

*"What we can learn from the New York Mets about living a fuller Jewish life"*

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There is a widespread legend that has been repeated among generations of students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I along with Rabbi Cahan, Hazzan Ozur Bass, Rabbi Ozur Bass, Rabbi Elson were all ordained. Dr. Solomon Schechter, of Cambridge University in England, had gained international fame after having excavated the Cairo Geniza, a treasure trove of medieval Jewish manuscripts discovered in the attic of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. In 1902, the leadership of the fledgling Jewish Theological Seminary in New York recruited Dr. Schechter to come to America to become the Seminary's president, and add his great prestige to the institution. Now the version of this story that I heard was that near the end of his career, and his life, Schechter met a young Talmud scholar named Louis Finkelstein, who would eventually become a successor to Schechter and the Seminary's third chancellor. Dr. Schechter asked the young Finkelstein, "Tell me, do you know anything about baseball?" "Not really," Finkelstein replied. "Well," Schechter said, "You can't possibly hope to be a rabbi in America without knowing anything about baseball!"

Undoubtedly, what Schechter was trying to say is that well-educated, English speaking rabbis at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in this country had to be more than scholars...they had to be able to communicate Torah in the idiom of the masses. Rabbis had to be able to speak and interact in ways that their predecessors in Eastern Europe never imagined. And what greater idiom was there in the roaring 20's than America's greatest pastime, baseball!

In just a few weeks it will be Solomon Schechter's 100th *yahrzeit*, and in honor of his timeless baseball anecdote, allow me to share some baseball-inspired Torah! Before I say another word though, please understand that in the World Series currently being played between the Kansas City Royals and the New York Mets, I have no stake in the outcome...some of my best friends (and colleagues) are Royals fans and Mets fans. I, myself, am a life-long Cleveland Indians fan, currently in the AL Central, the same division as the Royals; and of course my National League team is the Nats; so really I have no bias here. That being said, I am fascinated by what Rabbi Shmuel Marcus (the inspiration for this *derasha*), a rabbi in Kew Gardens Hills,

Queens—which is of course the home of CitiField and the old Shea Stadium— calls “the New York Mets Syndrome.”

The New York Mets Syndrome is based on the quirky fact that professional, regulation, Major League Baseball stadiums rarely have uniform dimensions. This is totally unlike football, basketball, tennis, hockey...which are played on precisely the same size fields, courts, and ice regardless of location. Since the very beginning of professional baseball, though, the league has accommodated all kinds of variations. In the early days there were no fences at all, and baseball fields look a lot like where your kids play little league today. There were some white chalked lines on the field, and that was about it. Nowadays there are domed stadiums, open air stadiums, stadiums squeezed into dense urban centers, and stadiums that have more room to spread out. Not only that, there is also atmospheric to consider. For example, the thin air of Colorado tends to cause baseballs to be bouncier and travel farther in the air at Coors Field than places that have higher air pressure. The Mets, it seems, were having a different problem. In 2011 the Mets logged 108 homeruns in the regular season. Four years later, in the 2015 regular season, the Mets racked up 177 homeruns...an increase of 65 homeruns! How did they do that? Was it a result of a dramatically improved roster? Better batting coaches? How did the Mets manage such a dramatic improvement?

I'm going to leave you with that cliffhanger for a moment, as I actually do have something to say about the parasha, specifically those final moments in Sodom and Gomorrah, before the *gafrit va'eish*, the sulfurous fire rains down upon those cities and destroys them. That very morning Abraham's nephew Lot, who had been living in S'dom, is told to grab his wife and his two daughters and high tale it out of there before it's too late. The angels tell him to go far away, to flee to the mountains at a safe distance, and not even to look back. Moreover, the mountainous region is where Abraham lives...Go back to your Uncle Abraham, he is told, there you will be safe and cared for. Shockingly Lot says 'I'd rather not!' *Anochi lo uchal lehemaleit ha'hara, pen tidbakani hara'ah va-MA-ti*. I can't go to the mountains, Lot says to the angels, because evil will catch up with me there, and I will die. What a strange statement. What in the world is Lot talking about? Rashi explains it in the following way...You see in S'dom Lot was a tsaddik compared to the other people who lived there. Relative to the population, Lot looked pretty good. Not only that, he was a big macher

there...*manuhu shofeit aleihem*, Rashi says, the people of S'dom appointed Lot to be the judge over them. But if he goes to Abraham's neighborhood, *Ani k'rasha*, I am like a wicked person, Lot says. There's no way I can compare to Abraham's righteousness; Abraham's kindness; Abraham's sense of justice and morality; Abraham's hospitality and care for strangers. In S'dom I was deemed worthy of being saved from destruction! But next to Abraham, I will merit no such mercy. Lot only looks good when compared to lower standards!

Now with all due respect to the New York Mets organization, I did a little research into their dramatic surge in batting averages from 2011-2015. It turns out that the reason those statistics improved so dramatically is because the Mets shortened the distance of the right center field home run fence. After extensive analytics, the team's management decided that moving the fence closer to home plate, albeit within the legal parameters of the league would result in more homeruns. And nothing in baseball sells more than homeruns. Sandy Alderson, the Mets' GM acknowledged that baseball purists might not be happy with this alteration of field dimensions, but not too many are arguing with him now that the Mets are playing in their first world series since 2000.

My friends, it seems to me that Lot's argument is not all that different from the Mets. Lot says if I go and live with Abraham, where the expectations are greater, where the dimensions of the playing field are so much larger, there's no way I can come out looking good. But if I move the fences closer, lower the bar a little bit, change the measurements to work in my favor, then I'll look like a champion.

The S'fat Emet, one of the great Hassidic masters wrote: *Adam nikra mehaleich*, A person is meant to always be on the move...always to grow...always to reach for the next milestone and accomplishment. To stand still, to resist change, to be inert is not the Jewish way. The Sfat Emet said that when God said those famous words: *Lech Lecha* to Abraham; when he told Abraham to set off on a journey of self-discovery, of personal and religious growth that those words were spoken *me'Hakadosh Baruch Hu le'chol ha'anashim tamid*: Those words were meant for all people; spoken to each one of us, for all time. I happen to think that this is one of the challenges of liberal Judaism today. Too many liberal Jews would prefer to move the fences closer in than to stretch for more. We are very good at introducing change, innovation, and liberalization to the tradition...and sometimes that is justified and important. But too rarely

do we actually strive to do more in our service of God and Torah. Too rarely are we on a path to adding another mitzvah to our repertoire, to increasing our learning, to adding to our vocabulary of faith and practice. We can always compare ourselves to those who are less observant, and we come out looking super pious. But chevrei, our relationship with God and Torah cannot be static... it must always be growing. *Tzarich lechadeish bechol eit derachim be'avodat Hashem*, said the S'fat Emet, we must always renew our and reenergize our commitment to God. We should look for the next challenge, the next opportunity to bring more Jewish life, more mitzvot, more Torah, more learning, more prayer, more *chesed* into our lives not the same, and certainly not less.

Many of you heard my tribute to Wilmer Flores on Rosh Hashanah. Notwithstanding that, I think the Mets player I admire most is 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman and team captain David Wright. It's hard not to love this guy, the son of a policeman from Norfolk who just seems like an uber-mensch. He supports the NYPD, the NYFD, he started the David Wright Foundation to help children with emotional and educational support. He's a tsaddik! He graduated high school in 2001, as All State Player of the Year. Mets recruiters drafted him into the minors that year where he honed his skills and earned the Sterling Award for Best Player. In 2004 he became the 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman, and was named Rookie of the Year. The next year in 2005, he led the team in runs and was second in homeruns. Now he's the team captain of the World Series Mets! He famously said: **"I'm always looking to improve. And every year I want to do better than the year before."** What if David Wright's motto became our motto for our Jewish lives? Every year I want to do better than the year before. No major league baseball player wants their stats to be the same from one year to the next; the same number of RBI's, the same number of home runs, the same Earned Run Average...even the best players always want to improve their numbers. Friends, the best Jews want to increase their stats as well. Let's increase our commitments to Shabbat, to Yom Tov, to prayer, to Torah study, to *tallit/tefillin*, to *tzedakah*, to kashrut, to lovingkindness towards others. Let's aspire to championship Jewish living...not by lowering the bar or moving the fences closer, but by striving—like David Wright—to always be better than we were before. And may the best team win this World Series, a subject about which I have absolutely no opinion at all!