

THE FAILURE TO RENEW

Emor 5779

I.

I have never been more excited to speak from the pulpit than today, Rafi's Bar Mitzvah. Because there is only one person in this shul whose first words to me I remember: Rafi. It was my first Shabbat, and, at the *kiddush*, he walks up to me and says three wonderful words: "I like Arsenal."

Now, for those of you who don't know, I am ridiculously passionate about what I call football, you call soccer. And Rafi is a huge fan, too. So much so that today is one of the rare occasions when I have not seen him sporting his signature Arsenal hoody, or some other Arsenal paraphernalia. And, here's the thing. I've always been confused by Rafi's choice of Arsenal as his team because, well, Arsenal aren't very good – they've not been good for a long time. And, Rafi, I know what you're going to respond, that I support Manchester United and they aren't that good either anymore. And that's true. But I never chose them. I was born in Manchester and my grandfather was an avid fan – it was never a choice. But you chose a not so great team.

But what's even more striking is that Arsenal were once very good. Fifteen years ago, this past week, marked the date they went an entire 38-game season undefeated. A near-impossible feat. And exactly 13 years ago yesterday, May 17, 2006, was the last time you could point at Arsenal and say they were excellent – when they faced off against Barcelona in the Champions League Final and lost. And, while I don't really have anything to say about why you chose Arsenal (except offer my pity), I would like to focus today on what went wrong at Arsenal because it's surprisingly instructive and relevant, not just to you, Rafi, but to all of us. Because what went wrong is a cautionary tale that speaks in so many ways to one of the greatest religious challenges you will face – one we all face – and one that I believe is addressed in the *parashah* you read from this morning.

II.

It begins in 1996 when Arsenal controversially appointed the Frenchman Arsène Wenger as manager. As only the second foreign manager in England's Premier League, his arrival was met with suspicion, not helped by the fact that, to quote Michael Cox's *The Mixer*, "he looked more like a teacher than a football manager and that he spoke five languages, had a degree in economics, and had briefly studied medicine." He was very different than the typical coach. And the suspicion around him was amplified when he made what were, at the time, bizarre changes to the nature of

Arsenal. He put an end to the mass consumptions of alcohol drunk by the players. Introduced the team to the concept of physical fitness and diet. And he had the team play in a more continental style: introducing a different style of play facilitated by the large number of European players – especially Frenchmen – he brought in.

These changes meant that, in Wenger's first eight years at the club, Arsenal won the Premier League an impressive three times and, when they didn't, they almost always came second. And their peak culminated with the era of the "Invincibles," which wasn't just a 38-game-season unbeaten run, but actually 49 games over three seasons. (Manchester United ended the run. I still remember it. It was beautiful.) In those days Arsenal had legendary players like Patrick Viera, who, to paraphrase Shakespeare, bestrode the midfield like a colossus; Thierry Henry, who transcended the game itself; and Dennis Bergkamp, who performed magic week in and week out.

But then, things went downhill *really* quickly. And there's a simple reason. Because all the other teams in the league also stopped drinking. All the other teams started paying attention to diet and fitness. Other teams in the league hired European managers to evolve their style, and those that didn't nonetheless learned from their European colleagues. European players – and those from other continents, too – started to come in and transform the entire landscape of the Premier League.

The problem was that Arsenal never changed. Wenger insisted on doing things the way he always did. But fitness methods that were revolutionary in the late 1990s were now leading to more and more injured players. Wenger was still playing the same style of football and seeking the same style of players – that had worked so well in the early-2000s – but now to an ever-increasing number of defeats. It led pundits to declare their confusion over why Wenger wouldn't sign the type of players that were needed for the tactical battles that had evolved. "They can't win the league with these players," decried one pundit, "and I think it's either naivete or arrogance to think that you're not going to adapt or change – because they keep losing this way."

It was only one year ago, May 13, 2018, that Arsène Wenger left Arsenal, after years of protests by the fans. The first thing his replacement, the Spaniard Unai Emery, did, was buy the type of player Arsenal had never previously bought. Arsenal still aren't very good. But for the first time in over a decade there's clear signs of improvement.

III.

Parashat Emor, the Torah reading you read from this morning, isn't the most exciting of *parshiyot*, narrative-wise. But it is one of the most frequently read. Because, beyond the once-a-year reading we give all *parshiyot*, we read parts of *Emor* on the festivals because it contains a description of them all. And this is significant because the cycle of festivals throughout the Jewish year teach us

something crucial. As put so eloquently by the 19th-century German leader of neo-Orthodoxy – a man whose name is, coincidentally, so similar to yours – Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch:

The festival cycle singles out certain times amidst the changing seasons of the year, times marked by Divine revelation. Their message to us is: These were the days on which God was near to you in the past. Each year, when they recur, God awaits you, to renew the union with you.

The key word here is renewal. It's not enough for us to turn up at every Pesach or Yom Kippur feeling the same way and going through the same motions. We have to continually refresh our relationship to the festivals and God, constantly seeking new ways to appreciate our Judaism. Just as the revolutionary football Arsenal played in the 2000s was stale a decade later, we have to be ever on our guard that those things in Judaism that excite us now won't do so a decade later. We must adapt and evolve our relationship with God. This is the message of *Emor* and the challenge to all of us, but especially you, Rafi, having reached your Bar Mitzvah.

IV.

But I am confident that you will be successful having gotten to know you. You think more carefully and thoroughly about the things you do than maybe you'd like to admit – and I am certain that you will bring that thought process to your Jewish life as you think about how to renew it. And, having gotten to know your parents, too, who are not only constantly volunteering for this *shul* in countless ways but are also so enthusiastic to learn Torah and reflect on it critically, you are in an environment that will encourage and aid your spiritual growth.

And so, when you next put on your signature Arsenal hoody and look at the cannon and crest that adorn it, heed its silent message to you as you are Bar Mitzvah, the same message coming forth from your *parashah*, *Emor*: look for ways to strengthen your relationship with God, refresh your Jewish experience, and renew your enthusiasm for a life committed to Judaism.

To you, your parents, Felice and Mark, to Chava and Ari, and to all your family and friends – and on behalf of everyone here – I wish you a *mazal tov*.