

What They Said – And What They Didn't Say
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November 2, 2013
Temple Aliyah
Needham, MA

Right now, as we are sitting here in shul, thousands of Bostonians are celebrating the victory of the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. As our Torah service began, just as we “pray-ers” began to sing “*Vayehi bin'soa ha-aron*,” the “play-ers” parade began on Boston Common. By now, the players have undoubtedly already entered the Charles River on their duck boats. I can't wait to get the details on the news tonight after Shabbat is over.

That last game, on Wednesday night, was a wonderful capstone to a great series, which itself was a wonderful conclusion to a terrific season. (I wouldn't have minded it if the games had begun an hour earlier each evening, but I'd rather a *late* World Series game in which the Red Sox are playing than an *early* one in which they're not.)

I have a few words to say today about the Red Sox. I think there are some lessons we can learn from them, and take to heart.

Before doing so, let me just pause to reflect on the phenomenon of speaking about a baseball team in shul. I don't do that very often. In fact, I've never done it. Baseball is, of course, a sport, and while we may value sports and admire great athletes, the question can certainly be asked: What's Jewish about it? What's Jewish about athletic competition? What's Jewish about the World Series?

I remember the World Series of 1965, which pitted the Los Angeles Dodgers against the Minnesota Twins. One of the top pitchers in the Dodgers bullpen was the great Sandy Koufax. He was an extraordinary pitcher. He pitched four no-hitters, including, in September of that year, a perfect game.

Sandy Koufax was also a Jew. The key question at the end of the Dodgers' winning season – for Jews, at least – was, “Will Sandy Koufax pitch the first game of the World Series?” After all, that game was

scheduled to take place on October 6th, which was Yom Kippur. Koufax was offered the opportunity to do that, but he declined, and people never forgot that. The Dodgers lost that day. The series continued on until game 7, in which, after only two days of rest, Sandy Koufax pitched. He shut out the Twins, allowing only three hits. (Not surprisingly, he received the MVP award that year.)

That World Series answered the question, “What’s Jewish about the World Series?” one way, namely: They’re not. It’s OK to play in the World Series as long as it isn’t on Yom Kippur. That series stood for the recognition that sometimes there is a conflict between athletics and Judaism, and when there is, Judaism should take precedence. Otherwise, you’re giving up too much of yourself.

(By the way, a few years ago, President Obama honored a group of prominent Jewish Americans. The one who received the greatest applause was, of course, Sandy Koufax. In his remarks, President Obama paid tribute to him – and he didn’t focus on his pitching talent. He said: Sandy Koufax and I have something in common: he couldn’t pitch on Yom Kippur, and I couldn’t pitch on any day of the year.)

Sandy Koufax’s experience suggests that there isn’t necessarily anything particularly Jewish about the World Series.

In fact, the Jewish tradition has been dismissive of sports and athletics for over two thousand years.

As we know, in just about a month we’re going to celebrate Hanukkah. Hanukkah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks and the assimilated Jews who embraced their ways. Among the activities that assimilated Jews engaged in and that the Maccabees recoiled from were athletics. Part of this had to do with traditional notions of modesty: after all, in ancient Greece, athletes competed in the nude. Jewish leaders were hardly comfortable with that. Moreover, Jewish teaching at the time rejected the Greek focus on the body and on its perfection. They saw that as narcissistic – self-centered – and ultimately irreligious.

So it is interesting, isn't it, that only one month before the holiday when we will celebrate the Maccabean victory over the Hellenists, we were cheering on our home team, the Red Sox, in their victory over the St. Louis Cardinals.

How do we reconcile that?

It's really quite simple. We – that is, liberal Jews, Jews to the left of the ultra-Orthodox Jews – have quietly abandoned that particular aspect of Maccabean ideology. We find the care and tending and strengthening of the human body to be a desirable thing. We see athleticism as a good thing, we see team competition as healthy and fun, and we don't consider any of that to be contrary to our religious faith.

Now, of course, we haven't entirely abandoned our distrust. Sometimes team sports become violent; sometimes athletes display unsportsmanlike behavior; sometimes the values they teach are not our values.

But sometimes they are. Times, I would like to suggest, such as the evening of the last game of the World Series.

The game itself was interesting. (Actually, for me it was a nail-biter. I'm sorry: I wasn't convinced that the Red Sox were going to win until the last strike of the last out of the ninth inning.)

But I found what happened *after* the game just as interesting, and maybe even more gratifying. I want to highlight three things I witnessed.

First, when the manager of the Red Sox, John Farrell, was given an award on the field, the first thing he did—the very first thing he did—was to congratulate his opponent, Mike Matheny, the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals.

Now, maybe it's routine to do that. Maybe he was coached ahead of time and told, if and when you get the trophy, be sure to give a shout-out to your opponent.

Maybe, but maybe not. I think we can let his words speak for themselves. They bespeak decency and good sportsmanship. It was a moment when the true virtues of healthy competition came through.

And then, when David Ortiz was (not surprisingly) presented with the Most Valuable Player award, the first thing he said when he held his trophy aloft was, “This is for you, Boston. You’ve been through a lot this year. This is for all of you.”

As some of you know, I was not in Boston when the 2013 Marathon took place. I was in Israel. As upsetting and surreal as it must have been here in Boston to hear the news of the bombings, it was even more so in Israel. I remember getting a cup of coffee and hearing the news on the radio. When the woman behind the counter realized that I was from Boston, she offered her sympathy. In the busses—which broadcast news on the radio every hour—we could hear the drama unfolding. We learned about the bombings and the casualties, and the manhunt and the lockdown and the shootout in “Vater-town” (Watertown). It was all played out right in front of us.

I knew—we all knew—what David Ortiz meant when he said, “You’ve been through a lot this year.” The victims of that terrible violation of our great city—and their families—were never very far from our consciousness this season, especially during the World Series. And they were apparently never far from the consciousness of the players on the Red Sox either. For David Ortiz to articulate that was, to me at least, very moving.

Finally, David Ortiz said one more thing that struck me. He uttered a prayer. He thanked God for “giving [him] the opportunity to stay healthy this year.” I was as struck by what he said as by what he didn’t say. He didn’t thank God for the team’s victory. He thanked God for keeping him healthy, keeping the team together and helping them to enjoy themselves. That’s someone who knows the difference between a true prayer and a vain one.

Now, I don’t know John Farrell and I don’t know David Ortiz. But I know what they said, and I found their words awfully gratifying. Sure, I was glad they won. What Bostonian wouldn’t be? There’s nothing like the

World Series to totally capture our focus and attention. But I really liked what they said after the game.

Their words reminded us of three things. First, ultimately, athletic competition isn't about—or it shouldn't be about—demonizing our opponents. Showing respect for our opponents and even affection for them is not only consistent with good sportsmanship; it also elevates our own achievement.

Second, an athlete isn't just an athlete. An athlete represents others: his or her team, his or her community, his or her nation. There was something very generous and very noble about the team's willingness to share the limelight with the city. Baseball players are sometimes dismissed as over-paid, self-centered prima donnas. We saw a different face this past Wednesday evening.

Third, and finally, as we know, it is not all in our hands. No, God didn't favor one team over the other. That's a tempting yet ultimately unsatisfying illusion. Rather, every moment of life, of health, of well-being, of joy, is a blessing, and deserves appreciation.

And so, despite the reservations that Jews have long had about sports and athletics, despite the fact that the City of Boston chose this hour, on Shabbat no less, to celebrate the Red Sox's victory, I am happy to thank that team of bearded athletes not for their victory – though they deserve congratulations for that – but for their beautiful words. May we take those words to heart. May we be gracious in victory as in defeat; may we remember whom we represent; and may we always know before Whom we stand.

Shabbat shalom!