

Parshat Ki Tisa
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These are indeed incredible times, emotional times for us as Americans and as Jews. This whole Trump thing...there are Americans who love him and Americans who hate him but very few who are *parve*, who are indifferent to him.

We Jews have of late, seen a rise in anti-Semitism that has us concerned – to put it mildly. The bomb threats to Day Schools and JCC's, the overturning of headstones at Jewish cemeteries, UN Resolutions declaring Israel an Apartheid State, the hatred of Jews that constantly erupts in Europe – we thought these things were part of our distant past, not a challenge to our present and future.

But if I were to pick one issue as the single most important piece of Jewish news in this emotional and passionate period – it would be....

The Israel Baseball Team!

Forget Trump, forget anti-Semitism – can you believe how well Israel did in the World Baseball Classic? Now for the few of you here who might not be as socially aware as the rest of us – allow me to bring you up to speed.

The World Baseball Classic is the premier international baseball series. Even though we call our championship series in the fall, "The World Series," the truth is the teams all come from the United States and Canada. Not so this tournament. This tournament features the best players in the world, playing for their home countries. Soon there will be only four teams left and the semi-final round will be held in Los Angeles beginning on Monday.

Sadly, Israel was eliminated this past week – but of the many things our beloved Israel is known for: high tech, ancient history, medical discoveries and so forth – baseball is not one of them. It reminds me of that old joke – as they were unveiling the statue to the Unknown soldier in Jerusalem. The Prime Minister pulled the string, the draping fell away revealing a statue of a man and the inscription read: Hyman Schwartz – the Unknown Soldier. The Prime Minister was astounded and immediately asked – how can you have a statue to the Unknown Soldier with a name on it? Well, said the sculptor – Hyman Schwartz was known as a wonderful tailor, he was known as a loving father and a dedicated husband --- but as a soldier...he wasn't known!

So it is with Israel – as a haven for baseball – it isn't known! It has no baseball league of its own – it tried a few years back but there was not enough interest. In fact, there is so little interest that Israel could not even field a whole team of native Israeli's. But that is ok – most other countries don't do that either. For example, Carlos Beltran plays for team Puerto Rica, Jose Reyes is playing for the Dominican Republic team. In fact, a player does not even have to live in the country that he represents, nor does he have to have a passport from that country -- the rules state that if he is *eligible* for citizenship under a countries current laws, he can play for that countries team.

Well, as you may know, Israel has as part of its founding principles, The Law of Return. The Law of Return states that to be eligible for citizenship in the State of Israel, you must have one grandparent who is Jewish, or married to someone who is Jewish. (Founded so soon

after the Shoah, Israel reasoned that if this definition was good enough for Hitler *yimach shmoy* – to use to send Jews to the Gas Chambers – it was good enough for Israel to use to accept them into its doors!)

So according to this Ryan Braun the phenomenal left fielder for Milwaukee whose father is Jewish and whose mother is Catholic – is eligible, even though his mother insists he is *not* Jewish. Unfortunately, Braun declined to play for team Israel, as did Kevin Pillar (mother is Jewish- father Christian although unlike Ryan Braun, Pillar did have a Bar Mitzvah); Joc Pederson and Ian Kinsler also were eligible but declined the offer. However, Israel did field a team that included the likes of Ike Davis the former Met, starting pitcher Jason Marquis who grew up in a Conservative home and Sam Fuld (father Jewish, mother Catholic).

So, in the end Israel filled its roster with former major leaguers and current minor leaguers and prepared to face teams with much more talent. Team Israel was ranked 41st in the world, and bookmakers put their odds of winning at 200 to 1. That itself sounds like a pretty typical Jewish story – we Jews have always been a long-shot.

Well, they had a pretty good run before they were eliminated this week in the quarter-final round getting much farther than most people thought they would or could. As one player said – *Dayenu* – we did pretty good.

Any of you who followed their progress remember such stirring moments as Hatikvah being played before each of their games – (although I am still not sure why they felt the need to don kipot as they took off their baseball caps – there is no *minhag or halacha* that I am aware of that requires a kippah for the Israeli National Anthem – but it was a nice touch). And then there was *Megillah* reading by several of the team staff's observant players, read in the dugout when the team played on Purim; And who couldn't fall in love with their team mascot – "*Mentsch* on the Bench!" – our Jewish version of Elf on a Shelf. It was a lot of fun – and I could spend hours more talking about it – (as I imagine I might at some future point) – since it raises fascinating questions regarding who is a Jew and when is a Jew – but we will leave that for another time.

The reason I chose to highlight this as my favorite Jewish moment in a period that does not lack from critical and emotional Jewish moments – is that there are moments that remind us that things are more than they seem – in this case that baseball is more than baseball – that there are moments when we are reminded of the human dimension to life – and these moments are becoming more and more critical in a world that is becoming increasingly dehumanized.

How many of you saw the YouTube that went viral of Professor Robert E. Kelly, an expert in Political Science, who was being interviewed by the BBC on Skype from his home office in South Korea when his 4-year-old daughter walked into the room, doing things a 4-year-old does, followed a few seconds later by her 8-month-old brother rolling in and then the frantic attempt of his wife – crawling on the floor trying to get the children out of the room unobtrusively in a hilarious comedy of errors that was captured on the video. What the good professor thought was an unmitigated disaster became his claim to fame as the video went viral seen by more than 85 million people around the world. If you haven't seen it – check it out after Shabbat – it is hilarious.

But why did it become so popular? Because like the Israel Baseball team it was a moment we could all relate too. That moment when home life comes crashing through your

professional veneer. It reminds us that all these talking heads on TV are really people like you and me – real people who have messy lives where children interrupt and diapers need changing.

It is why story of one young girl, Ann Frank, could communicate more about the truth of the Holocaust than a library full of books and statistics. It was why that one single image of a drowned Syrian boy, only 3-years-old, whose body washed up on the Turkish coast, did more to dramatize the plight of immigrants than a million newspaper articles.

What they all have in common is they remind us of our common humanity. We are all people, doing the best we can. Living normal, sometimes messy, sometimes wonderful lives. We are despite our different skin colors, languages and values, people – created in the image of God. And I humbly believe that now more than ever we are desperately in need of a reminder of this simple fact: we are all people, created in the image of God. And as the midrash insists, no one person's blood is any redder than anyone else's.

Have you ever been to a daily minyan?

If so, you may have seen something take place that seems very strange. If we want to count to see if we have enough for a minyan, we don't count, one, two, three . . . Instead, we count: not one, not two, not three . . . Or we take a verse from the Bible that has ten words in it and we count, *hoshia et amecha uvareyach at nachalotecha uriem vinaseym ad olam*.

Why do we count in such a strange way? It is a custom that has its roots in the opening lines of today's Torah portion. The *sedra* begins with the commandment to take a census of the Israelites. And Moses is told that you do it, not by counting heads, not by counting people, one, two three, but by having each person donate a half shekel and then, counting the half shekels. That is, if you think about it, a rather circuitous way of doing a census!

It is also strange that the amount chosen is a half shekel and not a whole shekel. If our financial officers heard about this I have no doubt that they would have said to count whole shekels! Count whole shekels and you would could double the amount raised, double the take without any extra effort! (more about that later)

We Jews do not count people. Not in minyan, not when we do a census. We don't count people because we don't treat people like numbers, we don't reduce them to statistics. When you count people by numbers and you reduce them to statistics, you lose sight of their unique and God given humanity. You overlook the fact that each and every one of us is unique, each and every one of us has talents and gifts that we and we alone have.

When the Torah demanded we count half-shekels and not people it wanted to make sure that we would not lose sight of that which makes each of us precious, the simple fact that each and every one of us is like no one else on this earth.

So, when you enter a minyan and see us counting in a strange way, and when you learn the odd way our census was conducted by collecting coins, I hope you will now appreciate that these strange behaviors are extremely relevant to the world in which we find ourselves.

We live in a world that debates health care as if it is only about budgets and bottom lines. We need to be reminded it is about people and their welfare. It is about life and death. We

speak of immigration as if all immigrants are criminals and bad dudes, refusing to remember that we are the country that opened its doors to the tired and the poor to the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Immigrants are not them – they are us.

The reason so many of us were excited about the Israel baseball team; the reason so many people forwarded that viral video of the BBC father is exactly what this week's Torah portion is trying to teach us: The more the world becomes disconnected from humanity the more we must find ways to connect each of us together. In a world of High-Tech, the Torah comes to remind us of the importance of High-Touch. The more we use computers and other such sophisticated equipment, the more we hunger, not for virtual reality but for real reality, not for talking to a recording when we make a phone call, but for the opportunity to talk to someone PERSON TO PERSON; not for being treated like a number and by the number by everyone with whom we do business -- our doctor, our insurer, our bank, our gas station, our credit card takers, and all the other places that only know us by our number, but for the opportunity to meet and to be met, person to person, face to face, heart to heart.

This point was further brought home to me this past week when a dedicated member of our congregation shared with me a complaint. This member had received a condolence letter from our synagogue on the loss of a loved one and this member's objection to me was that it was clearly a form letter and this member felt it lacked the warmth and personal touch which should be associated with our synagogue. My first response to this member was to be a bit defensive. I believe that we do many things well - we strive to reach out to our members in times of need - we reach out in such times through our clergy and our Chesed Committee in very real ways - from sending food, providing transportation, or just sitting with people at the bedside of a loved one. When death comes - again, I believe we are there in very real and tangible ways to bring comfort and solace - as we there step by step from the moment of death through the shiva - in short I believe we do many things right -but then I realized that this member was not challenging any of the myriad of things that we do right - this member was challenging this one thing that we may be doing wrong. Is a form letter - no matter what else we do - an appropriate form of contact from a synagogue - especially in such a time of loss?

Remember that half-shekel I spoke about at the beginning? Remember the question as to why count *half* shekels? Ok you don't want to count people, you are going to use coins instead, but, why half shekels, why not whole ones?

Maimonides, in the fourth chapter of the Laws of Teshuva, gives what I feel is a remarkable answer. He posits that the reason that a half shekel is given is to emphasize to the person giving it - that your gift is incomplete - it is only part of the picture - that it alone won't finish the job. The half shekel, in and of itself, is a partial unit of currency, but together with others it can make the unit of currency and its giver whole.

When you come to shul for a minyan - we still need nine others. No Jew is an island. The only way to become whole is by associating, cooperating and contributing along with other Jews.

I am going to thank that member for sharing his or her objection to the form letter with me - for reminding me - and now reminding us - what we want to be a part of, what we need to be a part of, when we join a synagogue. We, the Jewish people, are, by tradition, dependent upon each other as Maimonides taught us.

Thank you, Israel Baseball Team! Thank you for reminding us what baseball is really about, and what life is really about.

Thank you, Professor Kelley - for reminding us that political experts and news reporters and even presidents of the United States – are just people like you and me. Some better, some worse, some smarter, some not so smart.

The one thing that all of us have in common is that we need each other. That is the message of the half-shekel, that is the message of today's Torah portion – we need each other, now more than ever.