

The Power of One
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I awoke one cool November morning in my thirteenth year of life to the haze of an election eve which had gone on way past my bedtime. I wandered downstairs through piles of black and yellow pictures of my mother's smiling face on posters, buttons, and yard signs all bearing the simple phrase: "Support Rapport". It was the morning after my Mother ran for Mayor of Marquette.

Politics was a staple of our diet in the Rapport household. I suppose that it comes to you as no shock that I was raised in a politically active home! Mom had been involved in politics for pretty much all of my life.

Usually, she preferred to stay behind the scenes, working on issues she cared about, encouraging others to run for office, supporting candidates whose ideas or character inspired her respect. But this time, she had decided to run for mayor herself, without any real expectation of winning, more out of a general frustration with the candidates who were running and their unwillingness to even talk about any of the important issues that were facing our community.

So she placed her name in the primary as her entry ticket to participate in the candidate debates. She just wanted to shake things up a bit, but by the time she was done shaking she had actually won the primary and found herself in a full fledged general election campaign. For all she has done and continues to do to inspire me, at that moment my mother became an unexpected hero in one of the most formative moments of my young life.

Her opponent, Okie Brumm, was a glad hand monster-of-a-man who ran a building contractor's business and had no clue about the challenges of city government, except for the fact that he wanted to run it. Okie stood about a foot taller than Mom, out weighed her by at least 200 pounds, and he had this annoying habit of patting her hand and smiling a lot whenever they disagreed about an issue... which was most of the time.

Mom waded into the campaign with incredible determination, she gave speeches to the Lions Club and the Rotary, marched in parades, held town hall meetings, went door to door, block by block, precinct by precinct. We ferried lawn signs all over town, passed out leaflets in front of the grocery store, and handed out buttons everywhere we would go.

It was a tough race. Marquette was a very traditional, predominantly Catholic town in those days. There had never been a woman Mayor and although most people knew Mom from all the civic projects she had been involved in over the years, they also knew that some of those projects: like founding the first chapter of Planned Parenthood in our half of the state, building the first Women's Center, and Spouse Abuse Shelter, had left a lot of feathers ruffled and provided us with a pretty regular stream of hate mail and nasty phone calls over the years, just as well.

There wasn't much polling in the race for Marquette's Mayor, there were only about 25,000 people in the entire town. Nobody gave Mom much of a chance, but the local Paper endorsed her, and much as we were regularly reminded that she had never intended to win, the race felt close to us, nonetheless.

Well, morning came and we still didn't know the outcome. Recounts were underway and when it was all over, but the crying, Mom had lost by seven votes. Seven votes.

My father trudged in to his office at the University later that afternoon. He was sitting at his desk trying to draw his mind back to all the work that had piled up around him over the course of the campaign, when two of his colleagues began complaining in the hallway about the election's outcome. Their conversation went something like this:

"Can you believe it? Mayor Oakie Brum?"

"How could anyone convince themselves to vote for this guy?"

"Seven Votes!"

"Yeah, it is almost enough to convince me to go out, register, and show up next time to Vote."

My father stepped out into the hallway where these two professors were talking and said:

"I can tell that you two geniuses are too smart to do something as futile as casting a ballot. After all what are the odds that one vote will ever make a difference. But, let's make one thing perfectly clear: I don't want to hear one complaint out of either of you about anything Mayor Oakie may choose to do or not do. Because he is your mayor and you two geniuses elected him. People who vote, earn the right to *kvetch*, you two geniuses are getting exactly what you deserve."

That is the simple lesson I have carried with me since that day.
One vote counts, and you hold the power of that vote in your hands.

Your vote counts and for at least half of the people in this room, your vote only counts because of one vote. The 19th Amendment narrowly passed Congress in 1918 by one vote in the House and one vote in the Senate. If one person had changed his mind, women wouldn't have received the right to vote. None of the women in this room would be voting.

And once the 19th Amendment had passed both House and Senate by a single vote, it required the ratification of two thirds of the State Legislatures. It was a long hard battle, particularly in the southern states, but after a two year struggle, it all came down to Tennessee, the last state to vote on ratification. Lawmakers at the time thought Tennessee would all but certainly vote against the amendment. The vote was closer than anyone had imagined and ultimately the entire notion of women's suffrage turned on the single vote of one representative from Eastern

Tennessee who changed his vote because his mother insisted that she had earned the right to vote for him.

Your vote counts, and if you are Jewish, your vote counts twice. While more and more people are registered to vote, voter turnout has steadily dropped in recent elections. Almost 50% of eligible voters do not vote for president and the numbers are significantly lower for State and Local races. Jews on the other hand vote at a rate closer to 85% which multiplies the value of our votes pretty quickly. Add to that the fact that 85% of Jewish voters live in just 20 metropolitan centers in the United States and our impact in the places where we live becomes even greater. Add to that, the remarkable number of Jews who volunteer and contribute to political campaigns and our impact as a community grows larger even still.

There is currently only one black Senator serving in Washington, but there are 13 Jewish Senators and another 30 Jews in the House which makes up the largest Jewish representation in the United States Congress in all of our nation's history.

Your vote counts more, because the importance of the Jewish community to the political life of this country matters, not because of our size or strength, but simply because of the simple truth that Jews vote and we vote at a rate that rivals even our most treasured religious rituals.

Why do Jews vote? Well there are many answers to that question, but deep down I believe that for us, voting is something akin to a religious rite. We vote for many of the same reasons that brought many of us to gather here today. There is something about being Jewish that calls upon us to stand and be counted. There is something about being Jewish that inspires us to dream of a better world and, even more, there is something about being Jewish to believe that we ourselves can play a part in the building of that world through our actions.

Yes we are patriotic and we have good reasons to be so. The prophet Jeremiah teaches:

Thus said the Eternal One, the God of Israel, to the whole community that I exiled from Jerusalem... "Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Eternal in its behalf; for in its welfare shall you fare well." –Jeremiah 29: 4-7

I realize that this commandment may predate our lives and love of this land by a few thousand years. We have pronounced the blessing for "our country" in many lands where we lived lives that were far from blessed. You may recall the question asked of the rabbi in Fiddler on the Roof. Is there a blessing for the Tzar? The rabbi replies: "A blessing for the Tzar, of course. May God bless and keep the Tzar, far away from us!" I think about Jews in places like Poland and Iran and what they must feel when they pronounce that blessing for today.

We are truly blessed to live in this land of liberty and it is more than a mere civic duty to stand and be counted on election day, it is a recognition of that blessing, which calls us to cherish our role in charting our nation's future.

I was reminded of this lesson just recently and in the most unexpected of ways. I was watching a movie called “Swing Vote” a sentimental summer comedy which suddenly becomes deeply serious in the end.

For those of you who may have missed the movie, Kevin Costner plays Bud Johnson, this apathetic, beer slinging, lovable loser, who is coasting through a life that has passed him by, except for the one bright spot in his mundane existence, his precocious, over achieving twelve-year old daughter, Molly. She takes care of them both, until one mischievous moment on Election Day, when she accidentally sets off a chain of events which culminates in the presidential election coming down to one vote, her Dad’s.

Suddenly, Bud Johnson, the nobody, becomes the voice for everybody when the world realizes that his vote will be the one that elects the next president. Politicians and the press invade the small town of Texico, New Mexico waging war for Bud's vote. That is when this light summer comedy suddenly strikes a chord.

At first, this all seems like great fun and a silly stereotype of everything that is wrong with American politics. But as it begins to sink in that Bud Johnson holds the future of the free world in his hands, even he comes to recognize how poorly he is prepared for so enormous a responsibility. Embarrassed by how little he has been asked to do, how little he has given, how little he has made a difference in his life, Bud comes to recognize that it is never too late to make a difference. His vote counts. Not just because in this fictional fantasy his vote will ultimately determine the outcome, and the outcome does matter, but more importantly, because he has learned that voting says that you care about the future and a future of more than just yourself. Voting says you believe in this system of government we call democracy. Voting is the most honorable thing a person can do.

And it struck me then, sitting in the darkened theater, that all of these recognitions are the themes of these High Holy Days. All too often we lose sight of the real blessings in our lives and what we were placed here to do. Making a difference, looking back and deciding that we can do better, the ability to make that difference at any time, at any age, in many ways, these are the truest meanings of these most awesome of days.

But what is really remarkable about the movie is the final speech and the way Bud begins the Final Presidential Debate by looking, not at the candidates, but at himself. By pausing before asking them questions, to ask himself some harder questions about why these issues have never seemed to matter enough to him until now! Now that is a Rosh Hashanah sermon in the making.

It seems like a perfect Hollywood script, I know. One person gets to make a difference for the entire nation and the entire world. But there is more than a bit of truth beneath that tale. In 2000, the entire election for president of the United States came down to 537 votes in a single county in Florida.

In the most recent party elections for Prime Minister in Israel, Tzipi Livni's margin for victory was even smaller. 7 people in a tiny town taught me this lesson long ago. Every vote count.

But more importantly, for these High Holy Days, you count, and your actions count, and together we must stand up and be counted, among those who care enough to make a difference in this world. We stand at a crossroads in our nation's history and the events of the past few days have taught us, if nothing else, that it is time to take seriously the future we must choose.

President John F. Kennedy once said:

“One person can make a difference and every person should try.”

To say that in more Jewish terms, he meant:

Wherever we live, it is probably Egypt. There is, there really is, a better place, a promised land. And there is, there really is, a promised time. And there is no way to get from here to there, from now to then, except by joining together and marching—and sometimes stumbling—through the wilderness, watching this time not for signs and wonders, but for an opportunity to act.

– Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, adapted

My mother's run for mayor was many years ago, but the story does not end there. Mom eventually went on to win her election, not just for mayor of Marquette, but for a seat on the County Commission. The issues she fought for in that first campaign have slowly and painstakingly been accomplished. There is a happy ending to this little legend and when Mom was honored several months ago for her many years of service, the newspaper article which chronicled the event said simply this: “If there is one thing Karlyn Rapport has proven over the course of her work and volunteer life in Marquette County, it's that one person can make a difference.”

You are that one person, and the power of that difference sits squarely in your hands. Vote!

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם שנתן לנו הזדמנות לתקן את העולם.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe,
Who has given us the opportunity to mend the world!