



Play the Ball Where the Monkey Dropped It
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During Colonial times, the Englishmen who came to India brought with them their love of golf. But there were no places to play. So, after a few years of missing the sport, the new residents opened a beautiful golf course in Calcutta with great enthusiasm.

But golf in India had a unique challenge that the Englishmen had not anticipated. On opening day in Calcutta, the golfers each picked out the perfect club, took their best shot, watched their ball soar and land – only to be carried off immediately by wild monkeys.

This was, frustrating, to say the least.

Not ready to concede, the British golfers built high fences, posted guards to keep the monkeys out, and even hired monkey trappers to lure the monkeys away. But no matter what they did, the monkeys came back, and no ball could be counted on to stay where it had landed.

Just as it looked as though golf's future in India was doomed, someone came up with a suggestion that led to one of the most unusual rules in the history of the sport.

According to Gregory Knox Jones, who wrote a book on the subject: "If a monkey snatched a ball right out of the fairway, and put it in the rough or under a tree, you had to play the ball where the monkey dropped it. [And] if the monkey grabbed a ball that had landed in a sand trap and put it on the fairway, or better yet on the green, you played the ball where the monkey dropped it."

No matter what – whether ruining your shot or doing you a tremendous favor – you played not just the game you'd honed through your skill and hard work, but also the one that the random fate of a monkey's whimsy had created.

It's an apt metaphor for life. Our lives are not lived in a vacuum, where effort equals results. No matter how well we plan, there's always that unexpected happening, completely beyond our control, that throws us in a new direction.

We have that daily phone call with Mom or Dad, and then one day they are gone. We reach for the phone but stop ourselves, because they aren't on the other end – and we have to figure out who we are now without them.

We get married, filled with hope and dreams for the future, but despite all our efforts, something breaks and we find ourselves separated, or divorced. Suddenly the house feels empty, and we're walking around in what seems like someone else's life, starting over.

We're speeding along happily – work, home, kids – juggling with exhilaration, watching things get better each day. Then one day we sit in the doctor's office – cancer, heart disease, diabetes. Suddenly we're re-evaluating everything we thought we knew, trying to figure out where to go from here.

How do we move forward when the things we thought were under control become moving targets – when everything we thought we knew changes?

The ancient rabbis, commenting on this morning's Torah portion, offer us two models: Noah, who in the opening words of our parasha is called "*Ish Tzaddik Tamim Haya B'Dorotav*" – "A righteous man in his generation" – and Abraham, the hero of the final verses.

What is the difference between these two men?

When God threw Noah a curveball, changing in one moment everything Noah thought he knew about the world and his role in it, Noah stepped up – at first. He built the ark. He did what he had to do and got through the crisis.

But Noah never really adapted. His first act after the flood? To get drunk. As faithful as he was, he could rise to the occasion in the moment of crisis, but he couldn't quite take the next step to rebuild.

Now, who can blame Noah? Everything he knew, everything he thought he was, the world as he knew it was changed. It's hard to continue on when the ground rules are shifting. Like Lot's wife, Noah just couldn't figure out a way to move forward. The disappointment of his past forever haunted his future, affecting – destroying – everything, including his relationship with his sons.

This, our rabbis teach, is why the Torah insists that, as a hero, Noah was limited *b'dorotav*, to his generation, but did not measure up as a role model for all time.

Abraham, too, is thrust into a life that was not what he'd imagined. Less drastic than Noah's predicament, he nevertheless had to leave behind everything he knows, setting off into the harsh unknown, far from his family, his home, and everything that had made up his life to that moment.

Unlike Noah, though, who does his part and is spent, Abraham does find a way to adapt – again and again. Throughout his life, every time his metaphorical golf ball is moved – when Pharaoh takes his wife, when he is unable to find even ten righteous in Sodom and watches the city destroyed, when family dynamics boil over to force his older son out of the household, when God demands he offer his beloved son as a sacrifice, when his wife and partner since his youth, Sarah, dies – at each turn of events, Abraham finds a way to shift his balance, and play the ball forward.

What allowed Abraham to adapt when Noah couldn't?

Noah is, for all his strengths, fundamentally reactive. God says, "Build an ark," and Noah builds an ark – but then needs God's explicit invitation before going onto it. The land dries and the dove he sends out finds land and does not return, yet Noah doesn't move forward.

He stays on the ark until God tells him to leave. Noah is faithful; Noah is obedient. But Noah is passive, allowing the events of life to act upon him.

Abraham's strength, for better or for worse, is that, as the Midrash recalls, from his early childhood smashing idols in his father's shop to his final days arranging to find a wife for his son, Abraham acted. When life threw him, he reset his parameters and got right back in motion.

I thought about this quality yesterday when I saw the news that Al Gore had just won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on increasing public awareness of climate change. Recall where Al Gore was seven years ago – having won the popular vote for president, losing the electoral college by a hanging chad. Talk about the ball being moved.

Many defeated presidential candidates have slipped off into obscurity; having lost their shot, they step back from taking another. Or they keep trying to do the same thing in the same way to the same results the next time around.

But in the movie “An Inconvenient Truth,” Al Gore explains how he had a moment of reflection where he realized, in his profound disappointment in how the court had ruled, that he could give up his hopes of influencing the public policy agenda on the things he believed most important – he could wait for another four years to try again. Or he could reinvent himself, finding a new way, a new medium, to push the message.

He pounded the pavement, giving lectures, making public appearances, sharing his graphs and charts and alarming statistics, until the movie of his experience made him an icon of the global climate change movement.

Democrat or Republican, you can't help admiring Gore's passionate embrace of a new path, which has brought an issue he believes in to a new place on the national agenda.

Life shifts the playing field. But we decide how we will respond.

One of my mentors in rabbinical school was Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer. When I first met her ten years ago, she led what seemed to be a charmed life: a brilliant teacher, happily married with two beautiful children, a toddler and an adorable baby boy. But as that baby boy, Ezra, grew, it became clear that something was different. Ezra had autism.

Sitting in the therapist's office, her husband recalls, the counselor said to them, "You need to mourn." "For whom?" he asked. "For the child he didn't turn out to be."

But it didn't make sense to them to mourn. Instead, Rabbi Fields-Meyer and her husband decided to focus on the new understandings loving a child with autism brought them. In an article about Ezra's love of the zoo, her husband reflects on the incredible empathy Ezra feels toward animals, which make him calm and connected. Just being with Ezra and animals, he said, is a transcendent experience that opens his parents' spirits in a way they would have never imagined.

But more than just focusing inward to appreciate Ezra, Rabbi Fields-Meyer has used her experience to reach out to others. Advocating for Ezra, she found that there were few Jewish resources for families with autistic children. So she founded Ozreinu, a support and educational organization that created a completely unique Jewish camping experience for autistic children and their parents: Camp Yofi.

Loren Sykes, director of Camp Ramah Darom where camp Yofi took place, said, "It was one of the most moving experiences we've ever had at camp ... Watching a child with autism say to his parents, 'I'm going to climb to the top of the tower because that's higher than you did' and doing it, this is what you call a wild success ... It's families building communities. It's kids meeting kids. It's the Jewish community doing what should be done."

Rabbi Fields-Meyer has become a leader, a visionary in the field of Jewish autism education, a rabbi other rabbis turn to for insight.

What began through her own life's unexpected adversity, she now uses to give comfort and support, love and guidance, to so many, advocating, educating, and creating a sacred space.

Each of us has the power within us not just to react but to act each day – to be elevated by whatever may come.

We can say, in Noah-like fashion, “I’ve come as far as I can go.” Or we can walk in the footsteps of Abraham, adjusting the rules of the game so that no matter where the ball is dropped, we lift our best club, take our best swing, and play the ball forward.

In the eighteen holes of life, may we follow Abraham's lead.