

Be a Geek
Erev RH 2014
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I remember as a child watching the TV show Happy Days. The sit com was set in the 1950's where the boys wore letter jackets and the girls dressed in billowing skirts. The family was the Cunninghams with Howard, Marion, and their son Richie who was sweet but definitely not cool. The characters all had to deal with issues with parents, friends, and school. However, everything always stopped, when a man with a black leather jacket, slicked back hair, entered the room, and said "Ehhhhh" and "Whoa!" as a flock of pretty girls surrounded him.

He was Arthur Fonzarelli, known as the "Fonz" and he was cool. He would say as a comeback, "Sit on it". The Fonz was so cool that just by pounding his hand on the jukebox, vending machine, or car, they would light up at his touch just as the girls would run to his side with a snap of his fingers.¹ As a girl, I thought he was amazing and I had a big crush on the Fonz.

What does it mean to be cool? For the Fonz, it started with good looks and the ability to command people and things around him. But maybe his coolness also came from being comfortable with who he was and where he was at in his life. He didn't seem to care that he dropped out of school or that he was living above a garage. Fonz was who he was and wasn't afraid to be himself.

For me as I look back over the years, my sense of coolness has definitely shifted. How about you? If I were to ask you, what does it mean to be cool today? How would you answer? Is that even the right word anymore? Should I be asking what does it mean to be hip, bad, rad, awesome, or chill? Does being physically attractive make someone cool? Is it what he/she can do? How about how much a person knows? Does humor have anything to do with it? I imagine that our answers may be different depending on our age. As a child, coolness is inextricably linked to popularity. Are you voted to be class president? Do other kids yearn to be your friend? Are you the star of the football team or prom queen?

I remember not being cool in the fifth grade. The other kids would make fun of my clothes. One of them said, "Your dad is lawyer. Why do you dress like that?" As I surveyed my tough skin pants my mother purchased sensibly at Sears, I felt like such a loser. I remember the pain of other kids snickering and pointing fingers at me laughing. It got so bad in 6th grade, I would come home from school with tears. As a preteen, I wanted to be thinner, prettier, and more popular. I didn't want to be labeled as a geek, that's for sure. Whether we are children, teenagers, and even adults, we all want to fit in.

We talk often of teenagers falling prey to peer pressure but adults are susceptible as well. We feel pressure to imitate those around us regardless of whether it is good for us or not. As adults, we can feel self-conscious about our appearance, homes, jobs, interests, hobbies, and choices. Sometimes our fear of what others will think can paralyze us into keeping the status quo when we really need to take a leap into new arenas. We worry about being outcasts, unpopular, weird, or geeky and we lose sight of who we are. But maybe we have it wrong. Maybe we need to rethink what it means to be cool.

In the Bible, I was thinking of two people who are in my mind pretty hip. Let's take Joseph for example. Joseph was the 11th son born to Jacob and the Torah tells us that he was '*yefe toar, yefe marbe*'² nicely built and very handsome. Having attractive features never hurts someone but there's more to Joseph than a pretty face. After he is sold as a slave to Potiphar, he is promoted to be in charge of his entire household. Unfortunately for Joseph though, Potiphar's wife takes too much of an interest in him and unfairly Joseph is sent to prison.

One would think that this would be the end of Joseph but even in jail, Joseph makes friends with the other prisoners and the guards. Years later, he stands before Pharaoh and demonstrates his ability to plan for the future and his life enters a completely new phase. Joseph rises up to become Pharaoh's number one man over Egypt and successfully plans for the years of famine. When his brothers arrive wanting provisions, Joseph reconciles with his brothers and moves his entire family to Egypt. What makes Joseph cool? People like him but he is also bright, makes the most of every situation he is in, plans for the future, and is willing to forgive. The way Joseph overcomes adversity, I have to say, demonstrates that Joseph is the coolest dude in the Bible.

Radness isn't limited to men though. Queen Esther, the heroine of the Purim story, is quite awesome. Esther had a secret. She was born and raised with the Hebrew name, Hadassah. However, in order to marry King Ashasuerus and to become Queen over Persia, she kept her identity hidden. No one knew Esther was a Jew except for her cousin Mordecai. It must have been stressful not to mention elements of her childhood to her servants or even to her husband. But she kept her secret 'in the vault' so to speak. But the stakes became high when Haman's plan to kill all the Jews was coming to fruition.

Esther had a choice. She could continue living as the gentile Persian Queen and look the other way or she could act. It was terrifying. She hadn't seen her husband in some time and knew that she couldn't just visit him uninvited. The penalty of interrupting the king was death. After all these years, now with her people's lives at stake, Esther risked it all to visit her husband and requested those fateful banquets. It was there at the last dinner party with the king, herself, and the evil advisor, that she finally reveals herself. Esther says, "If ..it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my

people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as slaves, I would have kept silent.”⁴ The king is outraged and demands to know who has dared to do this. Esther responds, “The adversary and enemy is this evil Haman!” Esther, also known as Hadassah, the Jewish queen of Persia saved the Jews by being herself. Queen Esther was rocking!

In Joseph and Esther, I am seeing certain qualities. They both made the best of things, reached out to others, were caring, hard working, willing to act and they were themselves. They were far more than a pretty face.

Esther and Joseph came to be comfortable with themselves and they did good by their families and people. How can we be more true to ourselves? What would it be like if we devoted the determination of Joseph and employed the courage of Esther? What if we worried less of what others would think, forsook popularity, and embraced the inner geek within us all?

Geekiness for me is not just a boy with taped up glasses and a calculator in his pocket. I see geekiness as representing a part of ourselves that is different or unique. It is being authentic and real. For example, my cousin Howie, as a child, was fascinated with the weather. He had weather equipment in his bedroom and followed hurricane patterns obsessively as they blustered their way up the coast. I remember seeing his excitement as I watched the weather channel with him. Even as an adult, his excitement for rain and storms has been unabated. He is a geek and I admire him for his passion and knowledge.

Maybe I should point my geek-dar a little closer because I have to confess that I love Star Trek. I mean I really love Star Trek. My favorite series is “Next Generation” where Jean Luke Picard leads the Starship Enterprise through moral dilemmas and battles. I love to ask people, “If you could be any character from Star Trek, who would you be?” I fantasize about going to a Star Trek convention some day. I am a geek too.

In what ways are you a geek? What are the things that make you smile, excited, or happy? All too often, we don’t make time for the little things we enjoy.

Sometimes we are embarrassed by what we like and worried about what others will think. Just imagining the social disapproval of our family or friends can be enough to stifle our excitement. We censor ourselves into not wearing an outfit that we like, exploring a hobby that excites us, or revealing a critical aspect of ourselves because we are worried about being embarrassed. Maybe this is when we have to let go of a narrow conception ‘coolness’ and fitting in and just be ourselves. Every single one of us has interests that get us jazzed about life. Is it just picking up a book and reading for hours? Is it bird watching? Attending a conference on gardening? Dressing up at comic con? Playing dress up? Experimenting with color and clothes? Collecting stamps, buttons, or antiques? Sampling wines? What is your happy place? What do you do to get there?

Even if we aren't concerned about others, left on our own, we can be too critical of ourselves. Our inner judge can be so disparaging that we feel that we can't or shouldn't or don't deserve something. We feel the crushing need to be responsible, responsive, and 100% productive. There is no time for childish fantasies, hobbies, or interests. There are bills to be paid, events to be planned, and people counting on us. We feel that we have to be the person that others need. In times like this, I think we can lose perspective. Going through each day as a shell of person takes its toll over the days, weeks, and years. In such as state, we can't be at our best because the spark of our life is extinguished. I think it is a false choice between being responsible and being irresponsible. Life is lived in the gray and there are always ways to be real and true to ourselves as we still contribute to our families and society.

The bigger question underlying coolness and happiness is: Who are you? Are you living in a way that is true to yourself? Maybe it is time to let go of our fears and live authentically and fully. When we live in a way that honest inside and out, a weight gets taken off our shoulders. We no longer have to pretend to be something we are not.

Ecclesiastes says Hebrew כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחֲךָ עֲשֵׂה

"Whatever is in your power to do, do with all your might."⁵ Ecclesiastes advises us to live our lives and enjoy the blessings of God. Life is precious and our days come with a limit. Instead of trying too hard to conform we should celebrate our eccentricities, quirks, and geekiness. Once we know who we are and what makes us happy, then we can begin to use our talents and interests for bigger purposes.

This is the beginning of our High Holy Day season, a time when we sanctify life. I can think of nothing better than to look at how we can reinvigorate our lives. It's time to stop the inner critic. It's time to enjoy life and perhaps embrace what is unique within each of us. It's being down with ourselves, living fully, and seeking ways to fulfill our purpose in life as we smile and laugh our way through it.

There is a Hasidic tale where Reb Zusha was laying on his deathbed surrounded by his disciples. He was crying and no one could comfort him. One student asked his Rebbe, "Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham." Reb Zusha answered, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won't ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham,' rather, they will ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you Zusha?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential, why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine."⁶

God doesn't expect us to be like Moses. God doesn't expect us to be like our older brother or sister. We aren't expected to be younger versions of our parents. Zusha will be judged if he lived up to being Zusha. We are measured against ourselves. How do we live true to ourselves?

How do we live up to our God given potential? How do we savor and enjoy the gift of life that we have.

We don't need to slick back our hair and wear a black leather jacket in order to be cool. We can instead wear whatever is comfortable or desirable. It doesn't matter what kind of car we drive as long as we do things that are fulfilling on our life journey. We can be cool in our geekiness knowing we are being true to ourselves, living fully and contributing to the world around us. We can just be ourselves.

Notes:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Days
2. Gen. 39:6
3. Esther 7:2
4. Esther 7:3-4
5. Eccl 9:10
6. <http://rabbishimon.com/tzadikim/showz.php?p=zusha.htm>