

PATCHES, BADGES AND MEDALLIONS

[Thanks to Rabbi Jack Riemer for the inspiration]

Every year in March, the Girl Scouts hold celebrations on the weekend closest to the anniversary of the founding of the organization by Juliette Gordon Low on March 12, 1912. I'm not sure what happens for the rest of the weekend – I've never been invited - but on Friday night, the members of the Westchester-Putnam Council come to Shabbat services here at Temple Beth Abraham. Girls of all ages, of all sizes, all colors and all religions. They come either to pray or to learn or to support a friend, or because respect and mutual understanding is at the core of Girl Scouting. Or maybe a little of each. It is a wonderful event and I've lost count of how many years we've done it. But I do remember the first one. I remember we had no idea how many girls to expect, and that we were amazed at the large turnout. I remember that I was impressed at how many girls came in the full scout regalia, complete with sashes covered with patches indicating their various accomplishments and milestones. I was pleased to learn that the girls could earn a Shabbat patch. And I was even happier to receive one the following year.

I actually came across that patch a few months ago, just around the time that I participated in a Weeblos graduation ceremony with Father John at Transfiguration Church. The Weeblos have patches too, though I think they call them badges, and it started me thinking about the use of incentives in education. I really don't want to trivialize their achievements, because scouting is a great organization. But you can get those kids to do almost anything to earn a badge or a patch. And that started me wondering about Religious School, and the possibility of using patches. What if there were patches to be earned all the way through 12th grade? What if it became a status symbol to get all of those patches? I think it's an idea worth considering.

And as I was thinking about all of this over the summer, I got an e-mail from a colleague who suggested that I read a book by Rabbi Bob Alper, called, Thanks, I Needed That. It's a series of short vignettes, observations and reflection on life. Believe it or not, included in that little book is a piece which includes a reflection on badges.

Rabbi Alper begins by remembering his humiliating little league try-out. He tells it very succinctly: "I gathered with all the kids my age at the field on the day of the tryouts, nervously awaiting my turn. Finally, Bobby Alper goes to bat. Strike one. Strike two. Strike three. "OK, Bobby, that's it. Try again next year. You can go home now." Which I did.

He goes on to say that, a generation later, when his own kids wanted to play in Little League, he was protectively cautious. But things had changed for the better over the years. He writes, "While both my son and my daughter had inherited their father's athletic prowess, they still made the teams. Every kid made the teams, which is as it should be."

"Theirs was an era of well-meant, sometimes over-the-top parental encouragement. I swear I once heard a father yell to his son, who stood immobilized in left field as a ball rolled by him, 'Nice, William! You watched that ball very carefully!'

"Raising children, at least in our era, is usually characterized by years of ego-building encouragement, based on a theory that it's more effective to praise than to criticize; it's better to build up than tear down."

"And so we recognize, we encourage, we applaud. 'Great job!' 'Well done!' 'We're so proud of you!' But in thinking about those parenting styles, I realized something interesting: we cheer our children's beginnings. As adults, though, we rarely cheer each other's new beginnings."

"For adults, doing something new, or changing direction, is often difficult and even painful, sometimes risky, frequently the result of exercising enormous courage. And, for the most part, these are changes made privately, quietly, with no encouragement, no applause, no family or community support. Of course, people are lauded all the time for professional and academic and athletic accomplishments, for things done within the public parts of their lives."

"But the hard work of personal change is usually kept secret, without public approval or support. Perhaps it's time to see new beginnings in others in a different way, one that encourages recognition and praise.

"There are models that we might emulate. In particular, Alcoholics Anonymous, and other twelve-step programs.

"I'm pretty familiar with AA, because I live in East Dorset, Vermont. It was in our little town back in 1895, in a small room behind the bar of

Widow Wilson's Tavern, that Bill Wilson was born. Bill became a successful businessman, and also sank deep into the disease of alcoholism. He and another Vermonter, Dr. Bob, ultimately co-founded AA, and now Bill's birthplace has become a shrine of sorts to his memory, visited by thousands annually.

"Last year, on a warm summer's day, I was tooling around on my motor scooter...[and] I decided to ride through the East Dorset cemetery. It's a lovely and simple few acres, the resting place of a local boy killed in the Wilderness campaign in the Civil War, and a large number of children who died during the 19th century.

"Toward the back of the graveyard, on the right side, one comes upon the Wilson family plot, including the very unassuming headstone marked William. Bill Wilson's grave.

"It stands out from the others. Same size, but on that summer day, as on all days, Bill's grave was covered with small metal medallions of various colors. Just as visitors to Jewish graves leave a stone as a sort of calling card, members of AA place medallions on Bill's grave as mementos of their visits.

"The medallions are in recognition of sobriety. Some say "90 days," others "25 years." All are placed on Bill's grave as a way of expressing gratitude to Bill Wilson for co-founding a program that has led so many to healing, a program that has saved lives.

"Sobriety medallions. AA got it right. It's hard to make new beginnings. For some, agonizingly hard. Sobriety medallions recognize new beginnings, and often incredible achievements against a vicious disease with fearsome odds. They're awards, rewards, 'atta boys' or 'atta girls.' They're pats on the back, just like the shouts of encouraging parents at a T-ball game. And who doesn't need praise?

"Yet, for most of the new beginnings we make as adults, there usually is little or no recognition other than our own sense of accomplishment and hope for a better future....

"I was once witness to a quiet revelation as to how one man made one of those magnificent new beginnings in his own life, and how he did it, as usually happens, unacknowledged.

"Sherri and I were having dinner with Abby and Vincent, local friends in Vermont. Part of the conversation on that pleasant early September night

centered on the one living parent among all of our mothers and fathers: Vincent's 95-year-old dad, Frank. Frank had a rough go of it during the previous months: he took a bad fall, was hospitalized for a while, and then entered a rehabilitation facility. While he was there, Helen, Frank's partner, as we say, the woman he'd been living with for 20 years, died.

Throughout all of this stretch of hard times, Vincent had shown devotion and care above and beyond, visiting his dad and Helen daily, driving them to medical appointments, shopping for them, and finding them help at home. Vincent was definitely a devoted son. But what surprised us, and what Sherri and I discussed during our drive home, was one simple, unexpected statement by Vincent, in the midst of all the night's conversation. One simple sentence. "My dad was not a very good father."

"Back in Psychology 101 I learned that many of the patterns we follow as parents, as spouses, are those we learn from our own parents.

"We don't know exactly what Vincent experienced growing up with his father. But in his own life, with his own kids, he became a wonderful parent. And despite his childhood experiences, he also became a deeply caring, attentive son.

"In other words, Vincent made some new beginnings in his life, working hard to build a different relationship with his dad, changing the old patterns.

"Vincent deserves a medallion.

"Yet Vincent's new beginning, like many, was part of a long, undefined process, with no specific start, no conclusion, no stunning moment of epiphany. It just happened over years and years. A negative pattern broken, combined with a radical change in direction, in style.

"Other new beginnings are the ones where we determine to change: the hypercritical boss who finally realizes that she can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. The purveyor of gossip who finally understands the hurt he causes, and privately vows to mend his ways. The friend who finally lets go of a perceived insult from years before and now seeks reconciliation.

"It's hard to make changes. It's hard to short-stop the ways of a lifetime, to break with those comfortable yet destructive patterns. And the plain fact is that if we do it at all, it's usually alone, without encouragement, recognition or appreciation.

“Imagine if modern families sat around a holiday table boasting that their dear one reversed a history of parental neglect, or that their offspring, by strength and with the help of people who care, overcame a horrific addiction, or that their family member or friend went from being an abusive spouse to a compassionate, understanding husband or wife or partner.

“Imagine if our community publicly valued and applauded those who made new beginnings just as much as we publicly valued and applauded our kids when they tried hard and took their small steps forward.

“Imagine how much more eagerly people would be willing and encouraged to make those new beginnings.

“Imagine if we— if all of us— could hear these words once in a while from those we love, from those we respect. Imagine what it would feel like, after a struggle to change, if we could hear the simple words: “Way to go.” “You’re amazing.” “I’m so proud of you.” “You made a great new beginning.” Rabbi Bob Alper

A new beginning – that is of course why we are here tonight – to celebrate the start of a New Year, to hope that 5774 will be a good year, to think of changes that we’d like to make. But before we turn the page on 5773, I think we should each take some time to think about what we accomplished this past year. And we all accomplished something, every single one of us. I don’t have medallions or patches or badges to give you, though it is something to think about for the future.

We will have plenty of time over the next ten days to think about and atone for all of the things we’ve done wrong this past year. But take some time as well during this season to acknowledge all the good things you have done this year. Count up all the ways in which you have grown and changed in this last year. Some of those things may be very private, known only to you. In that case, give yourself a pat on the back.

And then, while you’re at it, give some thought to the positive changes that have occurred this past year in those around you – in friends, family, co-workers. Some changes may have been dramatic, and you may already have given that verbal badge of encouragement. But some changes may have been so gradual that you didn’t even notice. Take the time to notice now. Those changes were not easy. Take the time to say, “I can tell you’ve been

working very hard on.... I want you to know how proud I am of you.”
Imagine how that would feel – for both of you.

Patches, badges, medallions, words of encouragement. As we begin the process of taking an accounting of our souls, let’s remember that we have credits as well as debits. And let’s remember that the adults in our lives need encouragement as much as the kids. Maybe more. In the year to come, may we cheer each other’s new beginnings, and praise each other’s accomplishments. And may 5774 be a year of growth and of change, of health and of peace. Amen.