

I am grateful to my friends Rabbis Harold Kushner and Jack Riemer for their contributions to this sermon.

My friends, my talk this morning is on how to be a success in life. I am going to begin by doing something that I'm not very comfortable doing. However, the Torah seems to tell me that I should have a greater comfort level than I do. In the Torah we read:

*When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good...*

The very first thing God did after creating light was to say, “Hey, I did that pretty well. I like what I just did. That's some nice light right there.” So the Torah is telling not to practice false modesty, and to be able to recognize the good things we do as being good.

Therefore, despite my discomfort, I begin my talk today by saying that I think I am a good rabbi. I'm not going to play games and use words like fair or half-decent. I think I'm better than that. I think I'm good. I don't think I'm perfect by any means, but good? Yes, I do think that.

I tell you that today to set a context for a story that I want to share, a story I got from my colleague Rabbi Harold Kushner. Rabbi Kushner had gone on a speaking engagement at a small Conservative synagogue in some small town somewhere, and he was picked up at the airport by the rabbi of the synagogue. As soon as the two rabbis were seated in the car, the local rabbi began to say to Rabbi Kushner, “You’re active in the Rabbinical Assembly. Tell me, who’s in line for that big pulpit in Atlanta? Is it true that Rabbi so-and-so is retiring next year? What do you know about the congregation in (a certain community) that’s looking for a rabbi?”

Rabbi Kushner said to him, “You must be very eager to leave this place.”

The other rabbi replied, “Actually, I like it here. It’s a wonderful community, I like the people, my family is happy, my kids are in good schools, I think I’m doing an effective job. You know what the only problem is? When I go to the Rabbis’ convention and I see former classmates of mine, and they ask me, ‘Where are you now, How many families?’ I forget how much I like the people here and I feel like a failure for being stuck in a small *shul* in a small town.”

If I am going to be honest with myself, I have to admit that there is a piece of me that empathizes with that rabbi. My family and I are happy here. My kids like their school. I love the people in our congregation. You’re happy enough with me to have asked me to stay for five more years. Unlike the rabbi in the story, I never forget how much I love Shaarey Tefilla and Carmel. And yet, even with all that, I know what the other rabbi in the story means. At the RA convention, rabbis do play

the “mine is bigger than yours” game. If I’m asked, I have no problem telling a colleague how many families we have. But I know that I am expected to courteously ask the same question of my colleague, and I know I’m going to hear a big number. How do I know? Because only rabbis with large congregations measure success by number of families, and they are the ones who ask “How big is yours?” so they can say “That’s nice. But mine is bigger.”

Let me tell you what that means. That means even rabbis, whom I think should be above such superficiality, sometimes respond to an external and artificial standard of success.

You see, we as a society do have certain standards by which we measure success. For example, women are taught that the way to be successful is to be attractive. Would it shock you, as it shocked me recently, to learn that as many as one out of every ten female college students suffers from a psychological eating problem, - anorexia or bulimia? I think it was Sarah Ferguson who said, “There is no such thing as being too rich or, too thin,” and unfortunately, too many college students seem to believe her. Psychiatrists disagree on the root cause of eating disorders, but whatever the cause, it virtually only happens to adolescent women, and it represents an extreme form of the price we pay in mental and physical illness and unhappiness when we define success in terms of physical appearance. But don’t hold your breath waiting for the first Miss America who is bright and talented and caring and giving and witty and vivacious and overweight, or otherwise different from society’s conventional image of physical attractiveness.

Our society isn't much kinder to men, either. For men, we define success in winning, coming out ahead of others in the competition for fame and fortune, whatever you have to do to get there. The most blatant examples, perhaps, are the college football and basketball coaches who pass on to the 19-year-olds in their charge the wisdom that if you can't win within the rules, break the rules because nothing is more important than winning. We saw the most revolting example of this in the history of the world at Penn State. If New Jersey Governor Chris Christie ever runs for President, he will be the first overweight candidate in my lifetime (unless his handlers put him on a strict weight loss program before announcing his candidacy, which would not surprise me). But this definition of success as looking a certain way, achieving certain arbitrary and empty standards, and earning more money than the next guy is a lot more pervasive than that. As the story showed, it even reaches into the rabbinate. It needles us even when intellectually, we know better.

This attitude of respecting people on the basis of how attractive and productive they are is especially cruel to teenagers. It says to them that, unless you're Selena Gomez, you don't count. You're not worth anything because you don't have a real job. You don't look good, you don't earn money, therefore you don't exist. There are a good number of high school students here at services today. I'd like to ask them if they've ever had the experience of being ignored in a store by a salesperson who takes care of an adult who came in after you instead of helping you.

Rabbi Kushner suggests that's why so much teenage energy is channeled into violence: It's a statement: I'm going to make you notice me and take me seriously." From Lee Harvey Oswald and John Hinckley to the gangs who terrorize pedestrians on America's streets, random violence is the outburst of the person who can't get noticed any other way. Instead of becoming violent, young people become depressed, closed off. They turn to drugs and increasingly even to suicide, their response to a world which has rejected them, which has said to them, "Unless you're spectacularly good looking, or you have a lot of money, it's as if you didn't exist."

And as hard as this narrow definition of success is on young people, on middle-aged men and women, it is perhaps hardest of all on the elderly. What is it like to be old in a country which takes you seriously only if you look great and earn big money? What does it mean when you have worked all your life, to stop working and have to face the question, "What do you do?" Not just, "What do you do with your time?," but how do you understand who you are? When somebody asks you, "What do you do?," and for forty or fifty years, you've been accustomed to answering in terms of your work, who are you when you have no job? America respects people who make money, and you're not doing that anymore. America admires people with firm skin and lithe figures and bright, perky faces, and that's no longer you. No wonder that so much of American society gives you the message that old age is a social disease like tuberculosis, and we should feel sorry for people afflicted with it and find ways to isolate them from the rest of us until we can cure them of it.

Why do we tolerate this? Why do we put up with a system that either ignores us or insults us, that is constantly telling us we're not good enough, we're failures? We're too old or too young, too ordinary looking or too unambitious to be successful? Is there no other definition of success? One that we can live with and feel good about? Of course there is an alternative. Instead of a definition in which being successful means being attractive and productive, there is the Jewish definition of success in which to be successful means to be a *mentsch*. Not physical attractiveness, not making money, but *mentschlichkeit*, - that is what makes your life a success story.

The beautiful thing about this standard is that it does not demonize money or physical appearance. There is nothing wrong with making lots of money or being conventionally beautiful. But we should not confuse being successful in business from a financial perspective with being a success as a human being. One can be a rich *mentsch* or a poor *mamzer*. But in Judaism, only the *mentsch* is the true success in life.

Let me share with you another story. Before coming to Indiana, I spent a great deal of time trying to find a used guitar of a certain brand. They are hard to find on the used market, but I finally found one in Tampa. However, the guitar needed a very minor modification in order to suit my needs. It was only a five-minute job, but the luthier in the store was backed up and said I would have to leave the guitar with him for a few days. I told him I was from Fort Myers and it would not be a simple

thing to return in two days—a six hour round trip, in fact. He said that under the circumstances, he would do it for me while I waited, but first he had to finish something first for a customer who was due in shortly to pick up his instrument.

I waited over an hour for that five minute job to be done. I gladly waited. After all, the guy was doing me a favor. When he finished the work, he brought me the guitar and apologized for taking so long. I responded by telling him there was nothing to apologize for, and that I was grateful for his doing it for me while I waited. He smiled, shook my hand, and said with a thick Southern accent, “I ‘ppreciate ‘cha” which means “I appreciate you.”

I fell in love with that expression and have been saying it ever since. Did you understand what I mean? He did not say “I appreciate IT,” he said “I appreciate YOU.” What an amazing difference that little change makes.

Let me tell you a story that I got from Rabbi Jack Riemer about the comedian, Jerry Lewis. Those who know him say that he is a driven man, that he is always performing, that he is always ‘on’ whether he is on stage or not. He is always trying to impress you with how funny and how talented he is.

I read an interview with Jerry Lewis that appeared in the newspaper, in which the reporter asked him: “Why? What drives you?”

He answered: “My parents were both entertainers, but they never amounted to much. Maybe that is the reason they always put me down, and always told me that I was not very good.”

“My parents are long since gone, and yet, I keep thinking, that if I can just perform a little bit better this time, that they will look down and smile from wherever they are, and that they will say: 'that's good, man! Now you've got it! Now you're doing it right!'”

The reporter said to him: “You have the whole world applauding for you. Isn't that enough?”

And Jerry Lewis said: “There's no comparison between having the adulation of strangers and having the admiration of your parents. No comparison.”

Jerry Lewis is a driven man, who pays the price in psychic damage every day of his life, for not having had parents who were able to give him recognition, to appreciate *him*, and so, from him we learn that being appreciated, especially by one's parents, is an important ingredient of a healthy life.

Have you ever watched kids at a playground?

Watch sometime, as they go off the diving board, or as they go down the slide, or as they learn how to ride a bike.



What do they say?

They all say the same thing, which is: “Look at me! Watch me!” “Look Ma, no hands! or Look, Ma. I'm swimming! or Look, Ma. I'm sliding!”

Blessed is the child who has a parent who is able to say: “That's good! I'm proud of you!”

And pity the child who has a parent who, for whatever reason, it doesn't matter why, who is unable to say those words.

Pity that child, for he or she is likely to grow up like Jerry Lewis, *nebuch*, who, even at his age, even with all of his fame, and with all of his fortune, is still saying: “Look, Ma. I'm funny! Look, Dad, I'm here!” To no avail.

What we need to learn from Jerry Lewis is that the need to be recognized, the need to be appreciated, the need to be noticed, is a basic human need. If we can't get it in the usual ways, then we try to get it in other ways. Some are driven to try to get it in destructive ways.

Do you know the story about the shul board meeting where they are voting on whether to renew the *chazan's* contract or not. Everyone agrees to vote for the *chazen* except Jake. He votes no. And they all turn to him in surprise, and they say:

“Jake, what's the matter? Isn't it true that he is a good *chazen* and that he *davens* sweetly?” Jake says: “Yes.”

And then they ask him, “Isn't it true that he is wonderful with the children, and that he teaches the B'nai Mitzvah well?” Jake says, “Yes.” And they say: “And isn't it true that he hasn't had a raise in five years, and that he deserves one?” Jake says: “Yes.” And they reply, “So Jake, how come that you are voting against?”

And Jake says: “If I voted for, would everybody in the room be gathered around me asking questions?”

That is what some people are driven to do in order to get the attention and the recognition that they feel that they need. Think what it could have meant for someone to walk over to him and say, “Jake, I appreciate YOU. Not just what you did. YOU.”

That's one thing that we can do to try to change how we measure success. We can borrow that wonderful Southern phrase and we can say it to anyone who deserves it: I 'ppreciate 'cha.

There's a more Jewish way to say it as well. It is a word that you know already, but I am not sure that you ever gave much thought to it.

What do we say when a person comes back from the bimah after getting an aliyah?

We say to him or her, *yasher koach*. Don't worry about the literal translation. Saying it is a way to say: well done, or congratulations, or may you have the strength to do it again. Everyone knows that word.

Did you know it is not only when a person gets an aliyah? People have said it to me if they like my talk. What if we said it to the teacher at the end of a particularly good class? What if we said it to the mechanic when he figured out what went wrong with our car and fixed it? OK, you do get some funny looks at Midas, but so what? What if we said it to our wives or to our husbands when they made an especially good meal? What if we said it to each other at least once in a while? What if we said to each other: *yasher koach*, which means; I recognize you, I appreciate you, I affirm you, I admire you, I congratulate you.

Can you imagine how the lives of the people around us would blossom if we said *yasher koach* to them more often?

Can you imagine how much harder they would work to do a good job if they knew that we noticed and appreciated it when they did?

This is a Jewish way to increase the amount of recognition and appreciation in the world. Even if you don't have any money, even if you cannot answer the president's call for financial assistance, you can learn to say *yasher koach*. And if you do, that is no small thing, believe me.

I will never become famous as a painter or as an athlete or as a movie star or as a sculptor. I just don't have what it takes to achieve recognition in any of these ways. But there is one way that I can get recognition, the recognition that my soul desires, and there is one way that you can get it too.

Pirkei Avot says: *ezehu michubad?* Who is it that gets *kavod*? *Hamichabed et habriyot* - the one who honors others. I can *get* recognition for being a person who *gives* recognition. We can become known and respected as the kind of persons who give recognition to others, who always say a kind word to them, who always say thank you. And if we live this way, recognizing, affirming, and appreciating, those around us, we have reason to hope that God Himself will look down upon us, and that God will *kvell* over what He sees, and that God will say to us what I wish Jerry Lewis's parents had been able to say to him.

If we live this way, we have reason to hope that God will look over our lives, and appreciate the good we have done for each other, and for the synagogue, for the Jewish people, and for the world, and that God will say to us: "Well done, my child, well done. I am proud of you." And when our days on earth are done, that God will take us in and say to us: "*Yasher koach* for a life well lived." That, my friends, is success.