

Roger Clemens Dilemma
Parshat Ki Teytze

September 17, 2005

by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Roger Clemens dug his spikes into the dirt and stared momentarily at the ground before throwing his first pitch. He knew his mother wanted him on the mound. The Houston Astro's Ace (and former Yankees pitcher) made his scheduled start this past Wednesday evening but what was unusual about this game was that his beloved mother, Bess Clemens, had died earlier that day because of complications from emphysema.

Opposing manager Jack McKeon of the Florida Marlins expressed his admiration for Clemens by saying, "You have to know he was in a lot of grief...but he is a pro." Houston General Manager Tim Lincecum wasn't surprised that Clemens pitched, "I'm not really at all surprised...he understands the meaning of duty. His mother taught him about duty. He feels like he has a duty to pitch for the Astro's tonight, and that is what he is doing."

Do you think that what Roger Clemens did was admirable? I am not so sure. His mother may have taught him about duty - but the question here is where exactly does his duty lie? To his job? To his fellow players? Or to honor the memory of his mother and tend to the needs of her burial? I know that Roger Clemens would probably insist that he was honoring the memory of his mother by pitching - but I have my doubts. For the record - I hope to live to 120 - but whenever my time comes and I shut my eyes for the final times - and if any of my children are scheduled to pitch in a major league baseball game on that day - and they say - "I think my father would want me to pitch..." for the record you can tell them - no, he would not want you to pitch - he would want you to be by his bedside grieving over his death. Just for the record.

But what really interests me about this is not necessarily the particular decision that Roger Clemens made - but how did he go about making it? Did he speak to anyone? Did he search his soul? Did he ask for guidance from a minister or priest or friend? All of the values expressed were honorable ones - honoring his mother - doing his duty as a pitcher - but which value takes precedence? Which was more important at this particular moment? How did he arrive at his conclusion? These are the questions that intrigue me.

I can't begin to tell you - how many times I have heard people rationalize the most outrageous behavior - and convince themselves that they were truly doing a good thing, the honorable thing - when to my mind it appeared to be quite the opposite. "Rabbi, I know you think I should cancel my trip to Las Vegas this weekend and spend my mother's final hours at her bed side - but Rabbi, you didn't know my mother - and it would kill her to know I wasn't going to Vegas because of her - trust me Rabbi - she would want me to go - this is what my mother would want me to do!"

Ecclesiastes in that most famous of verses teaches: "There is a season for everything, and there is a time for every purpose. There is a time to laugh and a time to cry; there is a time to speak and a time to be silent; there is a time to seek and a time to lose. But, maybe Kohelet has put the matter too simply. What about those situations in life when it is not either/or? What about those times in life when we are pulled in both directions at the same time? What if we don't know whether to laugh or to cry; to speak or to be silent; to seek or to lose? For Roger Clemens there was a time to pitch and a time to honor his mother's memory - but what if we are attracted to opposing responses at the same moment? How does one best honor her memory? By pitching or by sitting by her side? And where does one go to find the answer to such questions?

There is a French proverb which describes this situation: "I laugh, lest I be tempted to cry." The most poignant, and the most tormenting dilemmas of the human situation are precisely these, where we are torn between two conflicting impulses; we are rent asunder by two opposing desires.

There are times when a person is moved by outrage and courage to stand up and speak, and yet discretion and prudence whisper, be silent, look away. One of our great rabbis once found himself torn between courage and prudence and he said: "woe is me if I speak, and woe is me if I do not speak."

Many of us who were in Israel this summer felt the pain of our brothers and sisters there as they wrestled with the challenge of disengagement. Except for those on the extremes of the political spectrum - most Israelis felt the pull of both sides of the issue - most recognized the validity on both sides of the argument. There was pain in going and pain in staying - there was loss in giving up the land and loss in the ongoing price that was paid in keeping it - there was no good solution - only the pain of being pulled in both directions - but something had to be done - a decision had to be made.

There is a time to seek and there is a time to lose. There is a time when a person may legitimately seek his own advantage and advance her own interests, and there is a time when he should forego these things. But, a problem arises when the two impulses are simultaneous and the push of one and the pull of the other, come at the same moment and a person must choose between them. To this Kohelet, Ecclesiastes does not speak.

I remember as a student studying the story about Jean Paul Sartre, the famous French philosopher and playwright, one of the most prominent writers of the school known as "existentialism." In one of his essays he wrote that during the Nazi occupation of France a young man came to him with a question, it was sort of the Roger Clemens's dilemma of his day. This young man had an old invalid mother. He was the only person who could look after her. Should he leave her, escape from France to join the French Resistance Forces or should he stay and care for his mother? This was his dilemma and his question to Sartre. On the one hand, if he left her he could play a part in his country's liberation. He could by his participation, help bring freedom and security to millions of his countrymen, or should he stay to care for his mother? There were after all, others who

would fight for France, but none other to provide for his mother. He could honor his mother and stay with her - or he could honor his mother's values by leaving her. What was, he asked, his moral duty? To his mother or to his country - or to his mother by fighting for his country? Sartre was frank and he confessed that he could not give him a categorical answer. All he could say was, "You must decide and no one can choose for you."

I remember studying this essay as a student and I remember being disappointed with Sartre's answer. Not that it wasn't true - but that I expected more from him. Of course that young man had to decide, and of course no one could ultimately choose for him - but he was seeking the great man's advice and counsel - was this the best he could offer? It was around that same time that I began to lose my faith in the modern philosophies and decided to delve into the wisdom of our sacred texts which over the years I have found had so much more to offer.

But, to be fair, religion has its dangers as well. If the "modern philosophies" were too "relative" in their approach and offered no direction- I found that the danger of religion could be that it could be too directive and too absolute in the hands of those who wanted to read the Bible as a cookbook for all of life's complex dilemmas.

Roger Clemens probably would have been comfortable with Sartre's advice - he too seemed to feel this was something he had to sort out on his own, and there is no evidence he sought any advice other than to search his own soul. And my Fundamentalist friends - whether they be Fundamentalist Christians or Fundamentalist Jews (or Fundamentalist Muslims - though not that I have many Muslim friends) would tell me that one need just seek advice from your religious authority and every dilemma can be neatly resolved by a proper reading of one's sacred tradition. Had Roger Clemens asked their minister or priest - these fundamentalist friends would say - he would gladly have told him the right thing to do.

Somehow both of these approaches left me wanting. In difficult times I feel that I need to do more than just search my own soul - and yet, on the other hand I am not ready to abdicate all authority for my most important decisions to someone else - however respected a religious authority that someone else might be.

And then as I became a serious student of our religion- I was thrilled to learn that Judaism does indeed offer a different approach. I found that in difficult moral dilemmas, our sacred tradition is not afraid to offer direction at the same time it challenges us to choose. That it encourages us to make our own decisions but guided by the light and truth of thousands of years of illuminated learning. And this is the way, the Jewish way, I have found so helpful in the conduct of my life.

There is an illustration of this precise methodology from this week's Torah Portion - how convenient.

There is a law that is found in this week's Parasha which, if you have studied it - you probably didn't give it much thought because on the surface it does not seem to have special meaning for our time, for a modern sensibility, although it is not difficult to understand its relevance in the age in which it was promulgated.

The Bible outlines in great detail the rules about returning lost property, lost objects. In an agricultural society the return of lost sheep or cattle to their rightful owners was obviously a matter of great importance, for these were objects of great value and well sheep and cattle were wont to roam. So the Bible says in today's Parasha: *Lo tireh et shor achicha o et sayo nidachim v'hitalamta mayhem, hasheyv t'shivem l'achicha.* . "If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow... You shall do the same with his ass; you shall do the same with his garment, and so shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent." (Deut 22:1 ff)

Now the law is clear and simple. A child can grasp its purpose and value. This is one of the 613 Commandments of Judaism. But, leave it to the rabbis to complicate a relatively simple matter. They ask the following question in the Talmud: What if this situation occurs to a venerable person - to a Sage, a Zakayn, an aged and revered scholar? If a great elder of the community sees a lost sheep, is he obliged to chase after a stray animal in an open field, to drag home a lost creature or object, to appear ridiculous in the pursuit of some wandering sheep or goat? After all, this behavior would be extremely unseemly for a great learned and elderly scholar - *lo lfi kevodo* - it is not in keeping with the dignity and respect that elders have coming to them. And yet...on the other hand... as a person of learning and faith is he or she under less moral obligation than anyone else to secure the property of another and to prevent its loss and destruction?

So, here we see two values in conflict. The right of the scholar to the consideration of her age and wisdom which are normally associated with restraint, and on the other hand the right of the owner of that animal which the sage has within her power to rescue. Roger Clemens wanted to honor his mother - he thought he was doing so by pitching. The sage wants also to do the honorable thing - but is not sure what action he or she should take to achieve that - run after the lost sheep, or preserve the dignity of a scholar.

Sartre (and Roger Clemens) would tell us: "Only you can choose, only you can make up your own mind..." and then we have the Fundamentalists on the other side who believe that all of life's difficult choices can be dictated and directed by God's word and on this matter the Bible could not be more clear: "If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it..." Deut. 22:1 - sorry Mr. Sage and Reverred Scholar - start running!

But, I am happy to tell you that there is a third way - the way of Judaism, and of most great moral and religious traditions. The way of Judaism as it has been practiced not by the extremists but as it has been understood and practiced by the great rabbis of the

Talmud. What I offer you this morning is not fundamentalism or existentialism but Judaism.

You see the Talmud did not just leave us with a dilemma - it gave a solution - and the solution was much more complex and much more sophisticated than to merely quote the Bible. The Rabbis of the Talmud in Brachot 20a state: "Great is human dignity - as it can even override a negative commandment of the Torah! The Bible says: If you see your fellows ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it..." but there are times when you may ignore it..." The Talmud then goes on to describe a series of circumstances (and includes our case of the revered sage as one of them) - where a choice needs to be made and it gives clear guidance as to how that choice should be made. What an incredible teaching this is where the clear directive of the Torah is overridden by a conflicting but superior Torah value.

Our ancient rabbis were carving out a path that was somewhere between - "chose for yourself" and a cookbook approach to the Bible.

Our sacred tradition recognized that sometimes there are choices that need to be made - and sometimes there is no one else but you to make them - and make them you must. But, unlike that young man who turned to Sartre and was disappointed when he was told nothing other than - You must choose. We have a rich and brilliant tradition, extensive literature, generations of scholars who have left their insights to guide those who turn to their rabbi in difficult times for guidance and help.

I suppose that there are some rabbis whom you can call - and will tell you what you should order for breakfast. And I suppose there are rabbis who would respond to such inquiries as Sartre would have responded - with: "You must choose and only you can choose what is best for you." But I think both such responses miss the mark. How would I respond? I would say, the choice is yours - but here is what you should consider. The decision is yours, but here are the sacred values which must be taken into account. The role of religion is to help us confront the contradictions which must not be avoided or rationalized away. The role of religion is to make sure we have considered all sides of difficult issues and not silenced our conscience to critical considerations.

A new year is about to begin and we have much to discuss in the days and weeks to come. There are many difficult challenges that will confront us in the new year. "There is a season for everything, and there is a time for every purpose. There is a time to laugh and a time to cry; there is a time to speak and a time to be silent; there is a time to seek and a time to lose. Knowing when to laugh and when to cry, when to speak and when to be silent, when to seek and when to loose - these are life's toughest questions - come let us study together.