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“Enough Room for All of Us”

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After shocking the tennis world with a fairytale run into the fourth round at Wimbledon, 15-year-old tennis phenom Coco Gauff was on cloud nine. Celebrities from Snoop Dogg to Venus Williams were applauding her dramatic arrival onto the tennis scene, while fans quickly arrived in droves, sending the young girl’s Instagram tally to 600,000 followers. Coco celebrated her doubles championship in the Citi Open the following week by meeting Michelle Obama, who gave her a signed book in exchange for a signed racket.

Then came the U.S. Open. An impressive run into the third round had fans of the young Gauff dreaming the impossible, even with number-1 ranked Naomi Osaka on the docket. But it was not to be. Gauff lost handily in straight sets, 6-3, 6-0...and she was devastated.

Ordinarily, this is when the loser would wave politely to the crowd and head back to the locker room, leaving the winner in her on-court interview to say something brief about the budding young upstart’s promising future, while turning her full attention to her own match prowess and her next rival. After all, the tennis world, like the rest of America, often lives by the words of the late Vince Lombardi, “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.”

Instead, Osaka insisted that Gauff join her in the post-match interview in an inspiring show of sportsmanship and partnership. The interview quickly went viral as dumbfounded audiences cheered loudly for the rare demonstration of camaraderie taking place before their eyes. Sports networks carried the story for weeks.

Osaka knew that Gauff was already on a path to stardom, one that had brought most of the crowd to the match that day... and one that might ultimately take trophies away from her. And yet, she chose to lift up this young woman, destined to be her rival for years to come, because she understood a truth that is often difficult for the rest of us to accept: There is enough room at the top for all of us.

Our collective astonishment at what was, if you pause to think about it, just a simple gesture of kindness, affirms a disturbing reality that haunts every corner of our lives, from our recreational pursuits, to our academic and professional lives, to our families and friendships. Our preoccupation with competition has created a world in which moments like those shared between Osaka and Gauff have become the exception, rather than the rule. For from a young age, we have been scripted in the mindset of scarcity, one which teaches us that we can only succeed if we’re *better than* everyone else... and that others must be left behind or even vanquished in order for us to experience the success we so desperately crave.

In his book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, author Alfie Kohn explains our deeply inculcated obsession with competition: “Our economic system is predicated on competition,” he asserts, “while our schooling, from the earliest grades, trains us not only to triumph over others but to regard them as obstacles to our own success.

Our leisure time is filled with highly structured games in which one individual or team must defeat another. Even within the family, there is a rivalry—a muted but often desperate struggle that treats approval as a scarce commodity and turns love into a kind of trophy.”¹

Our leaders, our schools, often even our own families condition us to believe that life is a zero-sum game with winners and losers—a dangerous fallacy that views the universe as little more than a pie, with only so many slices to go around, and our task is to seize ours as quickly as possible, before someone else takes it. Some are destined to eat, while others are destined to go hungry. Ironic, considering that humanity produces enough food to feed one-and-a-half times the entire world’s population. Yet the hungry remain, more than 820 million worldwide, a tragic testament to the enduring dominance of our competitive worldview.

Even here, in the land of opportunity, our belief in scarcity convinces us that only a select few can benefit from the American dream. And, so, we jealously guard our opportunities, denying entry to the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, withholding first world medical care from those who cannot afford it, and sabotaging efforts to provide equal education to our nation’s children. As we’ve grown more and more comfortable with a stark rhetoric of “winners” and “losers,” we’ve embraced more and more systems that *create* winners and losers, rarely considering if it ever had to be this way.

But in the world of scarcity, it’s not just the ‘losers’ who suffer. Those who succeed in grabbing their slice of pie are saddled with the tormenting belief that they must always strive to be the best, lest a potential rival usurp their success. Author Stephen Covey, in his famous book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explains that, “People with a scarcity mentality have a very difficult time sharing recognition and credit, power or profit—even with those who help in the production. They also have a hard time being genuinely happy for the successes of other people—even, and sometimes especially, members of their own family or close friends and associates.” They firmly believe that “Only so many people can be “A” students; only one person can be ‘number one.’ To ‘win’ simply means to ‘beat.’”²

Spending my summer reconnecting with many of our Leo Baeck Temple high school seniors and university students revealed just how destructive our competitive mindset can be for our youth. An LBT student at one of our UCs has sat down in her library to study for exams, only to discover that pages from the book she needed had already been torn out by a classmate trying to ensure that others could not study from them. Meanwhile, some LBT seniors at a local high school find themselves thrust into a competitive pressure cooker whenever they walk through the main hallway of their school, where administrators post each student’s college acceptances for everyone to see.

But perhaps the most poignant example of the suffering caused by this mindset can be found, not on our national or academic landscape, but within our families, where, all too often, love becomes a contest among parents and children alike.

¹ Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, 2.

² FAO of the United Nations in 2019: A little over 820 million people suffer from hunger, corresponding to about one in every nine people in the world. This is the number of those suffering from “severe food insecurity,” defined as people who have run out of food and have gone a day or days without eating.

³ Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, 219.

Our tradition warns us of this heartrending truth through the stories of our founding family in the Bible, who, time and again, deprive one another of the love they so desperately need and deserve.

After Sarah, Abraham's wife, miraculously gives birth to their son Isaac, she demands that Abraham cast out his eldest son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar, into the wilderness for fear that Ishmael might procure his father's inheritance. *And, let's be honest, the issue of inheritance is not just for Bible stories...it has surely created painful conflict in many of our own families as well.* A generation later, Isaac's son, Jacob, deceives his father in order to steal his older brother Esau's birthright, leading to a feud that drives the brothers apart and forces Jacob from his home for years.

Meanwhile, Jacob's own sons emulate their father, trapping his favorite son, Joseph, in a pit before selling him into slavery. Our patriarchs' deeply internalized belief that there is only enough love...or money for one child is the real "inheritance" that gets passed on from generation to generation, pitting siblings against one another and tearing families apart.

These stories have become such an integral part of our collective consciousness that the competitive nature of their participants appears to represent an essential element of human nature. And yet, who can read these tales without recognizing the pain and suffering our founding fathers and mothers inflicted upon one another and upon themselves? Who can read these tales without lamenting the endless possibilities – for love, for partnership, for a better present and an even better future – that were lost because our ancestors regarded their love as a finite resource?

Indeed, perhaps the most devastating drawback to the world of scarcity is that it deprives us of the most creative and useful solutions to our individual and collective problems. By encouraging nations, companies, and individuals to hoard their resources, competition narrows our available options in any endeavor. It reminds me, believe it or not, of *Star Wars*, when Luke, Leah, Han Solo, and Chewbacca are stuck in the trash compactor. As the walls begin closing in on them, their options become more and more limited. Like that trash compactor, our competitive worldview forces us into a narrow place where we can't see the possibilities that lay beyond our limited perspectives.

But once we have acknowledged the toxicity and pain inflicted by a worldview of scarcity, then we must ask ourselves if there is another way... a way that reminds us that the more a parent loves, the more it stretches their heart, creating spaciousness for further affection... a way that bravely re-visions the pie so that no one need ever go hungry... a way that imprints in us the awareness that there is enough—and that the more we pool our talents, our resources, our thinking together in intentional ways, the more we all benefit.

The great Talmudic sage, Rav, said that in heaven, there is, "no jealousy, no hatred, and no competition." Our relationships, our mental health, our country, and yes, even our world depend on us finding that other way—a model of collaboration.

People often ask my husband why he joined the military, expecting to hear a story of inspiring patriotism, a family tradition of service, or simple financial savvy.

· BT Berachot 17A.

Instead, they hear about Cadet Blythe, who hosted Josh when he first visited the West Point campus. A freshman, Blythe fell asleep at his desk at 4:00 AM studying for a physics exam. Just before 5:00, when his alarm was set to go off, his classmates crept in and silenced the alarm.

Josh watched –suspiciously at first – as Blythe’s classmates performed his morning duties, delivering laundry and newspapers to the upperclassmen and shining his shoes and belt buckle, before waking him. As they helped Blythe dress, they even read him the morning headlines from the newspaper – which he was expected to know verbatim – so that he would be prepared for morning inspection.

These freshmen could have easily focused on their own demanding responsibilities or treated Blythe’s predicament as an opportunity to move ahead in the rankings... after all, every cadet’s first job depends upon their competitive ranking. But instead, they recognized that, as a team, they achieved more by working together than competing against one another... that when Blythe looked good, their squad looked good, and, so, they took care of each other.

In many ways, their behavior is but a small representation of a collaborative approach that permeates military policy. Though pop culture has trained us to believe that basic training exists to weed out those unfit for service, its primary purpose is to enculturate every participant to a world that demands collaborative achievement, rather than individual recognition, as its primary objective. Because soldiers succeed or fail in their missions as teams, their individual achievements are, in fact, meaningless, which makes collaboration imperative.

And if we look honestly at ourselves, we would probably find that our existence in the world is not much different than that of basic trainees. Our fates are irrevocably tied to one another; we just often choose not to admit it. But, for many, the benefits of a collaborative mindset are now proving too significant to overlook.

In 2012, the outdoor clothing company Patagonia announced that, after four years of research, it had developed a new, sustainable replacement for neoprene, whose toxic manufacturing process made wetsuits a hazard to factory workers and to the environment.

But instead of holding onto its patent, Patagonia shared its advancement with the rest of the surf industry, virtually eliminating the risks posed by neoprene overnight, while simultaneously increasing its sales and reputation in the process. Imagine how different our world would look if Merck or Facebook shared propriety discoveries for the benefit of humanity.

Meanwhile, at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton Business School, Professor Adam Grant works tirelessly to create a classroom that accurately models the business world. Grant spent a decade comparing the careers of those who compete to come out ahead to those who devote their energies toward collaborative efforts, discovering that the latter consistently achieved better results over time. So, he attempted to make his classroom similar, and it wasn’t easy. Each change he made seemed to reinforce his students’ competitive tendencies.

But, four years ago, he finally found a way.

He told the students that they could pick the one question on an exam about which they were most unsure, and write down the name of a classmate who might know the answer — think phone a friend on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” If the classmate got it right, they would both earn the points. This small gesture resulted in an immediate 2% increase in test scores, as students began studying together.

By the next year, students began partnering in earnest to prepare for the final exam; one student reserved a room and invited the entire class to study together; another suggested they divide up the readings and write summaries to share, and still another offered to share the study guide she had already created. That year, scores climbed another 2.4 percent, providing proof for Grant's steadfast belief in collaboration.

Like our economy and our schools, our sports landscape embodies an insidious ethos of competition that has become all too normal. However, promising changes have appeared on the horizon from an unexpected source. Norway, a nation of just 5.3 million people, about half the population of Los Angeles County, illustrated the benefits of a collaborative approach to athletics last year during the Winter Olympics in South Korea when it won more medals, 39, than any other country in the history of the Winter Games. For those counting, the United States finished fourth, with 23 medals.

Norway, however, has a much different approach to sports than we do, prioritizing participation over competition. In their system, children get to decide for themselves how much they would like to train and can opt out of games if they just like to practice. Moreover, the government prohibits championship games and the publication of any game scores or rankings before age 13. Competition exists, but never at the expense of the Norwegian vision of the "Joy of Sport for All." And by the way, similar platforms exist for Norway's schools, including a national prohibition on giving out grades until age 13.

"It's impossible to say at 8 or 10 or 12 who is going to be talented in school or sport. That takes another 10 years, said Inge Andersen, former secretary general of the Norwegian confederation. "Our priority is the child becoming self-reflective about their bodies and minds." Imagine those words coming from your child's gymnastics or little league coach.

And yet, even these changes promise limited returns unless we can discover, as individuals and as families, how to cast aside a perspective of scarcity in favor of collaboration. In order to teach their children the value of partnership, my friends Alyssa and Jeremy set aside their Monopoly and Risk game boards to play collaborative board games with their three children. In these games, everyone has to work together to win; they either all succeed or all fail — instilling in their five year old, nine year old, and thirteen year old a new model for engaging with one another one that teaches them that someone doesn't need to lose in order for someone else to win.

Some of you might be thinking, that's really nice, Lisa, but in the cutthroat world we live in not everyone gets a trophy. And whether it's okay or not, sometimes you have to run over someone else in order to get ahead. But is that actually true? Do we really need valedictorians for students to be motivated to learn or little league champions for children to engage passionately in sports? I realize that even asking these questions may seem heretical, but perhaps that's because we have been so deeply ingrained in this way of thinking that it's hard to consider another option.

5 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/opinion/sunday/why-we-should-stop-grading-students-on-a-curve.html>

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/28/sports/norway-youth-sports-model.html>

· *ibid*

Yes, competition is not always bad and, sometimes, scarcity does exist. But, the consequences of telling ourselves and our children that triumphing over others represents the *only* path to success are far too great to ignore.

Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism share a parable that underscores what's at stake if we continue to rely on a competitive worldview. The Jewish version of the tale begins with an exchange between a Hasidic rabbi and God about Heaven and Hell.

"Let me show you Hell," says God, who leads the rabbi into a room containing a group of famished, desperate people sitting around a large, circular table. In the center of the table rested an enormous pot of stew, more than enough for everyone. The smell of the stew was delicious and made the rabbi's mouth water. Yet no one ate. Each diner at the table held a very long-handled spoon – long enough to reach the pot and scoop up a spoonful of stew, but too long to get the food into one's mouth. The rabbi saw that their suffering was indeed terrible and bowed his head in compassion.

"Now, I will show you Heaven," says God, and they enter a room identical to the first: same large, round table, same pot of stew, same long-handled spoons. Yet there was gaiety in the air: everyone appeared well nourished, plump, and exuberant. The rabbi could not understand. "It's simple," explains God, "but it requires a certain skill. You see, the people in this room have learned to feed each other!"

This simple story demonstrates the tragic cost born of our world's scarcity mindset. Through our relentless competition against one another, we deprive ourselves of our greatest collective possibilities. Only by investing ourselves in one another and acknowledging that our fates are irrevocably tied to each other can we free society from the burdens of winning and losing to create a world of collaboration... a world where students, companies, and nations work alongside one another to achieve solutions that would otherwise elude us... a world where children enjoy sports for the love of the game... a world where no one need go hungry... a world in which the escalating climate crisis can be reversed... a world where individuals and families alike can experience the abundance of unconditional love... a world where moments of tenderness between rivals on the tennis court is the norm, rather than the exception.

Then, perhaps we can all reach that heavenly place the rabbis describe, here on earth, where we recognize that there is enough room at the top for everyone...when we all decide to throw in together.

* Alter Druyanov, *The Book of Jokes and Riddles* (Lithuania, 1935).