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With apologies to Blue Jays fans, I begin with a reference to baseball. A recent column by Washington Post sportswriter Dave Sheinin was entitled: "*In seeking new fans without offending current ones, MLB faces its toughest call.*"<sup>1</sup> He writes:

The inescapable conclusion is that this sport, if not in crisis, is at least at a crossroads in regards to what it wants to be, as both a game played by gifted human beings and as an entertainment product and cultural institution. We have more numbers and information to digest in baseball than ever, from the launch angles and exit velocities that are an intractable part of the broadcasts now, to the advanced analytics that are behind the rise in defensive shifts, to the advanced metrics that help us understand the game better than ever.

Numbers can tell us where the game has a problem: The league-wide batting average (.247) that is the lowest in 46 years. The fact there are more strikeouts than hits for the first time in history. The 5½-percent attendance drop that may or may not be wholly attributable to the April weather. But the most important number for baseball, in the context of the current health of the game and its mission for the future, is 57.

That is the average age of a fan of Major League Baseball, according to data compiled by Sports Business Journal in 2016. And it is going in the wrong direction: In 2006, the average age was 53. For comparison's sake, the average age of an NBA fan, based on the 2016 data, is 42. For the NFL, 50. And for the NHL, 49.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, July 20, 2018

When you visualize baseball's audience growing old and gray – and, well, you know what typically follows that stage in a lifespan – you can begin to appreciate both the magnitude of baseball's challenge and the urgency of the mission. The game doesn't just *want* to connect with younger viewers and ticket-buyers; it absolutely *has* to.

Yes, the game is built on its traditions, and they are essential to its ethos, but to survive as a major sport, baseball needs to be faster-paced, more action-filled and – yes – more accessible and entertaining to younger generations that might have different viewpoints on what is or isn't fun.

[Baseball commissioner Rob] Manfred said. “We never want to alienate that core fanbase we have and have always have had. On the other hand, we want to do everything we can to attract the people who are not part of that fanbase.”

Every sport, and every cultural institution for that matter, has wrestled to some degree with the balance of new versus old, progressives versus traditionalists, modernization versus status quo. And nearly every issue confronting baseball can be viewed in the context of that delineation. But if the sport stays static and stubborn – resisting change just because “that's the way it's always been done” – The fanbase will keep getting older, and eventually die off, and baseball will slowly become irrelevant, then obsolete.

I was fascinated by Sheinin's column, not only because I am a baseball fan. Aging demographics and declining attendance are not the concern of baseball alone. Substitute “baseball” for synagogue” and the article still makes perfect sense. Synagogues are facing the very same challenge. Our numbers are not what they once were, and our average age is on a steady upward climb. Like Manfred and the other

decision makers of Major League Baseball, we too are faced with the challenge of trying to balance holding on to our core traditionalists with seeking appropriate tweaks to entice younger Jewish generations to synagogue affiliation and attendance. My international involvements in the Jewish organizational world these past few years have made it clear to me that what I am describing is not a unique Beth David issue. It is faced by almost every synagogue of every stream from Reform to mainstream Orthodox, even though we in the Conservative Jewish orbit are tagged with the reputation of experiencing the steepest decline. Similar reports of aging congregants and declining attendance emerge from most Christian denominations as well. That others are also struggling, however, is no comfort. But it does help our exploration of solutions in recognizing that we are experiencing an across-the-board challenge of engaging younger people in religious life.

In dealing with this dilemma it's helpful to realize that no quick solution is readily at hand. Baseball can bring the designated hitter to the National League, and shuls can introduce yoga into the silent Amidah, but neither will result in significant attendance boosts, but potentially lead to the disaffection and alienation of purists from both ballfield and sanctuary. So how do we handle the time-bomb of demography and do what we can to insure the long-term viability of our centers of Jewish spiritual life?

The story is told of the elderly woman whose children and grandchildren, for years, had pleaded with her to leave her downtown old-style shul, and to join them in their ultra-modern suburban synagogue. Her family had boasted about the magnificent award-winning architecture of their synagogue, their renowned rabbi, their world-class cantor and splendid choir. Finally, their mother and *bubbie* agreed to the change and joined them for High Holy Day services. After the holidays were over, as the family sat at the table breaking the Yom Kippur fast, they asked her for her reaction to the services in the new environment. "Sure," she said. The services, the

shul, were all beautiful. Everything was nice. But I have one complaint.”

“What didn’t you like?” they asked her. “What was wrong?”

“אלעס איז שײן,” she replied. “Everything was nice. אָבער מען קיין ניסט וויינען דאָרט. But you can’t cry there.”

The great first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook, famously wrote: “הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש – The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be made holy.” Rav Kook, a traditionalist Orthodox rabbi, founder of *Yeshivot*, was not a religious liberal. What he was suggesting was the ever-present need to keep the tradition relevant, while at the same time insuring that novelty or innovation in Jewish practice retain its holiness connection, its attachment to our rich spiritual heritage.

We understand why our aged mother and *bubbie* missed the sentimentality of her old shul – she understandably wanted to be able to cry, to emotionally connect with previous generations, something which she was unable to achieve in ultra-modern surroundings. How to transform today’s structures to better meet tomorrow’s needs, without losing the essence of what we have inherited from previous generations may be the challenge of the hour, but we have been there before.

Our Rosh Hashanah Torah readings highlight the life of Abraham, perhaps the most transformative figure in our long history. When God promises Avram: “וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְךָ לְגוֹי – I will make you into a great nation,” the Midrash<sup>2</sup> understands “make” to mean: “אני בורא בריה חדשה – I am making you into a new creation.” Avram, in becoming Avraham will not only earn a new letter in his name, but more important, will be transformed from just another idolater into one who will recognize that there is a true God who will command our intellect, who will energize our hopes, who will

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<sup>2</sup> Tanhuma *Lekh Lekha* 3

stimulate a tradition that will lead us to a love of learning, and to a commitment לתקן עולם במלכות שדי, to bring our world closer to what God expects of us.

Abraham's transformation began with לך לך, with the command to undertake a journey, without the benefit of G.P.S., with no road map, with no explicit destination – a journey that we, his descendants, have followed as well, to הארץ אשר אראך, to a place to which God would lead him, to a future where no limits would be placed on our ability to achieve, to grow, to learn, to pray, to build, to dream, and, when necessary, to fight to secure our future in an always unpredictable and often inhospitable environment.

Look, it is easy to read surveys of North American Jewry and to despair of our future. It is easy to respond to growing intermarriage rates, to diminishing synagogue affiliation, to aging congregations and to conclude that our best days are behind us. We can read in the Torah of the journeys of Abraham and his successive formative figures of our past, and while revering their legacy, recognize that the thousands of intervening years of Jewish history from then until now have not been a walk in the park, but centuries and centuries of trial, of ordeal, of life-and-death struggle. It is clear that pessimism felt today in many Jewish quarters is not unique to our modern period.

The noted historian Simon Rawidowicz, in a famous essay provocatively entitled: *Israel – the Ever-dying People*,<sup>3</sup> argued that, in his words: “The world makes many images of Israel, but Israel makes only one image of itself – that of being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing.... There was hardly a generation in the diaspora period,” he notes, “which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain.”

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Rawidowicz, *Israel – the Ever-dying People*, Associated University Presses, 1986, pp. 56-60

Some 800 years ago, Maimonides, the giant of philosophy and *halakhah*, after completing his magnum opus *The Guide to the Perplexed*, wrote to the scholars of Lunel in Southern France: “In our difficult time, there are none left in Israel who care for the Torah and Talmud except for you and your neighbors. All other places are either dead or dying. There are three or four decaying centers in Palestine, one in Syria, a few in Babylonia. Be strong and fortify yourselves for the benefit of our people, for the matter depends upon you – that is, the survival of Israel and the Torah depends upon you alone.”

Rawidowicz notes the irony that at the very time that Maimonides was writing these pessimistic words, he, evidently, was unaware that Jewish centers of spiritual learning were beginning to spring up throughout Europe. Thousands of scholars became experts in the texts that Maimonides feared would be lost, and experts in the writings of Maimonides himself.

This fear for the Jewish tomorrow continued into the modern period. The Zionist writer and poet of the late 19th-century, Y. L. Gordon, spoke the same despair when he wrote: “For whom do I labor? Who shall tell me the future, who will tell me that I am not the last poet of Zion, and you my last readers.”

But just as Maimonides didn't realize that his pessimistic letter to French Jewry, speaking of the end of Jewish learning, was accompanied by the greatest boom in new Torah study centers to that moment in history – so too, Y. L. Gordon and his contemporaries. For, as Gordon was mourning the death of Hebrew poetry, a young man was making his way through the Yeshivah of Volozhin, by the name of Hayim Nahman Bialik. And, in Odessa, in a Russian secondary school, a student by the

name of Saul Tchernichovsky, and dozens of other future poetic geniuses after them...

But, Bialik too, the greatest of modern Hebrew poets, and one of the greatest of all times, would refer to himself as אחרון האחרונים, the “last of the last,” the end of the line as far as Hebrew poets were concerned.

It is true, to be sure, that we have undergone some very dark moments in history. No doubt, the fear for future was not without a basis in reality more than once in history. But it is not by chance that we have endured. With our powerful and meaningful traditions and practices and through our own hard-learned resilience, and our dedication to the values of freedom and human dignity, we have made it to this moment, heads held up high.

The story is told of the Italian-born Jewish architect, later to become artist, whose cartoons for many years graced the pages of the New Yorker Magazine; Saul Steinberg. In 1940, Steinberg was awarded the degree of Doctor of Architecture from the University of Milan. The wording of his diploma reflected the political winds of his time: “Awarded in the name of Victor Emanuel III, King of Italy, and thanks to Mussolini’s troops, Emperor of Ethiopia.” The name etched on the diploma: “*Steinberg, Saul; di Razza Ebraica*, of the Jewish people.”

Saul Steinberg would later comment: “The beauty for me now is that this diploma was given by the king, but he is no longer king of Italy. He is no more King of Ethiopia. I am no longer an architect. The only thing that remains valid today is: “*di Razza Ebraica*, of the Jewish people. Only that part of me survives.”

As painful as so many pages of our past and especially our recent past may have been, and as discouraging as statistical analyses of this moment in Jewish time may appear to be, persistence and perseverance have brought us to this holy day, with lots of Jews, old and young, here with us today. True, today's attendance may not reflect our weekly Shabbat crowd, but the desire of all of you to self-identify as Jews, be it day-in-and day out or less frequently, bodes well for the Jewish tomorrow. As good as we are at predicting the end of Jewish life as we know it, we are even better, in our practices, of proving that not to be the case at all.

This year Tel Aviv will celebrate its 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Its founding, in 1909, was preceded seven years earlier by a devastating cholera epidemic in Jaffa. Jaffa's Jewish population in 1902 of some five thousand faced a severe crisis. Many were succumbing to the epidemic, but the Ottoman officials would not allow burials within the city walls because of fear of contagion, and there was no Jewish cemetery outside of the city. The community finally succeeded in negotiating the purchase of land outside the city limits in what was known as the Lands of North Jaffa, for the purpose of burial. Once the cemetery was secured and established, remaining land in the purchase was made available for homes. This territory, north of Jaffa, underwent two name changes. In 1906, it became known as *Ahuzat Bayit*, literally meaning "home acquisition." In 1909, it would receive the name it bears today, Tel Aviv. Historians Zvi Kroll and Zadok Leinman, in their 1939 manuscript entitled *The Book of the Old Cemetery*," would write that "the city followed its graves."<sup>4</sup>

Could the small, struggling, Jewish community of old Jaffa at the turn of the twentieth century, when they were suffering a horrible cholera epidemic and the challenges of an inhospitable environment and less than loving neighbors – could they have ever imagined in those really difficult times – that out of death, from a burial ground, could emerge the first new Jewish city in two thousand years, an

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Mann, *A Place in History*, Stanford 2006, p. 33

economic, technological, industrial powerhouse?

The late prominent rabbi, educator and philosopher, David Hartman, would speak often of his transition, in the early 1970's, from Montreal to Jerusalem. He spoke of the crisis facing his Montreal congregation, in the Hampstead suburb, which was facing the lack of land to expand its cemetery. Upon making *aliyah*, his new Jerusalem community confronted a shortage of space to build new schools. As he would describe it, he went from *meysadike tzoris* to *leybadike tzoris*, from challenges of death to challenges of life.

No doubt, too, today, we as a congregation and as a community, confront *leybadike tzoris*, challenges of life. Our work is cut out for us to insure synagogues and structures that will meet the needs of today's younger generations, and of those not yet born. We know that we are here today largely because those who came before us had similar concerns, and because they built institutions that have brought us to this moment of Jewish history. As we face the challenges of today and lay the foundations for an as-of-yet undefined tomorrow, we need institutions where our young, our singles, our newly married, our families with young children, and our middle-aged and seniors will find inspiration, substantive learning, meaningful companionship, tools to navigate a world transforming at too rapid a pace, and, also a place where מען קיין וויינען, where one can experience the emotional force of connectivity with our ancestral past, while fully engaged in the world around us.