

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

5776

"I Don't Keep Score. I just remember the Good Shots."

(For Daniela, who reminded me that "less is more.")



Michael Bader, in his article: "Frustrated Golfer Syndrome: Causes and Cures," reminds us that *"the frustrations of golf are well known. Mark Twain is quoted as having said that golf is 'a good walk spoiled.'* The sports writer Jim Murray said, *'Golf was obviously devised by a man torn with guilt, eager to atone for his sins.'* Their humor notwithstanding, these quotes express an essential truth, namely, that *golf is an emotional roller coaster for many, if not most, of the people that who play it."*

So how did I get to take up such frustrating game? Didn't I play other sports badly enough that I needed to add one more?

Twelve years ago in Roanoke, VA, a congregant who wished to give me a present he was sure I had never received before, paid for my first golf lessons. While I was hesitant to go for many reasons - I didn't know how to play, it looked boring, I stunk at almost every other sport I've ever played, he convinced me to give it a shot.

So I took the lessons to make him happy. And then it happened. During my second lesson, I hit a good ball. I swung the borrowed club and I saw the ball going up in the air in a perfect, arc, and I said to myself, "Wow, Manes, you did that! Try to do it again!" And then I was hooked. I finished the five lessons, went to the driving

range in my free time, and took another five lessons with the hope of replicating that first nice shot. I got a used set of golf clubs and was given half a dozen balls as a gift, which of course ended at the bottom of the artificial lake in the golf course. Hence, I confess (today is a good day for confession) that I am a frustrated golfer, although I am not sure I am worthy even of using the word “golfer.”

Taking up golf, nevertheless, has some interesting advantages for a rabbi. Usually you can find in any given congregation a dozen or more golfers who are happy to enjoy a beautiful day outside and spend quality time with their rabbi. The main disadvantage for the Hillcrest Jewish Center members who invite me to play with them is that they need to watch their language. In other words, you don’t want to use many four letter words when you know the guy sitting beside you in the golf cart might call you for an aliyah next Shabbat.

Another advantage that golf presents for me as a rabbi is the way I get to rethink the relationship between work and leisure time. If I were not a rabbi, I would write on my weekly planner, “9 AM- 2 PM: Playing Golf.” Now, however, I can write, “9 AM- 2 PM: networking with congregants,” or “meeting with chairmen of the house committee and endowment fund.” After all, when you are in a golf cart for five hours with Hillcrest Jewish Center members, you end up, sooner or later, talking about the shul.

However, the main advantage that taking up golf has for me as a rabbi - and as a human being - are some life lessons I was able to learn from the game itself and from the experience of playing it with other people. At the last Hillcrest Jewish Center golf outing, for example, I learned the difference between a Golf Scramble and a Shotgun Start tournament, and I’d like to suggest that you can learn many important life lessons from both tournament models and their rules. ^{i ii}

I am not the first person who looked at golf for life lessons. Bea Fields, for example, argues that golf can teach children – and adults - humility, respect, punctuality, safety, persistence, focusing, listening, graciousness, and problem solving skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

As you can see, even a frustrating game can teach you important life lessons and now, next time I go to play golf I can tell Silvia, "I am taking a few hours off to contemplate life lessons!"

In any event, there is one particular life lesson I would like to share with you today because it ties in directly with the essence of Yom Kippur.

A couple of months ago I went to visit Joe and Fryda Kessel and when I was leaving their home I met Jack, their son, and we agreed to play a round of golf.

When we finished the first hole I asked him, pointing to the golf card: "How many strokes?"



Jack replied, "I don't keep score. I just remember the good shots."

I decided to do the same. Keeping score was too depressing, and remembering the good shots of the day wasn't so difficult since I didn't have too many to remember.

"Don't keep score and remember the good shots" is not only a good piece of advice for a beginner golfer like me who wants to enjoy a nice afternoon without getting depressed. "Don't keep score and remember the good shots" is also a great piece of advice for our lives, especially tonight, as we begin the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go through life not keeping score? Wouldn't it make us happier, healthier, more forgiving human beings? Aren't we asking God today not to keep score and to remember our good shots? Why can't we do the same?

We all carry lists of what others did to us. How and when others wronged us, hurt us, insulted us, and ignored us. "We invited them for dinner twice and they didn't invite us yet!" "I am always the one who says I am sorry!" "I took the garbage out three times this week, and you took it out only twice!" "We gave them \$180 as a

wedding gift and they gave us only \$150!" "We went to your parents last week, this time we go to my parents!" And the list goes on...

אם עונות תשמר יה אדני מי יעמד

"If You were to keep score, God, who could survive?" (Psalm 130: 3) - we just begged God before Kol Nidrei. And yet, we feel we have the moral right to keep score, to remember forever what God Himself is trying to forget.

Keeping score in life (by all means feel free to keep score in your golf game if you wish) only hurts us; nobody benefits from it. In our self-righteousness we seem to enjoy remembering how others disappointed us, how God hurt us, how we ourselves keep falling short of our expectations. We don't forgive others, we don't forgive God, we don't forgive ourselves.

We are so busy keeping score that we forget to enjoy our good shots.

What were your good shots in this past year? What about your accomplishments? What about the Torah you learned, the love you shared, the acts of kindness you performed for others? And what about the many, or even few people, who made a difference in your life? Can you recall them? Can you think of them with gratitude and appreciation? What about your blessings? Did you count them today? The truth is that even those of us who might have had a challenging year, have a long list of "good shots" to celebrate. Here is my list, for example:

I am alive.

I have aches here and there, but overall my body functions pretty well.

I have food on my table and a roof over my head.

I enjoy the blessings of family and friends.

I am able to provide for my family doing what I enjoy, in a friendly environment, and I even have time to relax here and there.

My children get a good education.

My parents, although far away, are well taken care of.

My mind is sound, my spirit isn't broken.

I am both loved and respected.

I get to go on vacations and visit nice places.

I live in New York City.

I am Jewish and I happen to live in a privileged time of history where we Jews have our own state, in the land of Israel.

I feel the presence of God, not always, but often enough to keep in touch with Him.

Master of the Universe, "If You were to keep score, God, who could survive?" You have the power to remember everything, and yet, for our sake, you chose to let go. Teach us to let go as well. We wish to travel a little lighter, to bring joy and peace to our lives. Help us not to keep score and to remember our good shots. And when we are having a lousy day out there, help us remember that better days lie ahead, that our best shots may be yet to come.

Avinu Malkeinu, on this holy day, bless each of us and our families with a year of joy, health, fulfillment and peace, with a good and sweet year.

ⁱ The Scramble is one of the primary forms of tournament play for golf associations, charity events and the like. A scramble is usually played with 4-person teams.

In a scramble, each player tees off on each hole. The best of the tee shots is selected and all players play their second shots from that spot. The best of the second shots is determined, then all play their third shots from that spot, and so on until the ball is holed.

So where are the life lessons?

- You pick the best shot!
- It is about teamwork!
- What is the best we can do, collectively?
- You won't have always the best shot, but eventually your shot will be the best one!
- You cannot be the best always, but you will be the best sometimes!

A scramble tournament recognizes the contributions of each player, and that includes everybody, including me. You should see my face of joy when during the 15th hole one of my teammates said, "Let's hit from the rabbi's ball!"

In other words: If you pick the best shots of every single team player, your team has a chance to win.

These life lessons apply to families, to work places and yes, to synagogue life as well.

ⁱⁱ A Shotgun start is a golf tournament format in which all groups of players tee off simultaneously from different holes.

Each hole on a course will be the tee off hole for each group of four. Group 1 would start from hole 1, group 2 from hole 2, etc. Each group starts to play at the same time. Like in a Shotgun start tournament, we all start at different places in our journeys. For some the difficult part is at the beginning of the journey. For others in the middle and for others at the end. Life puts you ~~in~~ **at** a particular hole (a loch), and you don't have a choice but to start from there. **B**ut at the end, we all go through the same 18 holes...

ⁱⁱⁱ[http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/4807/golf_guide/
the_top_10_life_lessons_your_child_can_learn_from_playing_golf.html](http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/4807/golf_guide/the_top_10_life_lessons_your_child_can_learn_from_playing_golf.html)