

RABBI'S MESSAGE

The Fall Classic

Ever since I was a child, I've always felt a connection between the High Holy Days and baseball's pennant races. Often, Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur would coincide with a key baseball game – or even the World Series – and we would rush home after services to catch the last few innings. Some thought it sacrilegious, but for many of us, baseball was almost like another religion. My parents thought I would outgrow it. The joke's on them; my passion for both baseball and Judaism has stayed with me. When the Jewish calendar is winding down, we prepare in excited anticipation for the beginning of a New Year. At the same time, the baseball season is reaching its conclusion, and both players and fans are anticipating the excitement of the competitive playoffs and World Series. The confluence of baseball and Judaism made headlines 50 years ago when baseball's best pitcher, a Jewish man named Sandy Koufax, declined the honor of pitching the first game of the World Series because it was the same day as Yom Kippur.

Fifty years ago – 1965 – was also the first year for the Houston Astros, whose only World Series appearance was 10 years ago in 2005. Since then, the Astros have had several very dismal years, and Houston baseball fans, including me, started to lose interest...until this year. The Astros have spent most of the 2015 season in first place. Whether they win a championship or not, there is a renewed excitement for baseball in Houston. In my personal and professional preparation for the High Holidays, I've also managed to watch late-season Astros games and highlights. Believe it or not, significant lessons about modern Jewish life were "driven home."

As the Astros make their push to end the baseball season successfully, several unexpected things have happened. Reserve players saving games with late-inning heroics; a new pitcher who has never pitched a complete game tosses a no-hitter; a 20 year-old youngster becomes one of the most exciting and respected players in his first year; and the team works together to beat some of the toughest opposing pitchers in baseball. Their success is not what caught my attention, though. It's their reaction. These are grown men, trained professionals, whose livelihood depends on their performance. And when there is surprising victory, these men turn into little boys, excitedly jumping up and down on each other, laughing, and enjoying the thrill of teamwork. They revel in each other's successes and console each other in loss. As I watched a player hit a game winning homerun, with the whole team running around celebrating, I thought, "How can this excitement and passion be part of Judaism?"

I've seen it and experienced it. I remember my youth group and summer camp days, jumping up and down singing spirited songs based on liturgy. I've been to Jewish spiritual and educational conventions in which enthusiasm is contagious. I've been to Shabbat dinners and luncheons where people lose themselves in song and prayer. What did these experiences have in common with the Astros baseball team? They all include people sharing their excitement, their love and their passion in such a way that others want to experience it, too. Perhaps that is the importance of a *minyan*, a minimum number of people attending to have a full prayer service. We don't need anyone else with us to pray; but when others are with us, our prayer takes on a different kind of dynamic excitement. We become transformed from individual worshippers with private prayers to a *team* – a community that is there to celebrate together and help each other.

The New Year is a time to start building that excitement. In the coming weeks, the temple will be filled with community members renewing their commitment to religion. A "standing room only" temple reminds me of the most exciting baseball games. The big crowd at the stadium cheers on the team, knowing that this important game will make an impact on the entire season. The fans inspire each other to inspire the players. There is a nervous anticipation about what is going to happen next.

The Jewish High Holidays are not a game. But it is a time for excitement, a time to be inspired and a time to inspire others. A time to put "losing seasons" behind us, and gain the optimism and confidence that comes from being together. We've completed much of our rebuilding. Now it's time to celebrate!

With our shared enthusiasm, I know it's going to be a great year.

Shana Tova,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

To see previous monthly messages from Rabbi Dan Gordon, visit
<http://temple-beth-torah.org/our-rabbi/rabbis-monthly-message-archives/>