

You Can Observe a Lot Just by Watching

Parashat Ha'azinu 5776

Rabbi Michael Safra

Since the Pope is no longer in Washington, I thought I might begin today with a great American thinker who died this week. I'm referring, of course, to Yogi Berra. The longtime New York Yankee boasts the winningest career in the history of American sports, having been to the World Series 14 times in a 17 year period and winning ten times. He won the most valuable player award three times. As an 18 year-old, Berra put his baseball career on hold in order to serve in the Navy during World War II. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. But to many Americans, Yogi Berra is known best for the things he said, in spite of his claim that "I didn't really say everything I said." Things like:

- It ain't over 'til it's over
- Baseball is 90% mental. The other half is physical.
- When you come to a fork in the road, take it.
- Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours
- You can observe a lot just by watching

I want to focus now on that last one: "You can observe a lot just by watching."

Like many of you, I've been working evenings to build my Sukkah, in advance of the Festival of Sukkot, which begins tomorrow night. The Talmud's very first requirement for the *sukkah* is that it cannot be built too tall; a *sukkah* that is higher than 20 cubits is invalid. The Torah explains the purpose of the Sukkah: In order that your generations will know that your ancestors dwelt in booths while they were wandering in the Wilderness. The Talmud explains: Up to 20 cubits, a person notices the branches on the roof; higher than 20 cubits, a person's eyes don't notice the roof, and therefore it has no meaning.

"You can observe a lot just by watching."

Later Rabbis expand on this idea. The 15th century sage, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher asks why – if the purpose of Sukkot is to remember those huts – we celebrate Sukkot in the fall instead of in spring, when we remember the other events of the Exodus. He answers that in spring and summer, lots of people might build huts to protect themselves from the shade. By building the *sukkah* in the fall, exactly at the time when the weather is changing and we would otherwise be going back inside, we become cognizant of the fact that our purpose is not just enjoyment, but also the observance of a commandment.

It is appropriate, when sitting in the sukka, to look up at the sky and reflect on what the hut represents. Sometimes it is more difficult to appreciate the bounty and the relative safety in which we live our lives from inside our homes. When we expose ourselves to the elements of nature, we are more aware of both the fragility of life and God's protection of our people in history and our lives in the here and now. The purpose of the *sukkah* is to generate awareness. After all, "You can observe a lot just by watching."

Today's Torah reading, Ha'azinu, is always read just before Sukkot. Moses offers his final words to the people, knowing that his death is imminent. He tells them to be cognizant of history: "*Zekhor y'mot olam*, Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past." Moses recounts poetically how we were wandering in the wilderness, a stateless people on a mission but unsure how to get there. God watched over us and provided for us when we were desperate. Moses worries that once the people arrive in the land and become successful, they will forget all that history; they might abandon their worship of God and, even more worrisome, they might become heartless. It is precisely when we have made it that we are called upon to remember the indignities and uncertainties and insecurities of the past so that neither we, nor other people who suffer, should be condemned to repeat it.

I hear this warning. I build my *sukkah* and remember God's protection of my ancestors in the wilderness. And I read the news. ... And I sense another Yogi Berra-ism because it feels like "It's déjà vu all over again."

Over the past few months, I have come to learn about the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim ethnic group, the majority of which lives in the Rakhine province in Burma. In the spring, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a report on the early warning signs of genocide in Burma. The Rohingya are excluded from citizenship, and in the words of the report, they "suffer from a combination of state sponsored discrimination and popular hatred, which together create a climate of racism, xenophobia and hate." The outbreak of violence in 2012 left 140,000 Rohingya displaced and forced to live in terrible conditions in relocation camps. In more recent months, thousands of Rohingya have been spotted adrift in the Andaman Sea. They pay exorbitant fees to be smuggled onto tiny fishing boats with the hope of escaping to Malaysia or Indonesia, but they are being turned away. Adrift at sea, they are vulnerable to the elements, attacks by pirates, and others who seek to do them harm.

I am preparing to celebrate Sukkot, dubbed *Z'man Simchateinu*, the Season of Our Joy, and I feel like the joy should come with an asterisk. When we see the *sekhakh* and express gratitude for God's bounty, how can we not but think of today's wanderers who are denied what we consider the most basic of protections?

The 11 million Syrians who have fled their homes because of war are probably more well-known to most of us. Seven million of them are displaced within Syria and over four million are refugees. About 90 % of these refugees are in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which have been good host countries but are simply not able to provide for such an overwhelming number of people. Now, many have fled a second time, risking their lives to try to make it to Europe. Some of these migrants have literally washed up on the shore, only to find the doors of some countries closed. Knowing our history as we do, it bears mention that Germany has committed itself to accepting 800,000 refugees, which on a per capita basis would be the equivalent of the United States accepting 3.2 million. The German government has expressed worry about the enormity of the task, but their efforts are quite remarkable.

Now, I've gotta tell you, I wish I didn't have to be delivering this sermon. Two families are celebrating bat mitzvah today, and these girls deserve all of the accolades and fuss. We have lots of wonderful programs planned for Sukkot, our processions with hundreds of *lulavim* and *etrogim* will be

beautiful and joyous, and these crises are so far away. And yet we are called upon to remember; and in our tradition, memory comes together with the sacred commitment of “Never Again.” As we express gratitude for God’s protection, we have to ask ourselves: Who is responsible to protect the ones who are unprotected?

Among the things we can do, perhaps the most important is to learn more and build awareness, because “you can observe a lot just by watching.” The report on the Rohingya is available on the Holocaust Museum’s website. I don’t have details yet, but we are hoping to announce a vigil at the Burmese embassy on the afternoon of November 8, which is the day of the Burmese election. This crisis offers an interesting opportunity to find common cause with the Muslim community for the sake of justice and humanitarianism.

HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which once worked to help many of our grandparents and great grandparents to settle in this country, has today become a leading voice on behalf of refugees throughout the world; and they have accepted the mantle of leadership on behalf of the Syrian refugees. Just before Yom Kippur, Secretary of State Kerry announced that the United States would increase its quota for refugees from 70,000 to 85,000 next year, and up to 100,000 the year after that. Mark Hetfield, CEO and President of HIAS noted that, while this number represents a nice symbolic gesture, it falls far short of the need. Their website, www.hias.org offers more information about the crisis, volunteer opportunities, and a petition that you can sign to urge our government to resettle more refugees, provide aid for the underfunded humanitarian efforts, and make the resolution of the Syrian crisis a top foreign policy priority. They have called on our government to accept 100,000 Syrian refugees over and above the current refugee ceiling.

I don’t pretend to be an expert on this subject, but I know that as we express joy and gratitude during Sukkot and as we read Moses’s exhortation to remember the days of old, we are called upon to look up and look out, to observe and to learn, to accept responsibility for the stateless wanderers of today. To quote our great teacher Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now, when?