history had long been overshadowed by the murders of eleven Israeli athletes and coaches seized by

²⁰ Rabbi Mitchell Smith, *Gold Medal Lessons For Life*, at 1, available at <http://www.jewishsports.com/reflections/struggold.htm> (last visited Dec. 31, 2004).

²¹ *Id.* at 3.

Palestinian militants during the 1972 Munich Games.²² As “the Wave” (the meaning of his name in Hebrew) said: “I simply felt a whole country standing behind me, pushing me. I never before had felt such a thing.”²³ That collective “we” was certainly at hand.

[16] Seventh, when you are stressed, float a while. Michael Phelps may have swum hours a day, and according to one often repeated commercial, laps across the ocean, but we all are not Olympic athletes competing against watches and other standards. So strive to at least keep our heads above water as we occasionally slow down in our own daily laps.

[17] Eighth, remember, the Ark was built by amateurs, while the Titanic by professionals. Maintain perspective. Let us face it, we only know of one such memorable ark being built, and even our nation-leading 103 medals won in Greece was but one medal for every 2,854,796 Americans.²⁴ And for all the talk of China, which was third in medals, this amounted to just one medal for every 20,000,000 of its people, placing it seventieth out of the seventy-five countries that won medals. Indeed, 127 countries went home without any medal at all.²⁵

[18] As with the law, it is one thing to know the “rules” but quite another to analyze and apply them. Given my own ambivalence about religious formalisms, I am certainly open to question about whether I will follow every custom governing this

²² *Israeli Wins First Olympic Gold*, at 1, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics_2004/sailing/3597956.stm (last visited Dec. 31, 2004).

²³ Magnus Wheatley, *Israel Surfs the Golden Wave At Last*, FINANCIAL TIMES, August 26, 2004 at 12.

²⁴ Sports Illustrated, *supra* note 17.

²⁵ *Id.*

holiday, including the observance of the fast. Perhaps in answering, I can look to the approach recently taken by another sports figure, Shawn Green of the Los Angeles Dodgers. Green decided to play in the game tonight against the San Francisco Giants but to sit out tomorrow's game in this crucial series between the long-time bitter rivals, indeed the two top teams in his division.²⁶ When asked why, he responded that "[e]veryone approaches their worship in their own way and goes about it differently. Playing one of the two is most consistent with my beliefs as a Jewish person I feel like this is the most consistent way for me to celebrate the holiday."²⁷ In explaining why he chose Friday night instead of Saturday, he noted "I just feel like that's the best way I can respect the holiday and the way that I'm going to do it."²⁸ Having struggled with the decision for many days, and having consulted other family members, he expressed his relief that "I woke up this morning feeling good about it".²⁹ And while my own personal decision certainly will not be as newsworthy, it will ultimately be one with which I am comfortable.

²⁶ Tony Jackson, *Green Opts to Play Tonight, Sit Saturday*, THE DAILY NEWS OF L.A., September 24, 2004, at S8. Green played in the Friday September 24, 2004 game but did not play in the next day's game in the series. *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *First Baseman Will Sit Out Saturday's Game*, at 1, <http://sports.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=1887038> (last visited Jan.14, 2005).

²⁹ *Id.* at 2. Maybe not ironically, Green's inner resolution allowed him not only to play that evening, but to hit a two-run homer in the Dodger's crucial 3-2 victory over the Giants. As Green commented: "It couldn't have worked out better for me personally or the team. It's been a tough few days for me going through all this in my mind but I felt at peace today. For me, it still would have been the right decision regardless of what happened." *Bonds hits No. 702 in loss*, at 1, <http://sports.ESPN.go.com/mlb/recap?gameid=240924126> (last visited Jan. 15, 2005). The Dodgers ultimately won the division title by a one game margin over the Giants.

[19] In reality, and by contrast to the Olympic athletes and Shawn Green, the great lot of us are truly professional amateurs. We may never invent a new game, like the one I referred to earlier, “Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden,” yes G-O-L-F.³⁰ We are not defined by any Olympian feats or particular medals but by having developed other facets of our lives, having come to realize that people are not so much defined solely by their accomplishments, or their “stuff” or “things” or their job titles, but by the essence of their inner selves. While negative thoughts will inevitably creep into our consciousness, and we will have disagreements and suffer or cause others to suffer slights, insensitivities, and injustices – after all, we all need to have things to “purge” ourselves of next year – I hope that we can and will focus on the positive as the year begins, that our ark or boat is not in this instance perpetually half full of water. Eight Simple Rules – but still leaving us with choices; it is in that spirit we look inwards and that we share this evening as a community, as a larger family, seeking at least a temporary shelter from the storms of life. So mind your P’s and Q’s, sleep tight (at least once services are over) and enjoy the coming challenges, some of which may be perceived as of Olympic proportions, along with the wonders of the new year.

Epilogue

[20] *My speech was delivered and I felt my own sense of serenity in having finished the task without undue embarrassment. I was relieved to have weathered this latest request and already began thinking to myself, “OK, that’s it, the two highest holidays and two speeches in two years, I’m now off the hook.” And, yes, I figured it was time to do with this speech what I had done with the one for my son’s bar mitzvah, i.e., bury it somewhere in the “family file.” But many out there had been listening. I was approached by congregants applauding my sentiments and offering how I had truly captured the spirit of this very solemn yet uplifting holiday. And my two resident critics were soon at hand, Sarah to offer that she thought it was “good, very good – and pretty*

³⁰ See *Where Did That Come From?*, *supra* note 5 and accompanying text.

funny, too – better than last year’s, so publish it!,” while Adam said it was “OK, I guess, the sports stuff was cool – yeah, at least good enough to publish.” And who I am to disagree, especially on the occasion when we strive for harmony and put forth our hopes for all of our futures? So, in knowing that my children (mostly) follow my advice and prodding (cleaning their rooms, notwithstanding), it’s once again time to follow theirs . .

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