

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
**AUGUST 21, 2010**  
**RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG**

This morning I would like to bid farewell to John Wooden and welcome Rabbi Chai Posner and his family ... and show you what the two have in common.

Just as the summer began, John Wooden died at the age of 99. John Wooden was a giant in the history of college basketball. No coach ever won more games than he did. His teams at UCLA won an incredible ten national championships in a twelve season stretch from 1964 to 1975. At one point UCLA won 88 consecutive games ... still a college record! Wooden's nickname was "the wizard of Westwood" and rightfully so. But not just for teaching teenagers how to play basketball, but for also turning them into respectable human beings. How did he do it? Well, it all began with shoelaces!

My colleague and friend, Rabbi Benjamin Blech, in an article on the website of Aish Ha-Torah, took note of an article that was written about Wooden in the New York Times. The writer, George Vecsey, pointed out the fact that all the youngsters who started playing for Wooden were surprised that he started their training not with how to play defense, and not how to shoot lay-ups. In fact, he wouldn't even allow them to shoot any baskets before he first taught them how to pull their shoelaces tight and even, so that they would suffer no sprained ankles. It all starts with how you tie your shoes!

Now, interestingly enough, as Rabbi Blech points out, Judaism teaches the exact same lesson. It's right there in the early chapters of the Shulchan Aruch where we are told that when we get up in the morning and get dressed we are supposed to put on our right shoe first, and then the left ... but when we tie the shoelaces we do the left and then the right. There are different halachic and kabbalistic reasons for this, but the fact remains that the Shulchan Aruch and John Wooden had the same philosophy and outlook toward life: little things mean a lot ... greatness, success, happiness ... it all starts with the little things.

Our Torah portion gives us a good example of this. We are told that if a man sins, a sin that is punishable by lashes, "*arboim yakeniu, lo yosef* ... he may be flagged with 40 lashes but no more." So what does the Torah tell us? The required amount for lashes is 40. And so, how many lashes did the Jewish courts of old give those who were so guilty? The answer? 39! But the Torah said 40. How come we only gave 39? It was because of the way the Anshei Keneset Hagadolah – the Men of the Great Assembly – interpreted the verse. They interpreted it in such a way that the verse meant: 39 and not 40.

Who were these "Men of the Great Assembly?" They were a group of 120 sages, amongst them were several prophets headed by Ezra. Ezra established this great assembly shortly after the beginning of the second Jewish commonwealth. And among the 120 was Mordechai from the Purim story, Daniel – the one from the lion's den, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Nechemiah. No wonder it was called "the great assembly!" And this great assembly instituted some of the basic Jewish practices we follow to this very day, including the Kiddush and Havdalah for Shabbos, the idea of praying three times a day, the Amidah – the Silent Devotion, the blessings before eating. No wonder it was called "great!" But you know what? It was called "great" not because of the men who were part of it, and not because of the prayers it instituted. According to our tradition, it was labeled "the Men of the Great Assembly" because they spared criminals one lash – that's what made them "great." And yes, little things mean a lot!

With this in mind, I happily welcome Rabbi Chai Posner as one of the rabbis of the Beth Tfiloh Congregation. Many people have commented on how young he is, indeed, how inexperienced he is. So you tell me: how much experience do you have to have to be a rabbi? And how old do you have to be to be a rabbi? This very question is being debated in Israel right now where last week a 14 year old youngster named Moshe Sharify took the written examinations for being a rabbi – which was held in Jerusalem and administered by the Chief Rabbinate – and he passed the exam! In the past year, this 14 year old has been tested by ten well known and senior rabbis for his knowledge of Jewish law ... all of whom have been impressed by his knowledge, labeling him a genius. And it seems as if he showed his genius early on ... his father says that when he was only 1 year old, every time he walked by a painting with a rabbi in it, he would say, “Here is a rabbi.” Little things mean a lot. When I was 1 year old I still couldn’t say “MaMa!” And this kid was already saying: Here is a rabbi!

So yes, sometimes you don’t have to be old, and sometimes you don’t have to be very experienced to be able to show that you have great potential as a rabbi. And that is certainly true of Rabbi Posner. I tell you: this is a rabbi! Yes, it is true that he is just out of rabbinical school, and his experience has only been as a rabbinic intern. But all of us who met and spoke with and heard Rabbi Posner saw enough little things that mean a lot. I’ll tell you one story that impressed me, and I hope Rabbi Posner doesn’t mind my repeating it. Like many Yeshiva high school graduates, Rabbi Posner spent the year between high school and college studying at a Yeshiva in Israel. There is a seven hour time difference in Israel from that of the U.S. and so the night of the World Series arrives, which starts at 8:30 and ends something like 11:30 here in the U.S ... in Israel it starts at 3:30 in the morning and ends around 6:30. That year the Yankees were playing in the World Series. It seems as if every year the Yankees play in the World Series! That’s why I hate them! But Rabbi Posner likes them ... no one is perfect! So he and a group of his American classmates stayed up and watched the game. That very same morning they appeared on time in the classroom for their Talmud class. Now, I could identify with that. When I was in rabbinical school I had a teacher – a Torah giant, Reb Dovid Lipschutz – who always gave a class on the morning of Jan 1<sup>st</sup> and you had better be there – or else! And we were all there, some of us having come straight from a New Year’s Eve party. And that was fine. But for Rabbi Posner’s teacher in Israel that wasn’t fine. He didn’t compliment the students for having stayed up to watch the game and yet having come to class. He criticized them for having wasted their time by watching the game. Then and there, Rabbi Posner decided that this Yeshiva was not for him.

Rabbi Posner is a young man with a very mature perspective in life. He has his feet planted both in the world of Torah and in the world around him. He possesses an insight and sensitivity way beyond his years. He has already shown some of us what I know he will show all of you: a potential not simply to be a good rabbi ... but a great one, following in the footsteps of the men of the great assembly who showed that they were gifted not just intellectually, but emotionally as well.

We welcome Rabbi Posner and his lovely wife, Rachel, and their adorable son Roni with open arms and with open hearts. And yes, it’s true it wasn’t too many years ago that Rabbi Posner learned how to tie his shoes ... but he certainly now knows how to stand on his own two feet! We are thrilled to now have him stand here as our rabbi.

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