

Rosh HaShanah Day II - 2014

Over the last several years it has been my privilege to teach a combined sixth-seventh grade Hebrew school class on Sunday mornings here at the synagogue.

Because of previous space limitations the students have met with me in my synagogue office.

Very soon, my office will expand and there will be more room for the students who visit me for study.

Often we squeeze in a few extra chairs because lately the combined sixth - seventh grade class has totaled approximately 8 students.

For DRRS, that is actually a large class.

In most school settings, I think we could agree that 6 to 8 students in the classroom is small, and some might even think, ideal.

Let me tell you that in certain ways, 6 to 8 students in my office, is great for me but not so great for them.

I mean they are right in front of me, and so close, they can't get away with anything.

I see every squirm and I hear every breath!

Most of the time, in all seriousness, we are able to accomplish quite a bit in this setting.

We can cover a great amount of learning in a short period of time.

We engage in significant discussions, but as a class, that number of 6-8 students usually *is not ideal* for discussion.

Not everyone participates in the discussions.

When the class population is only 6, 7 or eight students, the discussion is really limited to just a few of those in attendance who speak over and over again.

With students who have special needs, undoubtedly, very small class sizes are not only helpful, but necessary.

But that is not true across the board, in every educational setting or situation.

There are many sources for this new educational wisdom, but I encountered this idea while reading, “David and Goliath,” the latest book written by Malcolm Gladwell.

Malcolm Gladwell tells us how he polled a large number of teachers in the United States and Canada and asked them whether a class can be too small?

"Here is a typical response:

my perfect number is 18: that's enough bodies in the room that no one person needs to feel vulnerable, but everyone can feel important. 18 divides handily into groups of two or three or six – all varying degrees of intimacy in and of themselves. With 18 students, I can always get to each one of them when I need to.”

What the evidence suggests is that when you get below this midrange, teachers don't necessarily work harder when there are less students.

They just work less.

This is only human nature.

I bring this information not to impress you with my knowledge of recent trends in pedagogy, but rather to share an example of how conventional wisdom doesn't always conform to reality.

The important lesson here is that “more is better only up to a point, and so is smaller.”

In the same chapter where Gladwell discusses classroom size, he brings another example of how "more is not better.”

This will probably be easier to accept as true, although most of us would like to live our lives as if it is not true.

Namely, that extremely wealthy parents have a tougher time as parents.

Most people assume that growing up in wealth means greater advantages for children.

But Gladwell says that after a certain point, incredible wealth is also a disadvantage.

The truth is that “money makes parenting easier until a certain point - when it stops making a difference.”

Gladwell says that it’s difficult for wealthy parents to tell their kids, “Yes, I can buy that for you. But I choose not to,” especially when they have a Ferrari in the driveway, a private jet, and a house with a loft in Manhattan the size of an airplane hangar.

Sometimes, actually quite often, having so much more money than you need, puts you well past the point where it makes that much of a difference in parenting.

It might be possible to be so rich that your money makes the job of raising normal and well-adjusted children that much more difficult.

I know what many of you are thinking –I’ll take the extreme wealth, because I already did a good enough job of messing up my kids without it.

Why should we all have to suffer?

A bell curve would be best in describing the progression of this phenomenon - a continual increase in benefit until a peak is reached, followed by a decline in benefit equally steep and harmful.

A bell curve can apply to us right here as well, to our shul, to its size and its spirit.

Is more always better?

Will our expansion of size affect our spirit?

Before I elaborate on this, let me tell you how Malcom Gladwell came to write the book, David and Goliath, in the first place.

Perhaps you may have read some of the other books written by Malcolm Gladwell.

A few years ago I read and spoke about his book entitled "Blink," which describes how we often make lasting impressions in the time that it takes to see something and blink.

Another well known Gladwell book which I did not read, but certainly heard about is called "Outliers."

In an interview concerning "David and Goliath," Malcolm Gladwell refers to his earlier research and writing of the book "Outliers" in this way:

When I was doing "Outliers" I was struck by how often when successful people described their lives, *they would talk about the things that went wrong or the things that were hard, as opposed to the things that were easy or what's right.*

I decided to do another version of this question, but starting with people's stories, and looking at this question: to what extent can disadvantages be advantageous and vice versa?"

"The theme of this book is that much of what is beautiful and powerful in the world comes from adversity and struggle. The other theme is that people who appear to have no material advantage are much more powerful than they appear."

And it is this last sentence which describes one realistic way to look at the story of David and Goliath.

The way the story is often told is that it was a miracle from God that David was able to defeat Goliath, the oversized, giant of the Philistine enemy.

But after some research and analysis, Gladwell comes to the conclusion that it may not have been as much a miracle as we have been led to believe.

In Gladwell's words, "I think there has been an over emphasis of the idea that David's victory was improbable.

When you look closer to that story and you understand the full historical context, you see it from a different perspective.

Here was a guy who brilliantly changed the rules of combat.

He was equipped with a sling that was routinely used by armies to defeat the sort that Goliath was.”

*David was brave and courageous.*

*David was very skilled at using the weapon and he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord.*

Put those things together, why is he an underdog?

He's smarter than his opponent, better armed and he had this extraordinary force in his heart.

When you understand that perspective, you understand sometimes our instinct about where power comes from is wrong."

These lessons and themes are very important for us right now as we are in the midst of a synagogue expansion.

Once again we are here in this sanctuary, where many of us have been praying for several years, if not even more than that.

It may be freshly painted and if you look to your left, you know that a great amount of change is underway within our school wing.

Soon, Mary will be in a much larger and more convenient office.

I will have more room with which to work and to teach students.

And in the near future, hopefully within a year, we will have opened the "Tree of Life Pre-School at Kol Shalom."

We have worked very hard over the last several years to get us to this point.

We deserve much credit and we should be very proud.

But in many ways, the mystique of our congregation is hinted in the name of the street on which we are located – Hidden Meadow Lane.

Our beauty is really hidden, and tucked away, in the midst of this meadow.

It is a surprising spot for a synagogue,(just ask our neighbors) and it is also a place where surprising things can happen to the spirit of the person who enters.

The message in the name of the street leads almost seamlessly to the message in the name of the shul – Kol Shalom, the voice of peace.

From within this shul, we see God's world, without noise, without traffic, without crowds of people who push and shove their way in front of one another.

At the end of his book Gladwell writes, "you see the giant and the shepherd in the valley of Elah and your eye is drawn to the man with the sword and shield and the glittering armor.

Yet, so much of what is beautiful and valuable in the world comes from the shepherd, who has more strength and purpose than we ever imagine."

Like with David versus Goliath, our size, or lack thereof, is our strength because we know how to use it to our advantage.

I predict that in the next several years more and more synagogues will want to be our size and style, by design and not by accident.

As I mentioned earlier, Gladwell claimed that David was smarter than his opponents, better armed and had extraordinary heart.

It is the last piece which is so important for us as we move ahead.

Just inside the title page of the book David and Goliath, Malcolm Gladwell cites a verse from the first Book of Samuel which summarizes the book and the point of the sermon.

The prophet Samuel is wondering why Saul is no longer suited in God's eyes to continue as King of Israel.

Saul was very tall and stately, royal in appearance -

“But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him;

for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Today as we begin a new year of life, let us hear what God told Samuel and what God is telling all of us:

we have an extraordinary force in our hearts,

and however else we expand,

that is the part of who we are that should never contract.

Let us be ready to welcome God to view what God saw in David – our hearts and our spirits and our desire to love God and one another.

And then indeed the new year will be filled with blessing.

Shana Tova