

Dvar Torah, Shabbat Naso 5769
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Congregation Beth Evergreen
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“Baseball and Kabbalah: More than Just a Game”

The Beth Evergreen softball season is underway. The Mensch Warmers and the Hebrew Nationals played their first games last night. Coming as it does on the heels of the annual Jewish ritual of Counting the Omer [numbering the 7 weeks between Passover and Shavuot], a tradition with deep mystical associations, I'd like to share some thoughts about the possible connections between baseball and Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah.

But first, let me frame the question slightly differently. In the past two months, CBE has held two baseball-related events. Marshall Fogel, a founding member of this congregation, hosted a fund-raiser in his home where he invited us to view his museum quality collection of baseball artifacts – baseball bats belonging to just about every baseball great that one could name, an authentic Mickey Mantel Jersey, an unbelievable collection of original photographs, many signed, and much more. And in the same month, we managed to round up some 40 members of our congregation to play softball together in the community Rec League. As fun as these two activities may be, let us ask ourselves, what about them is Jewish?

When I interviewed for Rabbinical School, I was asked this very question. What makes something Jewish? If Jews are doing it, does that make it Jewish? I am not sure what I actually said at the interview, but what I imagine myself saying when I recall the exchange is this: “A activity or event is Jewish when Jews do it ... with intentionality, with the *kavanah*, the intention that they are doing it as an expression of their Jewish selves, their Jewish values.”

Can we delve into the history of baseball, collect baseball treasures, join a team, and round the bases... as a Jewish spiritual practice. With the help of kabbalah, I think the answer is yes.

So, a group reflection on the intersections between baseball and Kabbalah – are you game?

First, what are some life lessons we can draw from the great American pastime, baseball: *(Here, congregants raised their hands and shared their insights. Among them, were the following...)*

- 1) It is a team sport. Every player has a critical part to play.
 - 2) Everyone gets several chances at bat, but three strikes and you're out.
 - 3) To get a hit you have to get up to the plate and take a swing.
 - 4) To win it takes talent and skill and teamwork.
- ...Etc.

And 5), as in life, in baseball, you have to make your way around the bases, but ultimately **we are all trying to make it back home.**

Now, we try the same thing with regard to Kabbalah. What do we know about kabbalah and the life lessons it has to share? I see a lot of blank stares. That is OK. With regard to Kabbalah, we are all rookies. Owning my own lack of expertise, let me offer three core principles at the heart of Kabbalah:

First, **every act is impactful.** For the kabbalists, every person and every act has the power to effect change in the universe, in God even. No deed, word, or even thought, is insignificant in the grand scheme. To use a baseball metaphor, we all get a turn at bat, and have the power to make a difference.

Second, the world, God, Torah, the self, **everything is understood as a process of giving and receiving.** Kabbalah literally means receiving or reception. The work of Jewish practice from a kabbalistic perspective is to refine one's ability to give and receive godliness or divine overflow. It's all about balance and a fluid exchange of energies between self and other. This insight highlights one of the aspects of baseball that differentiates it from games like basketball, hockey, soccer, lacrosse, and with the exception of the kickoff, football. Baseball (and Cricket, of course) is one of the only team sports that requires one team to pitch to the other team. Baseball is built around a constant exchange between one team and another, giving and receiving, often adversarial, but always symbiotic.

The third lesson is, of course, the central message of our of faith: **All is One.** In the liturgy we say "God is One." In kabbalah it gets a bit more intricate than that. Many of you may be aware of the kabbalistic map of God (and the universe and us, since it is all One). In trying to better understand the workings of the Divine, our sages envisioned a complex system of ten emanations or spheres (as Aristotle called them). In Hebrew they are called *sephirot*. Each *sephirah* has a name (or sometimes several names) and distinct functions. And yet they have essentially the same DNA, all of the other sephirot are also contained within each individual *sephirah*. Divine energy or overflow (also called Shefa, or perhaps the Ball) moves between them and in the process the infinite/ideal becomes the finite/real, the transcendent takes on form, in short creation occurs.

Now that we know a little bit about Kabbalah, we can explore some points of intersection between Kabbalah and Baseball. I have got 10 of them for you, several of which I am borrowing from stuff on the web, particularly someone named Reuven Goldfarb. I am certainly not the first to draw such parallels. Google baseball and kabbalah and check it out.

But first a riddle: Who was the first baseball player in history? Moses. When he took to swings with his wooden staff at the rock in the desert. And why wasn't he allowed to go home, to enter the Promised Land? He yelled at his teammates, split the ball in two (that's when the water came out), and talked back to the Umpire – a poor choice when the Umpire actually is God.

Now back to our series of ten connections between baseball and kabbalah.

- 1) Ten players on the field (including the batter) and ten *sephirot*, the “players” in the exchange of Divine Energy.
 - a. Map of *Sephirot* aligns with baseball field – three outfielders (*keter*, *chochmah*, *binah*), 2nd baseman, shortstop and pitcher (*hesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet*), first and third basemen (*netzach*, *hod*), batter and catcher (*yesod*, *malchut*) – *The map below has the basic layout with a few changes. Though that design has merits, like Reuven Goldfarb, I prefer to use the batter as the tenth “player” rather than the 1st base umpire, especially.*
 - b. Each player/sephirah has a unique and specific role to play
 - c. I will come back to this in more detail later
- 2) Geometry
 - a. Value of symmetry and order (batting and otherwise)
 - b. diamond shape folded makes two triangles (Jewish star)
- 3) Significance of Symbols and Numbers
 - a. Statistics, mascots, uniforms, emblems, signs and signals, icons
 - b. Gematria, *midot*, *totafot*
- 4) Four Bases parallel four worlds
 - a. 4 Worlds – *Asiyah* (Doing), *Yetzirah* (Desiring), *Beriyah* (Imagining) *Atzilut* (Intuiting)
 - b. Four Levels of Interpreting: PaRDeS – *Peshat* (literal), *Remez* (figurative), *Drash* (Extrapolated) and *Sod* (Hidden)
 - c. Each base represents a different world of plane of existence or interpretation
- 5) Laws and Rules
- 6) Interconnectedness / Teamwork
- 7) Shabbat and the Seventh inning Stretch
- 8) Keeping Score – in Jewish life we call it *Chesbon haNefesh*, taking an account of one’s soul by tracking our behavior, grading our moral performance on a regular bases
- 9) Baseball has a Hall of Fame and Judaism has *Olam Habah* (or *Gan Eden*), a place where the heroes are honored and remembered in perpetuity

..and finally,

- 10) It is all about Coming Home – returning to the place of origin
 - a. *Teshuvah* as Return
 - b. Life as a sacred journey away from and back to Eden / Israel
 - c. Home run as a ball hit our of the park, defying laws of nature, transcendence!

What do think? Some might add more illicit connections like the use sexual allegories in both systems or drug induced aides, but hey, let’s keep it clean folks!

So now back to the question of how to play baseball Jewishly, as an expression of our Jewish selves. Take another look at the map of the sephirothic baseball field. Each position on the field now assumes another layer of meaning. Center field is the crown (*Keter*) of the team. The haftarah reading for this week is the story of the birth of Samson, the mighty warrior with long hair, the crown upon his head. Before Israel had kings, Samson (and his mother's) pledge of allegiance to God, was the source of his strength. When I stand in center field and invoke Samson, as well as the strength and characters of a Willie Mays or a Mickey Mantle, proudly represent my team, I am centerfield-ing Jewishly. When I stand on the pitcher's mound and draw on the power and beauty of *Tiferet*, the balance of compassion and justice, integration of creativity and precision, the heart of Jacob our ancestor, I am pitching with intentionality.

As a second baseman, I can remember that I am a partner with *Gevurah*, my shortstop, giving my all to the team even when my generous contributions may go unnoticed. As First-baseman, I am recast in the image of Moses -- and Lou Gehrig, symbols of moral stature, stamina, endurance and Victory [*Netzach*]. At third-base, I can tap into the *Hod* of Aaron, divine grace, as I work my priestly magic in the "hot spot" of the infield. Behind the plate, I am the Ground of Being [*Malchut*], the receiver of all the divine flow through the system, recycling the energy back through the system to keep the ball in play, and protecting the sacred home. And at the plate, I am Joseph the dreamer, dream interpreter, and the one who, with the proper timing, courage, awareness, and confidence can realize the dream for my self and my team.

Each position on the field has both an attribute towards which we can aspire and an archetype from which we can draw strength. Whether we are on the field of play, the field of our profession, or anywhere in between, when we place ourselves between the heroic archetypes of our shared past and the divine attributes of our shared aspirations, we are growing ourselves as *menschen*, we are playing ball, spiritually speaking. And when we do, playing baseball is very much a Jewish practice. Because, in Baseball and Kabbalah, the life lessons do indeed overlap. Infield or outfield, ball park or sanctuary, it is more than just a game.

Shabbat Shalom.

See image below for kabbalistic baseball map downloaded from the internet.

BASEBALL

Field of Life

