

Rabbi's Message

Touching Base with Torah

April 1st, to me, is not April Fool's Day. It's the beginning of the baseball season. It is said that Solomon Schechter of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York advised a young Louis Ginzberg, when he joined the faculty: "You can't be a rabbi in America without understanding baseball." In an effort to appeal to what is really on the minds of the American Jewish community, countless sermons, articles and temple bulletin messages have been directed to baseball fans. What is the connection? What attracts Jews to baseball? There is a mysterious connection between Judaism and baseball that goes far beyond Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax, who both refused to play on Yom Kippur. In 1965, Koufax was scheduled to pitch the first game of the World Series, but declined when it fell on Yom Kippur. When Don Drysdale gave up 4 runs in less than three innings and the manager came to take him out, he said to Manager Walt Alston, "Bet you wish I was Jewish!" In 1934, Greenberg actually played on Rosh Hashanah and hit two homeruns, but went to *shul* on Yom Kippur instead. An anonymous poet expressed it this way:

Came Yom Kippur – holy fast day world wide over to the Jew –
And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true
Spent the day among his people and he didn't come to play.
Said Murphy to Mulrooney, "We shall lose the game today!
We shall miss him on the infield and shall miss him at the bat,
But he's true to his religion – and I honor him for that!"

But Jewish learning itself has a connection to baseball. The symmetry of the diamond's four bases can be compared to the basis of Jewish learning. Each base corresponds with a way to learn in the Jewish acronym of PARDES – four Hebrew letters indicating the depth of understanding. P (peh), R (reish), D (dalet) and S (samach).

P stands for *P'shat*, which is the literal meaning of any text. We understand simplicity in Torah when we clearly explain what is happening. Moses speaks with Pharaoh, Abraham listens to G-d's command to leave his father's house, Jacob sleeps with a stone for a pillow, etc. The *P'shat* is like first base – you can't get anywhere without getting to first base, and you can't learn much from Torah until you understand the most basic meaning.

R stands for *Remez*, which literally means "hint." The *Remez* includes allegories, metaphors and ways to understand the Torah's meaning on a different level. Exploring the hidden hints within the text give us a deeper perspective. For instance, G-d tells Abraham that "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; if a man will be able to count all the grains of dust in the world, then your offspring will also be countable." (Genesis 13:17) Some commentators look at that as an indication that Abraham is "down to earth." I think of *Remez* as like getting to second base, where you can see much of the field and you're well on your way to scoring. From second, you can see the where the pitch is going and try to judge to what part of the field the ball might be hit. In fact, runners often score from second on a base hit. But everyone knows that, no matter how well a ball is hit, you can't score from second base without TOUCHING THIRD BASE!

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This is the D for *Drash*. This one is my favorite, of course. *Drash* (or *Midrash*) involves the stories that embellish the text. Popular stories like the one about Abraham smashing his father's idols help answer many questions. The rabbis created *Midrash* to explain those things that were unclear in the Torah. Why did G-d choose Abraham and instruct him to leave his father's house? Perhaps this is explained by the situation with smashing the idols. It might seem very far from the original text, but is connected in a parallel way. Just like third base seems so far from first, but is also on a parallel. The stories – and third base -- are the final levels of learning before the ultimate score.

Which brings us to S for *Sod*. *Sod* means “secret.” This is the hidden Kabbalistic meaning that is not easily recognizable through the simplicity of P'shat, Remez or Drash. We don't always reach the ultimate understanding, but when we do, it's quite a “score!” It's like coming home. And reaching home plate in baseball is returning to where you began. But things have changed. You've now got more points than you had before. And when Jewish learning leads us “home,” we feel like we've gotten some place.

Even though our Houston Astros aren't giving us much to cheer about, our Jewish tradition gives us much to learn.

Pray ball!

L'shalom,

Dan Gordon