

Weekly Teaching

June 16, 2017

Jimmy Piersall Z'L

November 14, 1929–June 3, 2017

It might seem a bit strange to have my weekly teaching dedicated to a former Red Sox player, but Jimmy Piersall played a small, albeit, important role in my life, and my own development as a rabbi.

My first exposure to Jimmy was as a young boy.

My father gave me his old Wilson baseball glove to be my first; an old fashioned “five finger” glove, autographed by Jimmy Piersall.

My dad simply said, “Jimmy was a great ball player.”



For my first few years playing catch with my Dad, I used his “old” glove with no hesitation.

Then, entering 4th grade, I lobbied for a new “modern” glove and received one for my birthday.

The old glove was packed away, but one never really forgets their first baseball glove if they love the game.

A few years later, I watched an old film with my mother Z'L entitled *Fear Strikes Out*.

It starred the actor, Karl Malden, one of my mother's favorites, who portrayed Jimmy Piersall.

I had started the film because I thought it was a baseball movie, but, in fact it was my first real exposure to the challenges of mental illness.

The movie was based on Piersall's autobiography, and it portrayed how this talented athlete had been plagued by his struggle with manic depression.

Jimmy, having confronted a difficult childhood, grew up with experiences of childhood trauma.

Never having received proper care, his mental illness would become exasperated and he suffered a nervous breakdown during a ballgame and was institutionalized.

After the movie, my mother and I held a long discussion on the challenges of mental illness, and shared family history for which I had previously been unaware.

She noted all of this with simple compassion, and said that it's "Easy to love someone who has no challenges, and poses no challenges; God's test of us is for loving everyone else."

My old baseball glove became something else for me on that day; a memory marker not just for the youthful passion for our national pastime, but a tangible holding on to a spiritual charge on how we will be challenged to "love the other."

As religious Jews, we are called upon to support those who confront brokenness; charged to help repair as best able.

Physical illness, while extremely daunting, is usually more ably addressed than mental illness.

We still confront the societal stigma of depression.

When an individual walks into our synagogue doors and visibly suffers from mental illness, the response can be one of love and embrace, or distancing oneself.

The latter impulse is understandable because we can be frightened by the apparent challenge. But this is our opportunity to fulfil God's mandate and to self-enforce "opposite action." In other words prompt the response that is counter to our initial inclination to withdraw.

Words of welcome; sitting with the stranger; showing interest in their life; exemplifying the mitzvah of love; such a posture towards another is Judaism at its best.

Beginning in high school, I began to seek to work with the "challenged."

Over the years, this work has often been the most difficult but also the most rewarding.

I love the many simchas and the opportunities to teach, preach and serve as our congregation's ambassador of Judaism to both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. These activities are most quickly validated by the multitudes.

But, it's the rabbinic support when confronting *tzurris* that is most important and usually only known by the ones who receive the support.

Creating an authentic posture of caring support, counseling and availability; these are demanding duties, but our most sacred responsibilities.

Our Judaism is for "everyone," and this mitzvah of inclusion is paramount.

My challenge to us all is to re-dedicate ourselves so as to assure that the message that the Jewish community is for everyone is apparent to all, and true in both words and action.

May God bless all those who live with mental illness, and their care-givers, families and friends.

May they walk in the footsteps of Jacob, King Saul, Miriam, Hannah and Naomi who struggled with dark moods, hopelessness, isolation and terrors, but survived and led our people.

Just as our father, Jacob, spent the night wrestling with an angel and prevailed, may all those who live with mental illness be granted the endurance to wrestle with their pain and prevail night upon night.

May God grace them with the faith to know that though like Jacob, they may be wounded, shaped and renamed by this struggle. They still will live on to continue an ever unfolding, unpredictable path toward healing.

And, may they not be alone on this path, but always accompanied by their families, friends, care-givers, community and ancestors and the Shechina (Divine Presence).

May God prompt us all to surround them with loving-kindness, grace and companionship, and spread over them a sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace and wholeness.

Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,
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