

Red Sox Nation: We Remember Them

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It was clear that it wasn't meant to be. It just wasn't in the cards that the Boston Red Sox could pull off a miracle a second year in a row.

Last week the Red Sox's chances of repeating their World Series victory of last year were nixed when they were eliminated from the American League playoffs by the Chicago White Sox, another heartbreaker team who has not won a postseason series since 1917. Maybe it will be their turn this time.

I spoke last year at Yizkor services about comedian Billy Crystal, (who incidentally, never responded even though I sent him a copy of the sermon, but that's ok. Its Yom Kippur. I forgive him.) Since I spoke about his book entitled, "I Already Know I Love You", it is only appropriate to follow up this year at Yizkor with a discussion of baseball and the World Series.

Some of you may know the joke about the man who comes to his rabbi and is concerned about what to do since the seventh game of the World Series coincides with Kol Nidre services. The rabbi tells the congregant he need not agonize over the dilemma. He tells him, "Don't worry. That is why God invented vcr's, so you can tape it." The man is so excited and appreciative. He says, "Thank you rabbi. I didn't realize you could tape Kol Nidre!"

The joke is poignant because it reflects and points out the irony of the different values and priorities of the two men.

I speak about baseball and what happened last year at this time because it says so much about the human condition and about the themes of this day.

Red Sox fans, among the most loyal in baseball had patiently waited 86 years for this victory. The last time they won a pennant was in 1918. Along the way, they came close a number of times, only to lose it in the most unimaginable ways. Six times they were a victory away from winning the World Series. One time they were one out away from winning. Yet each time, they managed to find a way to blow it.

It was almost as if they were jinxed, or that there was a curse. The prevailing feeling was that fate could not be defied. Ever since Babe Ruth was traded to the Yankees nothing worked to expunge the team of its predilection towards losing. Not even an exorcist or other soothsayers hired by the team over the years could cure the team and rid them of the curse. It was as if it was some kind of pre-ordained destiny, which could not be broken that they were destined to thrill, come close, only to break the hearts of their loyal and devoted fans in the end.

Until last year. It was as if there was magic in the air. Just as had happened so many times in the past, they were about to be defeated once again by the dreaded New York Yankees. But somehow, a miracle occurred. They pulled off a come from behind victory and went on to win the next eight consecutive games. History was made. The event was so earth shattering, many people felt life would never be the same again.

And so on this day when we think about the meaning of life, we can derive many important lessons about life, especially as it relates to Yizkor from the events of last year's World Series.

For one, the seemingly impossible occurred, reminding us that we are masters of our fate.

Judaism rejects the notion that we are consigned to an outcome or role in life that cannot be changed. One of the whole points of our gathering during this 24 hours of prayer, meditation, and reflection is to encourage us to do teshuvah. Teshuvah entails making a change in our lives to improve how we act and to mend our character. The only way teshuvah makes any sense is if we believe, as we do, that we are in control of our destiny and that we decide the kinds of people we wish to be, the kinds of lives we wish to lead. So the Red Sox victory teaches us that we are not restricted or confined by some kind of predetermined judgment. As our liturgy states, "the gates of prayer and the gates of repentance are always open."

As one individual, a professor at Harvard University was quoted as saying, the victory makes all things seem possible. It offers hope, to people who would otherwise be overcome with despair, who thought things could never change or get better, that perhaps the seemingly impossible can happen and that dreams can come true.

Patience is a virtue. At least one Boston priest eulogized at a funeral, "She was a woman of great faith. She believed she'd see a Red Sox championship in her lifetime."

On the other hand, there were reports of some fans who had spent their whole lives rooting for this to happen, and who now that it happened were reported as feeling a tremendous let-down. Just like the proverbial Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy always pulled the football away from Charlie Brown at the last moment, the Red Sox blowing a lead was inevitable, predictable, and maybe even part of what made them so lovable.

People liked rooting for the underdog. Their identity and persona was caught up in rooting for the underdog. What does it mean for our perception of the universe as we know it now that the eternal underdog is no longer the underdog?

Mike Andrews, who had played second base for the Red Sox in the 1960's said, "I'm having trouble dealing with it. It's something you let become part of your life and it's gone now.."

I am frequently reminded of the old adage that one of life's greatest tragedies is not getting what you hope for. And the other, even greater tragedy, all too often, is getting what you hope for.

Now that they have tasted victory, the question arises of whether it is really all it is cracked up to be. What happens once you attain something you thought you always wanted? One 98 year old fan was quoted as saying, "I lived for this for 86 years. Now that it's over, what are we going to do next?"

As one psychologist put it, some may have seen in the team's constant failure the notion that character is built by how one deals with adversity. What would happen now that they were the champions? Hopefully they would not gloat in their victory.

All of these factors are important and meaningful, and certainly the kind of material that makes a sermon interesting and relevant, taking an event from contemporary life and combing it for meaning. But in addition to the themes explored so far -- fate, seeing the realization of one's dreams, and so on, there is one other aspect which makes it especially applicable to the theme of Yizkor, this afternoon's service.

I read articles in several newspapers and magazines last year about an interesting phenomena that occurred after the Red Sox won the seemingly allusive title. A number of people felt a need to go and visit the graves of loved ones and tell family members who were no longer alive what had happened.

Writing in Newsweek magazine a year ago, Mark Starr wrote, "This morning I got up early and went to the cemetery. I had always joked to my wife that I wanted etched on my tombstone: IF THE RED SOX WIN, WAKE ME UP!"

Starr went to visit his father's grave, because as he explains, "for my generation of fans baseball was all about fathers and sons (and, occasionally, daughters)." He brought with him that day's Boston Globe, with the banner headline, "Finally!" to lay on his father's grave, as proof. As he writes, "... I also brought a red rose for my mom who, naturally, would be happier about me being happy than that our team won."

He was not alone, as countless other people made the pilgrimage to the graves of deceased family members. They were driven by a desire to connect to those no longer here, to somehow let them know what had happened, that a dream they once had in common and often imagined had actually come true.

Reading about this outpouring reminded me of the words we read earlier, and which have now become part of the standard liturgy and lexicon of American Jewish funerals. "When we have joys we yearn to share we remember them."

How true it is that we remember our loved ones especially at times of joy, especially when there is news we want to share with them, and at this time of year. Somehow those moments would be so much more fulfilling and our joy so much greater if loved ones

were here to share them with us. We wish the individuals whose memories we recall today were here to offer us strength, to give us the support and encouragement that once meant so much to us, and so often provided us with the will, the insight, the wisdom, the determination to carry on. If only that unconditional love could once again be felt. If only we could hear their voice one more time. If only we could have one more hug, one more embrace. How good it would feel.

And that, after all is what Yizkor is all about. We come here at this time consecrated to the memory of our loved ones. We think about them at this holiday season, and we think about them at other times throughout the year as well.

We recall experiences shared, times spent together. We long to be able to tell them about our lives, about our children, about the advice they gave us, about the direction things have taken, to seek their counsel and wisdom.

Alice Sebold author of the book, "The Lovely Bones" asks what happens to the dead, where do they go, and what do they do after they leave us. She concludes, as does the Talmud, that none of us knows, and then writes, "But on earth, where we remain, the living become the keepers of their memory. This is an awesome and overwhelming responsibility. And it is simple: we must not forget them."

That is the meaning of Yizkor, remembering and remembrance. We are here today as solitary individuals and as a community. While the longings and memories we each have are unique, others who have experienced loss know the feeling and share our sense of loss and the emptiness felt by the absence of a loved one.

On this Yom Kippur, at this hour consecrated to the memories of loved ones, may we remember not just the times we spent together, may we also recall the dreams we shared as well. May those dreams and those memories live on. May they offer us sustenance and comfort, and may we honor those who have passed by loving those who are here and who are present in our lives that much more.

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