

Collecting Our Errors
Yom Kippur 5784/ September 25, 2023
Family Sermon
Judea Reform Congregation

As most of you know I am a huge proponent of Jewish summer camps. I rarely miss an opportunity to rave about the URJ Reform Movement summer camps— really, if I could find a way to pitch it in a High Holy Day sermon I would. (Oh! Look at that, I just did!)

This past summer Judea Reform had about two dozen youth at our Movement's camps, and I spent two weeks on faculty at URJ Camp Harlam in the Pocono Mountains. I'll be there next summer, too, in case you want to come. (Oops, I did it again!). The only problem with going to camp is coming back, and this year when we came back, we had a big problem. With permission from my son, Caleb, I'd like to tell you what happened; and ultimately why it has to do with Yom Kippur.

Before sharing what happened, here's a bit of context. Caleb and I... we have a bit of sports card obsession. By obsession, I mean... if something ever happened to our collection, it'd be tragic enough to include in a Yom Kippur sermon. Between the two of us, we have tens of thousands of cards. Caleb's cards sit in a little nook in the corner of his room. I picked that spot for him years ago because the shelves are perfectly built for his boxes. While he was away, my job was to guard them and make sure that any monsters in the closet stick to Uno or Checkers.

I can say with full confidence that I kept the monsters away. But I can't say I did my job. When Caleb came home from camp, it was late at night. We were sitting on his bed. He was about to turn off the light, when he looked across the room and noticed his card shelves looked a little odd; a darker shade. He got up and inspected. "Oh, no." I heard him say. "Oh no, oh no, oh no, no, no, no, no, no!"

It turns out, keeping your trading beneath the air conditioner is not the best idea. They were soaked. We took them all out, salvaged what we could. And with what we couldn't...well, those were perfect for sports-card-soup. Actually, more like "cardboard queso." He lost about a third of his collection.

I know you non-collectors might not "get it," but these were valuable cards, not only in price but in personal meaning. I should have known better. I've had leaky air conditioners, and as a collector I know storage really matters. The error was mine.

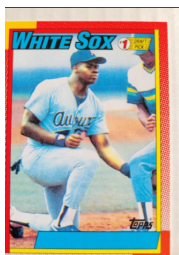
We can learn a lot from our mistakes, and I learned a lot from this one. Yom Kippur is about learning from our errors, our mess-ups. And, believe it or not: everything you need to know about errors, you can learn.... from the trading cards!

Now, bear with me here! I know, some of you couldn't care less about trading cards. That's fine, no one is perfect, but: I promise you there are lessons here for all of us (and if not, have a great nap!) Error cards, believe it or not, are a REALLY big thing. By "error cards" I mean, a trading card that was made with a mistake on it but distributed nonetheless— sometimes it's minor; other times, it's a huge, huge, mess up.

Having committed an error on thousands of my son's cards, I figured, what a great opportunity for me to pull out some of my error cards. And what I found was astonishing. Oh— you want to see some of my error cards? I thought you'd never ask!

Let's start small, with a little harmless mess-up:

Jose Uribe, 1990 Fleer. It says his birthday is 1959, but he was born in 1960. Oops. (Initially sold for thousands)



This one's kinda fun: 1990 Frank Thomas Topps Rookie Card. But you might not know it's Frank Thomas because... they forgot to say it's Frank Thomas. They corrected it later, but for some reason that error card became iconic.

We can call this mistake an “oopsies I goofed” innocent mistake that reflects a lack of attention to detail. Sometimes we mess up by not paying enough attention, especially when it comes to other people.

Error cards can get even stranger, and sometimes they come with cool stories. Take this one, of former big leaguer Rex Hudler. By far, the zaniest one I own. And its absurdity is self-evident. As the story goes, it was 1995, the year of the strike. The only decent picture the photographer could snap was Hudler hugging a pole like a koala bear. When asked about it later, Hudler said, with relief, “thank goodness I didn't cross my eyes.” Clearly it slipped through the quality-control measures of the company, so I categorize this mistake as the, “it seemed right at the time, but looking back oops” mistake.



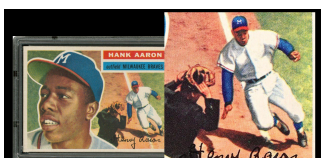
For those basketball fans, I'll throw in this one. Point Guard for the Orlando Magic, Sam Vincent. This error card's cool because there's nothing actually wrong with it— but it's an error card still because if you look closely, you see a decent player named Michael Jordan.

And if you look even more closely you'll see he's wearing the #12 (instead of his iconic #23). The card company took a lot of blame for this, but in reality, he WAS wearing #12. Why? Because before the game someone stole his jersey. They didn't notice when they picked this card to print.

We could call this mistake an “oops but let me explain” error. Those three “mantras of mess-up”— the small “oops I goofed,” or “seemed right at the time,” or “let me explain, it's complicated” — they all fall into the minor category of goofs. Now, let's go bigger— real mess-ups. The kind that aren't so innocent and aren't all that funny.

Take the rookie card of the legendary slugger Barry Bonds. Only one problem with this card. It's not Barry Bonds at all. It's a player named Johnny Ray. It's not even close.

And this is really messed up because on the long, long list of error cards, the most common mistake I've found is getting the player wrong. And the most common players who are swapped are Black men. In an industry that was at the time run by mostly White men, it's hard not to see this as a form of racism, working off the really wrong trope that says "all people of a certain race look alike."



The most famous of these is actually the great Hank Aaron's second year card, Topps 1956. Can you see that picture of him sliding into home? That's an iconic image—of Willie Mays! And it was never corrected.

Within every major industry, we find systemic mistakes— real, hurtful mess-ups. By "systemic" I mean, not just one person's mistake but everyone's, together. There are things that all of us do wrong, and sometimes we're all doing something wrong as a system; and because we're all together we don't catch how very wrong it really is. These are serious mistakes, and the only way to deal with serious mistakes is to deal with them honestly and collectively.

When we look around, we see serious, hurtful mistakes everywhere: Bullying in schools; Polluting the environment; Group hatred-- racism, antisemitism, ageism, gender-bias; Educational Inequality; This list is longer; goes on and on...

But there's one final "biggie" that I'd like to name. And it has to do with ALL these error cards. And that is... the demand. *Collectors love error cards!* We know this because of what people will pay to own them.

That Jose Uribe, mint condition, sold for over \$200.

The Sam Vincent, the *corrected* card's \$0.99. But the Error Card- \$35!

The Barry Bonds: corrected, it's \$100. The Error Card: \$4,000 (40x!)

The Frank Thomas: corrected, it's \$60. The error: for \$9,000. (150x!)

Why are these so expensive? That's an easy question— because people want them. The REAL question is: *why do people want them?!* The answer to this, I believe, has everything to do with Yom Kippur. All these cards have one key thing in common, and it's not just that they are "errors." It is because they are OTHER'S PEOPLE'S ERRORS.

It's so easy to see other people's mistakes. It's so easy to talk about other people's mess-ups, even find amusement in other people's mess-ups. Especially when they're big.

But we know the truth: that “when you point your finger at someone, there are three fingers pointing back at you.”

Making mistakes makes us human. Making things *right* makes us *better* at being human. Today we focus on ourselves. “Teshuva” – we “return” to the best part of ourselves—the part that’s honest and real. We name our mess-ups. We say I’m sorry; or forgive others who say they’re sorry. And we forgive ourselves, too— because each and every one of us deserves that self-compassion.

Caleb, I’m sorry for drenching your cards. I won’t do it again. And not just because they are already ... cardboard queso. But because we have a new year to discover new things.

May this year be for all of us a year of collecting blessings.

May the errors we discover help us learn and grow.

And may the good deeds we do for each help us to realize that we may MAKE errors, but we are each MADE exactly the right way – priceless and perfectly human.

G’mar Chatima Tova – may you have a meaningful Yom Kippur, and a very sweet New Year.

Amen.