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During a research experiment a marine biologist placed a shark into a large holding tank and then released several small bait fish into the tank.

As you would expect, the shark quickly swam around the tank, attacked and ate the smaller fish.

The marine biologist then inserted a strong piece of clear fiberglass into the tank, creating two separate partitions. She then put the shark on one side of the fiberglass and a new set of bait fish on the other.

Again, the shark quickly attacked. This time, however, the shark slammed into the fiberglass divider and bounced off. Undeterred, the shark kept repeating this behavior every few minutes to no avail. Meanwhile, the bait fish swam around unharmed in the second partition. Eventually, about an hour into the experiment, the shark gave up.

This experiment was repeated several dozen times over the next few weeks. Each time, the shark got less aggressive and made fewer attempts to attack the bait fish, until eventually the shark got tired of hitting the fiberglass divider and simply stopped attacking altogether.

The marine biologist then removed the fiberglass divider, but the shark didn't attack. The shark was trained to believe a barrier existed between it and the bait fish, so the bait fish swam wherever they wished, free from harm.

Many of us, after experiencing setbacks and failures, emotionally give up and stop trying. Like the shark in the story, we believe that because we were unsuccessful in the past, we will always be unsuccessful. In other words, we continue to see a barrier in our heads, even when no 'real' barrier exists between where we are and where we want to go.

It doesn't have to be that way. Ultimately, our trained behaviors get us stuck. Even the good behaviors can get us stuck, since they keep us from growing into better behaviors. Prior to the experiment, the shark had gathered its meal unfettered by barriers or interruptions. It just assumed

that the fish were there for the taking. No thought went into either the committed belief of success or the trained acceptance of failure.

I “played” through elementary, middle and high school. I graduated high school 38<sup>th</sup> in a class of almost 600. I could have done better, but I was involved in everything and stayed quite distracted. I was student body vice president, varsity athlete, president of several clubs and on the Board of Directors for a Key Club District that spanned Nevada, California, and Hawaii. By the time I left valley High School in Las Vegas, Nevada, I was a BMOC - Big man on campus! I was trained to believe that I could do everything, and affirmed in that lesson over and over again ... albeit all with minimal amounts of effort.

I went to Tulane University, expecting to continue being an academic rock star as a pre-dental student ... I was going to be a Dentist. I walked on to play football, and started working on the upstart and alternative newspaper on campus. (PAUSE) That was when I learned two valuable lessons: 1. Being a BMOC in High School was great in High school, but it meant nothing in the real world. I was amazed at how many of us wore High school letter jackets for the first several weeks ... even while it was still summer ... and then we never saw them again. 2. I was not an academic rock star. I was not a rock anything (except maybe a rock) and to put my name and the word academics in the same sentence was near laughable. My older brother went to Tulane Medical School. By my sophomore year, after the science department and I went our separate ways, and shortly before the whole university and I were ready to agree to “see different people,” David and I decided to share an apartment, and it became his sworn destiny to save my college career. It was devastating to have come from a world where everything I touched turned to gold only to settle in a world where the gold I was given all turned to dust. I was not prepared. I can blame the schools. I can blame my parents who let me get by doing “Just enough.” I can argue that my professors were unfair. The truth is that I was lazy and were it not for my brother, I may have used up my eligibility playing ball, but I would be yet another completely forgotten soul who snatched defeat from the jaws of opportunity.

David passed away two and a half years ago. I will stand here today and tell you that who I am and what I have done, I owe first to his love and support, and while I make a lot of fun over his foibles, he was and is my best friend.

Several years ago, I asked him why he had so much patience with me. Without batting an eye, he said, "Marc, when I left home, even having been valedictorian, I was not prepared for the world in which I found myself. There were a couple of people who all but adopted me and pulled me up. I love you, but even more, I was paying forward the blessings that saved me." Now, David certainly had his challenges, but I never saw him give less than his all. My niece, when asked about her dad, will say, "His patients always came first, and his family never came second." This is where I learned it.

So, here are a couple of things to chew on for a Holy day that calls on us to pay attention:

1. We all grew up with rules. We all grew up learning about the things that we were not supposed to do, and the things we needed to do. When David was a toddler, a man once asked him his name, and, as a result of all the trouble he got into, he swore his name was "NO DAVID." When we are young, we are told what religion to practice, what classes to take, what events we were and were not allowed to participate in. There is a real world. Sharks eat fish, until they are trained not to. No differently than the shark, even the most stubborn of us can be broken of habits and molded to better behaviors. I was all everything ... until I wasn't. No differently than my own experience, trained to be complacent with our successes causes real problems when the rules change. As I have said, so many times, "Change happens." When we are not prepared to evolve as does the world, we get left behind ... it does not wait for us. The rules that govern our lives change with our experiences and our ages ... and with the needs/wants/moraes of the community. And when we are already doing well? We still need to evolve. Again, the book, "From To Great." Read it!

2. We are dependent on others to help us make these changes. Modification of the shark's behavior was dependent upon the scientist in the lab. She trained the shark. My brother helped train me. In neither case could those behavioral and attitudinal changes have occurred without the very patient and intentional support of someone committed to the task.

There is a third lesson, though: one that hits at the crux of this entire holiday season. There was a huge motivational difference between what the scientist did and what my brother did. The goal of the scientist was to modify innate behaviors to keep the shark from doing what the shark is

supposed to do. I know, sharks are predators; they have big nasty teeth and are scary, but to have taken one from its natural habitat and diminished it ... something is just not Torah true about this. There was nothing at stake in the process except her own research, her own aggrandizement, and her own empowerment. Yes, she will write the paper to share her behavioral research, but many others learned the same lesson by offering people and animals opportunity for growth. Every day, we educate people to make them better, not just to save our jobs. A local school district has not yet reached an agreement on a contract with the faculty. The faculty continues to work overtime to ensure the success of the children.

How many people do we know who treat others this way? How many people succeed, make their names and reputations on the backs of others ... controlling someone else's destiny? In its worst form ... bullying is rampant; demeaning another to somehow prove the bully's self worth? We have watched corporate executives rape pension funds. We watch politicians spend more time demeaning their opponents ... even after elections, than presenting us with their credentials and then using them for the betterment of those beyond their own minions. We see wars wage around the world putting thousands of people at risk on the quest for power for only a few.

This is the coach who builds a team for his win-loss record without regard for the growth of the athlete. This is the teacher who wrote the lesson plan years ago, insisting on teaching it for years to come, irrespective of advances in what we know about how children learn ... insisting on a raise each year for the work done years before.

This is the congregation that tells someone that they are not a good member because they do not show up enough, or who guilts people into paying more money lest grandma should turn over in her grave. I saw a post on facebook the other day. It was about bullying. The post dared people to post it, arguing that most people would not care enough to do so. I wrote back, guilt is a form of bullying.

We know these stories.

Yes, there are positive things that we learn from these difficult examples, but we only get to a place where we can learn if we can get past the barriers that they created for us. If we pay attention, we learn empathy, we

learn how not to treat people, how to better respect people, how more properly and productively motivate people.

My brother's motivation, was to make me more whole ... just as others had done for him. In fact, I have had some amazing mentors. I can list the names for you, some would mean something and others not, but across all boundaries, people have given of themselves to help me grow and learn. For each of them, their intention was love and their motivation was to pay forward the love that others gave to them.

Every morning our tradition calls on us to remember everyday miracles. This holiday season calls on us to pay even closer attention to them. One of the prayers calls on us to open the eyes of the blind. Elsewhere, we are commanded not to put a stumbling block in the path of the blind. One might want to read these prayers literally, but I don't know that most of us would ever think of intentionally hurting a blind person, and only a few of us have the medical training to repair any part of the body, never mind the delicate eyes. Blindness is ignorance. There are specific commands in our tradition not to act as the did scientist ... there are specific commands to act as did my brother.

Folks, I do not know what I do not know. I cannot tell you what God is. Whatever God is, divinity is beyond anything I can describe or define. I cannot tell you how the world began or when it will end, to say otherwise would be sheer arrogance. I absolutely know, though, that there are things that we do that make the world more fractured or more whole.

We spend a lot of time reading a prayer book that reminds us of all our limitations. Yes, there is a place for that on these holidays. We are arrogant. We are complacent. We miss all sorts of opportunities to make better decisions than the ones we make. We do not do nearly enough to pay attention to each other's needs. Yet, we do a tremendous amount of good, as well. Every time we look in the mirror, we are our own worst critics. We have to give ourselves more credit than we do. Where we fall short, it is not that we intended to fall short ... we just did not do all that we might do with more focus. Each one of us counts on other people to make our lives whole ... and they count on us as well. Even where we lack tools to make the best decisions, or even when our own brokenness clouds our vision, I believe with perfect faith that we want to succeed in caring for the world and for each other. We want our world to be more whole.

What I learned first from my brother ... and then from so many amazing people, is very simple. Each of us is blessed, and where we are intentional in sharing those blessings the world heals. It does not take a lot of energy to do even the small things to help people get through moments that challenge their well being ... and the more we focus on doing for each other, the more we realize that doing so is not divergent from our life, it is absolutely our life. Albert Einstein wrote that setting a good example was not the main means of teaching a lesson, it is the ONLY means by which to teach it. Paying forward the gifts that have helped us see through our own clouds and our own barriers helps others through theirs, sets an example for all who are around, and helps bring even clarity in our own hearts, to the blessings we enjoy.

This year, we are dedicating our religious school year to the goal of teaching our children that each of us is a super hero. Each one of them possesses the ability to change a life ... some in large ways and some in small, but each is endowed with that power. The good that they do changes the life of those with whom they interact, no differently from those who observe how they interact. I want our children to know in their hearts a lesson taught by the Maharal of Prague, "Love of all creatures is also love of God, for whoever loves the One (God) loves all the works that He has made. When one loves God, it is impossible not to love His creatures. The opposite is also true. If one hates the creatures, it is impossible to love God Who created them." The best way for us to teach our children this amazing lesson is for you to live this mission, and show them by example. "The legacy of heroes," said Benjamin Disraeli, "is the memory of a great name and the inheritance of a great example."

(PAUSE)

Do not get lost in the language that calls on us to beat ourselves up for even the sins we cannot pronounce, never mind commit. Be earnest in our teshuvah, turn from the ways that challenge our participation in the good, and be earnest in celebrating that we are and what we do. Take stock of the gifts people have given to your life. Be intentional over this holiday to find ways in which you can pay those gifts forward.

I pray that the distance I have traveled in life helps me be ever more appreciative of the people who held me and pushed me along the journey,

and that I can do the same for others. This year folks, I want you to focus on giving to others the gift of you.