

My Children and My Children's Children

By: Moshe Kranc

This time, little Zalman had gone too far. He was well known as the most disruptive student in his school, and many a lesson had been ruined by his antics. Punching the boy next to him, leaving a cup of water on the teacher's chair, starting a fire outside the classroom window - Zalman had pulled these pranks and more. But in late nineteenth-century Russia, the Jewish community was committed to providing a Jewish education to all children, even unruly ones.

This morning, though, Zalman had crossed the line. Arriving early, he had gone to the school's synagogue, opened the Holy Ark where the Torah scrolls are kept, and placed a goat inside. The students assembled for morning prayers and when they opened the Ark, out sprang the bleating goat. In the ensuing chaos, the faculty quickly identified Zalman as the culprit.

His teacher dragged Zalman by the ear into the principal's office. "You must expel this child!" he demanded. "His behavior is uncontrollable, and he distracts the other students. The other teachers and I refuse to struggle with him any longer."

The principal, too, had had his fill of Zalman's disruptions, but he understood that expulsion was a grave matter. There were no other Jewish schools in town, and Zalman's parents could not afford a private tutor. Out of school, Zalman would never learn even basic Jewish literacy. The principal weighed this dilemma.

"I agree with you," he replied. "But, as you know, I do not have the authority to expel a student. Only the director of Jewish education, Rabbi Shalom Baer of Lubavitch can make such a decision. We will bring the case before him."

Rabbi Shalom, the Rebbe of the Lubavitch Hasidim, was the preeminent Jewish leader of turn-of-the-century Russia and had been appointed by the Czar to oversee all Jewish education in the realm. The principal and the teacher took Zalman with them to Lubavitch to bring the case before the Rebbe.



Rabbi Shalom listened carefully as the principal presented the litany of Zalman's misdeeds. He questioned the teacher carefully on Zalman's desecration of the Holy Ark. Although he rarely approved expulsion, Rabbi Shalom saw that, in this case, it was justified.

"You have my approval to expel the child," he announced with some reluctance. The ensuing silence was broken, to everyone's surprise, by Zalman himself. "Rebbe, please reconsider," he pleaded. "If you expel me from school, you are not just punishing me now but for the rest of my life. You are dooming me to a life of ignorance. I will never know how to pray or to study the commandments of the Torah. And you are not just punishing me; you are punishing my children and my children's children. They will be raised by an unlearned man, and will never merit to see the light of Torah."

Zalman's words were all the more moving for being unexpected. Rabbi Shalom looked into the boy's eyes as if seeing something there for the first time. Perhaps Zalman's logic had swayed him. Perhaps he was re-assessing the potential of a boy who understood the future consequences of today's actions.

Rabbi Shalom turned to the principal. "The boy speaks the truth. His misdeed is serious, but for his sake and the sake of his children, he deserves one more chance. His future actions will demonstrate whether he truly understands the words he has just spoken."

So Zalman returned to school. While he did not become a model student, he exercised enough self-control to complete his formal Jewish education.

Several generations later in America, Zalman's grandson married Rabbi Shalom's great-granddaughter. Not only Zalman's descendants, but also those of Rabbi Shalom himself, had Rabbi Shalom to thank for the wise decision that changed their lives.

Be Generous With Second Chances - The Consequences Can Reach Far Into The Future

Analysis

Zalman's antics threaten his future and that of his children. Zalman gets another chance by changing Rabbi Shalom's perspective, and by reminding him to evaluate the consequences of punishment in both the short term and the long term.

Some of the most serious and difficult decisions you have to make as a manager involve firing people. A decision to terminate a person's employment can seriously impact his career, his self-esteem and his family life for years to come. A person's future, and that of his entire family, may hang in the balance.

In some cases it is clear that the employee is unsuited for the job, is performing poorly, or is not investing the required effort. With the stakes so high, try to emulate Rabbi Shalom and take a longer-term perspective. Can you transfer the worker to a job more suited to his strengths? Might a heart-to-heart talk about the employee's personal problems show that you are sympathetic, while setting a deadline for improved performance? In short, can you find a better alternative than dismissal?

Try to exhaust all other options before resorting to dismissal. Sometimes you can find a win-win solution. Either way, when you know you have done your best to help an employee succeed, you'll find it easier to live with the consequences of firing.

In Today's World

The unprecedented success enjoyed by Jack Welch as the CEO of General Electric has made him an icon in the business world, prompting managers worldwide to emulate his leadership style. Welch earned the title "Neutron Jack," after the nuclear bomb that vaporizes people but leaves buildings standing, for his decision in the early 1980's to save the company via drastic downsizing, cutting GE by over 100,000 jobs. In retrospect, this proved to be the right move. 100,000 people joined the ranks of the unemployed, but this painful move preserved the livelihood of the remaining employees.

Welch did not stop there. Even after GE achieved financial stability, he instituted an ongoing process of firing which he calls “the Vitality Curve.” Each year, every manager is required to fire those employees who perform in the bottom 10%. Companies such as Cisco, Conoco and EDS have imitated GE in this annual ranking and elimination system. No longer a drastic but necessary response to an emergency situation, the practice of firing has become an ongoing management routine.

Critics point out that this system is counter-productive to good business:

- Poor performance might be due to other root causes - hiring the wrong person, inadequate training, flawed supervision - that firing does not identify or address.
- Fear of failure breeds mediocrity. When employees are anxious about falling into the bottom 10%, they stop taking the risks that might lead to breakthroughs to success. Rather than elevating performance, a quota system tends to bunch everyone in the middle of the scale.
- After the first round or two of firing, when the truly poor performers are gone, forced firings can turn into a distracting, stressful and unnecessary war for survival among the remaining productive employees.
- It is usually more expensive to hire and train a new employee than to keep an adequate performer.
- Loyalty is a two-way street. When people see their company summarily firing loyal employees after one bad year, how long will they stick around when the company falls on hard times or the job market picks up?
- The legality of this quota system has been successfully challenged in numerous court cases.

Consider this: if the Vitality Curve had been in effect when Jack Welch was starting his career at General Electric, it’s extremely likely that he would have been fired from his very first job. He was the manager of a pilot plant, responsible for everything that went on his building. One day the building exploded in a work-related accident that shattered every window and blew off the roof.

Fearing for his job, Jack was called in to explain the explosion to a senior executive. Much to Welch’s surprise, the manager was not angry, and simply asked why the accident had occurred and how to prevent such mishaps in the future. Welch claims to have learned an important first-hand lesson from this incident.

"When people make mistakes, the last thing they need is discipline. It's time for encouragement and confidence-building. The job at this point is to restore self-confidence. I think 'piling on' when someone is down is one of the worst things that any of us can do."¹ Welch was given a second chance, and his career flourished.

Now imagine what would have happened if Jack's manager had been operating under the Vitality Curve, looking to fire 10% of his workforce. Whom would he fire: a young manager who had just blown up his plant, or one who hadn't? Welch's career at GE would probably have been nipped in the bud, and GE would have been the worse for it.

Leaving aside the business considerations, Welch's Vitality Curve raises serious ethical issues. Firing people may be essential when a company is struggling to survive, but is it necessary in a thriving, successful company? As the saying goes, the only difference between surgery and sadism is the state of the patient.

Jack Welch recalls an incident in his autobiography. One day, his eight-year old son John was sitting on the school bus, minding his own business, when another boy lunged at him and, for no apparent reason, punched him in the face. Jack investigated and discovered that he himself had just fired the boy's father.

Welch cites this incident as an example of a burden placed on his family by his career. Rabbi Shalom might suggest a different lesson for this story. Welch fired a man. As a result, the world became a worse place for that man, for his children, and, ultimately, for Welch and his own children as well.

*(This article is an excerpt from **The Hasidic Masters' Guide to Management** by Moshe Kranc, to be published by Devora Publishing in September 2004.)*

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1. Jack Welch and John Byrne, *Jack: Straight From The Gut*, Warner Books, 2001.