

The Yachad Revolution

A sermon delivered on Yachad Shabbat February 27th, 2016.

1. Yachad Shabbat is a Revolution

You have just heard a wonderful dvar Torah from Naftali, one of our Yachad participants.

Please understand this dvar torah represents a revolution. Fifty years ago, a developmentally disabled man would not have spoken from the pulpit, and no congregation would have welcomed a Yachad shabbaton, so what has happened here in KJ during the last 25 years is nothing short of a revolution. But to appreciate why this revolution is so significant, we need to understand that our own attitudes on disabilities are far more complicated than we'd like to believe.

2. A Cold Look at Disabilities

A year and a half ago, a controversy erupted over a comment on Twitter by the famed biologist Richard Dawkins. When asked by a follower about the ethical dilemma of aborting a Down's syndrome pregnancy, Dawkins wrote: *"Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice."*

Undoubtedly, such a pregnancy presents a serious ethical dilemma, and halachic opinions on this subject are not wholly monolithic. But Dawkins' blithe response shocked many. How could he coldly pronounce "abort it", as if the life of a disabled person is worthless?

However it would be a mistake to see Dawkins' point of view as new or unique. The most immediate analogy would be the Nazi T-4 program, which murdered over 70,000 Germans with disabilities and psychiatric disorders. But this analogy is deceptive, because the exceptional evil of the Nazi regime makes us think that any policy they adopted is outlier the handiwork of immoral barbarians. But in actuality, the idea of murdering the disabled is quite old, and not at all uncommon. In Sparta, babies deemed "deformed" were tossed into a place called "the apothetae", a chasm near Mount Taygetus. (Aristotle accepts this idea as well in Politics 7:17). In ancient Rome, it was not uncommon to abandon disabled children. Martin Luther believed children with severe disabilities were actually "changelings", demonic beings that took on the form of a human child, and that they should be killed. He is quoted as saying: *"I said to the Princes of Anhalt: "If I were the prince or the ruler here, I would throw this child into the water-- into the Molda that flows by Dessau. I would dare commit homicidium on him!"*

This cold view of disabilities has always found followers because it is not unreasonable. In fact, it can be seen as the practical way of dealing with a difficult situation. When Dawkins' defended himself he wrote that *"if your morality is based, as mine is, on a desire to increase the sum of happiness and reduce suffering, the decision to deliberately give birth to a Down baby, when*

you have the choice to abort it early in the pregnancy, might actually be immoral from the point of view of the child's own welfare."

This view may seem cold, but it is logical. And if we are honest with ourselves, this vision is not at all foreign to us. In the Charedi world, a Down's Syndrome child affects the shidduch possibilities of the siblings, because of concerns about genetics; and frequently, the developmentally disabled child is hidden away, to protect the siblings and the family.

This view is not limited to the Charedi community. Shockingly, Rav Shlomo Aviner, a leader of the Dati Leumi community in Israel ruled that you make the blessing of Baruch Dayan Haemet (a blessing generally said when informed of the death of a relative) on the birth of a Down's Syndrome child.

Like Dawkins, Aviner sees the developmentally disabled as a liability, people who undermine the happiness of those around them. Both Dawkins and Aviner recognize that we live in a world where capabilities matter; intellectual, physical, and financial. In every sphere of life, there is constant competition for greatness and achievement; and these disabled children will achieve less and require much more from their families and their community. Dawkins and Aviner approach disabilities from a utilitarian perspective, and see disabled children as a tragedy.

To borrow the language of Rav Soloveitchik's *Lonely Man of Faith*, these utilitarian's believe that the majestic nature of man is all that matters. Soloveitchik writes that the inborn aspiration of man is to achieve majesty by controlling and subduing the world around him. And it is through achievement and triumph that man achieves dignity and honor.

When majesty is the only parameter by which life is judged, anyone with diminished capabilities is less worthy, and the utilitarian ethic of Aviner and Dawkins seems justifiable. **And because it is a reasonable perspective, this cold utilitarian view of life can always find advocates throughout history, can always find followers in our community, and many times, can find a place in our hearts.**

But what is wrong with this perspective is that it is far too narrow, and misses the most critical dimension of life.

3. A Jewish vision

There has always been another vision of life.

The Jewish vision is rooted (to borrow the Rav's terminology again) in the covenantal. Rav Soloveitchik talks about the search for redemption, man's need to create community simply because that is what his soul thirsts for. To Soloveitchik, man instinctively pursues accomplishment and greatness, but also embarks on a more important quest, for inspiration and insight. And on this spiritual journey, we gain a true appreciation for the miracle of life, and a different moral vision emerges:

Life is sacred.

Community is inclusive.

Love is redemptive.

Jews believe that **man is created in the image of God**, we believe that **Kol Yisrael Ereivim zeh lazeh**, and that we are all responsible for and intertwined with each other, and maintain **that the most important rule in the Torah is to love your neighbor as yourself.**

The mitzvah at the beginning of the parsha of the half shekel teaches us these very same lessons: **that we all count, but that no one person is more valuable than the other.**

Through the ages it is this moral vision that has challenged the utilitarian view. It refuses to reduce human existence into a series of metrics and number, and sees life as a gift and privilege. And it follows that the developmentally disabled, like everyone else, have lives of infinite value.

5. Even By Utilitarian Standards this is Wrong

But the utilitarian thesis fails in another way. Joy is not just measured in achievements and pleasures. Sometimes, joy comes from the devotion and difficulty.

In my previous synagogue, there was a young woman named Pamela who had Pervasive Developmental Disorder. (I will never forget the conversation when her family joined the synagogue. Pamela was 11, and I suggested that she should have a Bat Mitzvah. Her parents were extremely moved, because they never imagined that she could receive a Bat Mitzvah.) Pamela's parents are both accomplished professionals, who worked diligently to help her grow. As a child, Pamela learned how to write most of the letters in the alphabet, but the letter "e" eluded her. For years she tried; and finally one day Pamela brought home her schoolwork, with her name spelled in full, including the letter "e". That evening, the entire family danced around the house overjoyed over Pamela's letter "e". Of course, her two highly educated parents were not celebrating the writing of the letter "e"; rather they were celebrating a triumph of love and nurturing.

This is another reason why the utilitarian argument fails. It assumes that happiness follows ease and comfort, while in actuality other factors play a much larger role in creating happiness. Take love for example. We all want to be loved. Yet the experience of love is not at all a passive one, of being a lucky recipient. Rav Eliyahu Dessler points out that with love, the more you give, the more love you experience, and it is actually the act of sacrifice that allows us to feel love most profoundly. And because of this point, the utilitarian calculation that one is happier without the difficulty and burden of a developmentally delayed child is wrong. And this has been confirmed by studies, cited by Jamie Edgin in the New York Times, indicating that siblings growing up with

a Down's Syndrome sibling felt it made them into better people, and that the parents experienced few regrets. Rather than being an empty burden, selfless devotion can bring one a great deal of happiness.

Of course, however rewarding the experience, there are enormous struggles. Pamela's mother Marcy wrote me last summer about this. She was critiquing a sermon I had given about Moshe's last moments, on a mountain overlooking Israel. Marcy felt I was mistaken to portray Moshe as disappointed over the fact he could not get into the holy land, and sent me the following e-mail:

*"This past June, our family was incredibly privileged to attend a very special graduation from Summit School. To be entirely honest with you, I thought that I was going to sit through it in anger. I thought that all I would be able to think of was: "Why could it not be Herzliah, Marianopolis or McGill?" In a sense, I guess I thought that I would be like your Moshe on the mountain. I thought that all I would be able to focus on what was the unfilled: my unfulfilled hopes and dreams and all of the doors that Lawrence and I have so quietly closed over the years. Instead, the most amazing thing happened. Pamela walked in in her cap and gown with a smile on her face that could have lit the room and I immediately started to cry. I cried through the entire ceremony. **I can tell you that not one of those tears was about what was not, but instead what was and how far Pamela has come in the 17 years since her diagnosis. Lawrence and I have been very fortunate, we rarely think of what could have been. We never compare Pamela to others, we are content to move with her on her road and to watch her grow and change. Her smile is a sign to us from God that we are indeed on the right track and fulfilling our all-important mission of nurturing our very special neshama.**"*

This letter reminds us that there are joys that have nothing to do with conventional achievements. Happiness is not always about having a child graduate Harvard, and sometimes, even writing the letter "e" is a moment of intense joy.

6. We've Come a Long Way. But.....

The world has changed in the last 50 years. It was considered dramatic when Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote about his granddaughter having Down's syndrome in McCall's magazine in 1967, and many look back at that as a turning point in American attitudes towards the developmentally disabled. Since then, there has been greater sensitivity and greater inclusion, and at KJ we can be proud of 25 years of Yachad shabbatonim. But we still have a long way to go. As one person said to me this week, "Yachad Shabbat cannot be just one day a year", and she is absolutely right. Parents cry when their children have no one to play with on Shabbat, week after week, and they cry when there is no good Jewish education for their children. Inclusion needs to be a daily exercise, and there is a long way to go. We must do more in our community, in our synagogues, and in our schools.

But even so, we must remember Marcy's point. We may not be where would like to be, but like Moshe on the mountain, we can take satisfaction in how far have come, and know that the progress will continue in the future.

Shabbat Shalom