

Seven Things About *Teshuvah* That I Learned from the Game of Baseball

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

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So here we are, gathered on erev Rosh Hashanah, to begin what are called the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the ten days of *teshuvah*, of repentance, of turning and returning. I'd like to suggest to you tonight that it's no coincidence that these awesome days always fall at a key moment in the baseball season—either at the culmination of the pennant race, or during the playoffs. This confluence would suggest that there is a deep, cosmic connection between the game of baseball and the human condition. Now, I know there are those among you who might be skeptical about that claim. But you don't need to be a baseball fan to still be able to ask, "What can the game of baseball teach me about this process of *teshuvah*?" To begin to answer that lofty question, I humbly offer you, here, "7 Things about *Teshuvah* That I Learned from the Game of Baseball."

#1: We begin, of course, at spring training. As the Boston Globe scribe Dan Shaughnessy once wrote, "Spring training means renewal. It is baseball's New Year. Just as Roman Catholics"—(and, I would add, Jews)—"purge sins with confession and contrition, baseball players report to Florida and Arizona with clean slates, full of infinite hope and potential." (*Boston Globe Magazine*, Feb. 2, 2003). "Full of infinite hope and potential"—that is us, on Rosh Hashanah, poised on the brink of a new year. Wherever we have been this past year, whatever challenges and struggles we have faced, the promise of this holiday is a real chance at regeneration and renewal. In spring training, there are no good teams and bad teams, no winners and losers. Everything is waiting to emerge. So this is the first thing we can learn about *teshuvah* from baseball: to take seriously the notion that a fresh start is possible. According to one rabbinic teaching, whoever does true *teshuvah*, the one who makes a real effort to turn her life onto a new path, is like a newborn child. Everything is here before us, and we need only to embrace this moment of potential. The year, of course, like every year, will bring its full complement of joys and sorrows. We won't fulfill every intention we commit to, we won't change, perhaps, as much as we'd like. As another sports writer once remarked, "It's a pity they have to ruin the baseball season by playing it" (Dave Bush, quoted in *ibid.*) But let's savor this sweet moment of possibility nonetheless, and believe in its power to help us move onto a new path.

Lesson #2: Patience, patience, patience. Quoting again from Dan Shaughnessy, "[Baseball] is *supposed* to be slow. That's the point." As far as I know, baseball is the only team sport that is not governed by the clock, that is not portioned out in quarters and halves that last for just this much time. A 9-inning baseball game takes as long as it takes, which often means 3 to 4 hours. But sometimes it takes a bit longer. On May 8, 1984, the Chicago White Sox beat the Milwaukee Brewers after 8 hours, 6 minutes and 25 innings—the longest major league baseball game on record. The longest game in professional baseball history was played in 1981, between our very own Pawtucket Red Sox and the Rochester Red Wings, two minor league teams. The game began on Saturday, April 18, 1981, and continued through the night and into the next morning. According to Wikipedia: "Although most leagues have a curfew rule that would have suspended the game, the rule book that the home plate umpire had that night did not contain one. So the teams continued playing until the president of the league, Harold Cooper, was finally

reached on the phone sometime after 3 a.m. Finally at 4:07 am, at the end of the 32nd inning, the game was stopped. The game resumed on the evening of Tuesday, June 23, the next time the Red Wings were in town.” In the end, the game took 33 innings to complete.

The process of *teshuvah*, like baseball, takes its own time. While it’s certainly possible to experience a transformative moment that alters our life in a flash, real personal change and growth usually moves at a slower pace. Even with great dedication and wonderful intention, I can’t move myself beyond where I actually am. If we’re frustrated easily, if we expect to shed ourselves of old habits and patterns in an instant, we’ll never get where we’re hoping to go. Beware of any self-help book that promises to change your life in ten minutes, or ten days, or even ten weeks. Real *teshuvah* requires patience—patience with ourselves, patience with others.

But just because this process may feel slow, it doesn’t mean nothing is happening. A true baseball aficionado pays attention to the details that keep a game moving along, and so we too need to be attentive to the moments of growth along our path. We need to be sensitive to those times when we really are stuck, when we’re not moving anywhere, but also be aware of the incremental changes that are happening, once we set that intention to change.

#3: In most team sports, winning is based on a fairly linear process— you start in one place, on one side of the field or court, and you try to get to the other side. In baseball, the goal is to get back to the place you started from – home plate. The word *teshuvah*—often translated “repentance”—has the more literal meaning of “return.” It is a most fundamental Jewish teaching that, as human beings, our essence is holy and good. In the language of the Bible, we are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, “in the image of God.” But we don’t always live up to that inheritance. We get off the path, we stray, we get stuck, we fail to live up to what we are capable of. In coming back onto a Godly path, we are both “turning” and “returning.”

We are not here tonight in the hopes of becoming a different self—rather, we are trying to come back home to our true selves. This is a very hopeful perspective. We aren’t being asked to become someone else, to take on something that is beyond our capabilities. We are just being asked to be our true, full selves—to manifest the compassion, the wisdom, the strength, the gifts—that every one of us has, in our own way. And just as in a baseball game, there are many ways to get back home. Using all my own effort, in one prodigious blast, I can hit a home run. More often, I take it one base at a time, step by step, utilizing some combination of my own effort and the help of others.

Lesson #4: Batting .300 is really, really good. One of the most marvelous things about baseball is that, for a batter, getting out 70% of the time is considered excellent. Getting out only 60% of the time—that is, having a batting average of .400—is so difficult as to be nearly impossible. When it comes to *teshuvah*, this is very reassuring! It’s liberating to know that we don’t need to be perfect—that, in fact, it’s futile to try. If we get it right even half of the time, we’re doing really well.

As fallible, mistake-prone human beings, we need to learn to cherish every hit that we do get—every time that we’re on the mark. I find it very easy to beat up on myself when I feel that I’ve failed in some way. My own faults and missteps—when I’m aware of them—are so glaring, and

are so much easier to notice, than those moments when I make the wise choice, say the kind and helpful word, open my heart in generosity. It's so important that we affirm ourselves when we do the right thing. Not in a self-righteous or self-aggrandizing way, but in the way that you would encourage a child when he or she does something wonderful—to notice it and remark on it, in order to foster more such moments in the future.

Yet just because it's impossible to bat 1.000 doesn't mean we should stop trying. Every great batter tries to raise his batting average. We can't use our fallible human nature as an excuse not to try to do better.

Lesson #5: *Teshuvah* is an inherently individual endeavor that takes place in a communal context. Baseball players get into the Hall of Fame based on their individual statistics—for pitchers, games won and innings pitched, earned run average and number of strikeouts; for position players, batting average and number of home runs, runs batted in and defensive performance. So we, too, can only be measured by our own behavior and the evidence of our own lives. But ultimately, baseball is still a team sport, and no great player can achieve that greatness on his own. And similarly, there's a reason that we gather together like this over these *Yamim Noraim*, these awesome days. While sometimes *teshuvah* is lonely work, it's hard to do the work of *teshuvah* alone. Just being here, coming together for these services over the next 10 days, is a way of supporting one another on this path.

There are many ways to make use of our time in shul together, and I really invite you to use these times in ways that will best benefit you. If singing lifts your soul, then please join in when we sing together—sing loud! Clap your hands, stomp your feet, do whatever it is that helps you engage your spirit. If you need some private space for your own thoughts, feel free to pull your tallit over your head and create your own *mishkan*, your own little holy space. I invite you to think of all of this—the *machzor*, the prayerbook in your hands; the other people in the room; those of us leading from the *bimah*, the sounds and the silence—as pieces of a technology that is intended to help you reflect and connect. Sometimes you'll feel agitated – know that change cannot happen without agitation. Sometimes you may feel peaceful – let yourself rest in those moments. And know, too, that you are here for everyone else. The more your attention and your intention is focused—whether in silence, engaging with words somewhere on the page of the *machzor*, singing or meditating—the more that each of us brings of ourselves, our tears and our joy, the greater the experience for all of us.

Lesson #6: Don't waste your breath arguing with the umpire.

Baseball is a highly ritualistic sport—baseball players are notoriously superstitious, wearing the same piece of clothing for weeks when they're on a hitting streak, eating the exact same meal before a game, walking up to the plate with the exact same number of steps. To me, one of the most fascinating rituals is arguing with the umpires. Baseball has allowed very little technology into its refereeing of the game—with a few exceptions, decisions are left to on-the-spot calls by very human umpires who, like everyone, make mistakes. When a manager sees his player called out but thinks he was really safe on base, you'll see him rush out of the dugout to argue with the umpire. Often, this escalates into a lot of dramatic yelling back and forth, with the manager ultimately getting thrown out of the game.

I call this a ritual because it's exceedingly rare that arguing with the umpire actually changes anything. Yet the manager feels compelled to do it anyway—to show his team that he cares, to stand up on principle, I'm not entirely sure why. It's a highly ritualized encounter, with almost everyone knowing exactly how it's going to end. The reality is, it is usually futile to argue with the umpire.

Life, like baseball, is not always fair. Sometimes life just hands us what it hands us, and many times we wish we could hand it right back. Serious illness, the death of a loved one, losing a job, ending an intimate relationship—these aren't things that anyone would wish upon themselves. We can argue with God or with the universe, we can rail at our misfortune—but ultimately, all the arguments in the world won't change the reality of our lives.

As Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches, the word “*teshuvah*” has an additional meaning, along with “turning” and “repentance”—it also means “response.” We are always being asked to respond, in this life, to the good and to the bad. Sometimes we are called to respond in awe or in gratitude. When we see injustice, we are called to respond with courage and wise action; when we see suffering, we are called to respond with compassion, for ourselves and for others.

The challenge here is to learn, in the difficult moments of our lives, not to ask “why is this happening to me?”—a question for which there is no answer—but instead, “how do I respond to what has happened to me?” For that, there are many possible answers. What happens to us is often not in our own hands, but our response to what happens—that is always in our hands. Part of our *teshuvah* work during this season can be fostering those qualities that will help us respond in ways that are most helpful. Fostering our ability to see beyond our fears, fostering the quality of patience and a sense of calm, making space in our lives where we can take the needed time for reflection, all of this can help us as we deal with the challenges we face. Knowing that we can't argue with the umpire doesn't mean that we give up or declare the game a defeat; it just means that we pick ourselves up and get ready for whatever is next.

And finally, #7:

There was a very interesting moment, earlier this season, back on May 13th. David Ortiz, Big Papi, the mighty slugger of the Red Sox in seasons past, had been having a terrible first few months of the season, and that night he was having a particularly bad game. The Red Sox were playing the Anaheim Angels, and the score was tied as the game went into the bottom of the 12th inning. The Red Sox had loaded the bases, and Ortiz was up to bat. He hadn't gotten a hit in any of his previous at-bats, and had already left 9 men on base. As he came up to the plate, there was an incredible sense of anticipation in the crowd—would this be another Big Papi moment, the huge walk-off home run that would win the game? At that moment, the radio announcer, Dave O'Brien, remarked, “Baseball is a game of ultimate redemption.”

So this is lesson #7: Life, like baseball, is a game of ultimate redemption. Anything is possible at any moment. Our past life does not predetermine the rest of our days. Whatever story we've been telling ourselves about ourselves—how we can't do this or that, will never achieve this or that, are this way or that way—we can leave that story behind and move into a new one, if we so

choose. Redemption is always possible, albeit not easy. In that particular at-bat, Big Papi didn't find redemption. The count went to 3 balls and two strikes, and then he hit a weak ground ball and was thrown out at first base. In the months since, he's found his stroke, and is once again hitting the ball out of the park. And yet his season hit another bump when word got out that he tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs. So there's another sort of redemption that David Ortiz is seeking now, to repair the damage done to his reputation, and to prove that it's possible to be a productive player who is also clean.

I'd like to think that there's ultimate redemption for Big Papi, and for all of us, too. If we can own up to past mistakes, we don't need to be owned by them. If we totally screw it up in this moment, we can try something else the next time we have the chance. *Teshuvah* invites us to a certain generosity of spirit, with ourselves and with others. It's not so helpful to paint ourselves as total failures in one regard or another, to become identified with our failings to the extent that we say "I'm this sort of person" or "that sort of person." I find it much more helpful to be as truthful as I can about the mistakes I've made, to focus on the actions where I've done something hurtful or unwise, and from there to resolve to not repeat that error. We all have the capacity to go good and to do evil, and ultimately it's the choices we make that determine who we are. And the wonderful thing about life is that every year, indeed every day, we're given that choice, over and over.

I'd like to take this opportunity to offer my own apology to anyone here whom I've hurt in any way over this past year. If I've done so, please know that it was unintentional, but I want to say I'm sorry nonetheless.

And as much as we should believe in redemption for ourselves, it behooves us to believe in the possibility of redemption for others as well—especially those with whom we have some difficulty. To see others as fallible and struggling with their own weaknesses is quite different than to see them as inherently malicious or fatally flawed. A belief in the possibility of ultimate redemption for everyone around us makes it a bit easier to move forward with a sense of hope and possibility, instead of cynicism and despair. Of course, each of us can only do our own *teshuvah*, and we can't be responsible for anyone else's redemption but our own. But fostering a belief in the human ability to adapt and change and grow is healthy for our souls, and makes real transformation all that more possible.

So, as we enter into the year 5770, as we celebrate the creation of the world and our first steps into a time of possibility, let's play ball! And whether or not the Red Sox win the World Series this year, I hope each one of us will find a little taste of ultimate redemption in our own lives.