

We've Got Game

Growing up, I, like a lot of young fans and not so young fans, really believed that I could root my team to victory, especially my beloved Cincinnati Reds. I was born in Cincinnati and that's where most of our extended family lived. When I was pretty small we moved to Indianapolis, which at that time had no major league teams in any sport. The trips back to the family homestead in the Queen City were magical---and that was especially true when the visits included a game or two at the old Crosley Field. The roar of the crowd, the brilliant expanse of green, seeing your favorite players, root, root, rooting for the home team. Ah, if they don't win it's a shame, 'cause it's one, two, three strikes you're out . . . and rooting for the Reds in the mid-60s was counting a lot of outs.

Playing sports is the best---there is great value in the experience for dealing with the wins and losses of life, not to mention dealing with the drama and competition from teammates, coaches and opponents. But there also is great value in being an avid sports fan. The truth is, my first interest in serious reading began with the sports pages. Every day, I'd carefully decipher the box scores and the various accounts of the games.

Hey, pouring over box scores is as good a foundation for studying Torah and Talmud commentary as there is.

Newspapers ruled in those days. Sports on television was pretty scarce. In the 60s there were only the three major network stations and a local station whose signal was spotty at best. This was even before PBS. There was one game of the week and it was on NBC on Saturday afternoons. Curt Gowdy was the play-by-play announcer and his color analyst was Tony Kubek and later Joe Garagiola. Yes, that's right, one game of the week. If you loved baseball, and nearly everyone did, you watched it. And if your team was playing, you were not going to miss it no matter what. I refused, absolutely refused, to go on family outings so I could stay at home and watch my team. And when they weren't on television, I'd fiddle with the dial of the radio, trying to tune in to WLW, 700 AM, trying my best to get the Reds broadcasts. First it was Frank McCormick and later Marty Breneman with the Ol' lefthander Joe Nuxhall. I'd listen, though the static frequently overwhelmed the signal. I'd listen, way past my bedtime. I'd listen, because I just knew that MY team needed me and if I turned it off, for sure they'd lose.

Listening on radio, your imagination connected you to the action. As the announcer suddenly intoned, "That's a long, high drive..." it was up to

you to visualize the flight of the ball. And you believed that you could almost will that ball over the fence or into a mitt, whichever was best to help your team. Of course, our power was limited; otherwise the Reds would have gone undefeated every single year. But the feeling of involvement was real. The investment of will and spirit and energy that you generated was real.

I still see it today. Wonderful fans, dressed in their favorite uniforms, waving special good luck towels, primed to root their team to victory --- and that's just when they are watching the game on television. Watching at home is great, but there's nothing like going to the game in person. Bronco fans are particularly fortunate. (I have to make a quick aside to my family and friends who are Steelers fans: Yes, you are extraordinary; yes, you travel with your team more faithfully than any other fans. But, hey, I'm in Denver addressing Bronco fans, so yunz gatta give me a break!)

No matter what they are calling the stadium nowadays, Mile High, Invesco, Sports Authority, Bronco, whatever, when the 77,000 plus fans start chanting, you can feel the energy. It is a nearly solid field of orange. Set off against the sea blue sky, parachute dare-devils swinging dangerously in, jets wailing overhead, a cowgirl racing in on a white stallion --- all this before the game has even started! And at the kickoff, the stadium

literally rocks. And it is as if every fan is cued in, willing an errant throw by the opponents' quarterback so we can all yell together: "In-com-plete!" Cheering and stomping and screaming and shouting until your voices are raw, and it's all worth it, because your energy, your cheering, your voice, counts. The team needs you to win.

Yes, the team is picked up by your energy. It's not a sure thing. Sometimes the home team loses. And we feel let down. Fans talk about the team in the first person. Listen to the talk radio commentary when fans call in. They speak about our team. The rant about what we need to do. The refs, the opponents, the national broadcasters, the league officials are disrespecting US! Meanwhile, we are watching a bunch of highly paid ballplayers who rarely have more than a passing interest in our hometown. We are rooting for professionals who may be on the team for only a season or two and will leave our team in a heartbeat and join the division rivals for a little more money. But it doesn't matter if it's Plummer or Cutler, Tebow or Manning, Siemian or (what's his name), the names and players change because it remains our team.

When we go to a game, it is possible to sit there and daydream. You can spend the entire game on the cell phone, taking selfies, people watching or going back and forth to the snack bar. But the real fans are

engaged. And the players pick up on your enthusiasm. They can sense when the crowd is down or distracted. So they wave at us to raise our voices. The organ plays a stirring beat, we clap, we stomp our feet, we yell with all our strength, straining our voices until we are hoarse because we know that we can will our team to victory.

But the game changed last week. This past Sunday and Monday, the crowds were definitely distracted as many of the players kneeled down during the National Anthem. The harsh reality of our disfunctioning society came in full view. As long as one avoids reading newspapers or following the daily news broadcasts and feeds, a person can blithely pretend that nothing wrong is going on. But once the issues of race and respect, patriotism and partisan politics spill out on to the field, we can no longer turn away and pretend that it is not there.

We don't want politics to infringe on our entertainment because we want a few hours of escape. But there is no escaping right now. For better or worse, many of the players and the President have pushed this issue to the forefront. And like most important issues, the complexities seem overwhelming.

Yes, it is a matter of respect to stand for the National Anthem. Yes, we have the right to non-violent protest. Yes, we need to honor the men

and women who have fought for our freedoms. Yes, we need to honor them and acknowledge that one of the freedoms they fought for and many died for is the freedom of speech.

Yes, there are many unresolved issues of racism and injustice in this country. Yes, the men and women who serve as police officers are underpaid, underappreciated, and are vulnerable on a daily basis as they put their lives on the line to protect us. They deserve our respect. And yes, identity politics and the manipulation of social, ethnic, racial and cultural fears are cards played by both parties and by national and local leaders and commentators --- and this is a national shame and a disgrace.

My friends, this too is an instance when we cannot just sit passively and let the news of troubling events wash over us. It is time to tune in and get involved. Let me be clear. By getting involved I do not mean going to a politician's speech or presentation and trying to drown him or her out with unruly chants and disruptive behavior. How could someone claim that they are a supporter of free speech and then try to deny that right to those with whom they disagree? It is possible to protest and demonstrate in a peaceful, non-violent way. It is possible to communicate with our state and national representatives to express our opinions. I assure you, they listen,

and they keep a tally of the calls and messages we send. And it is possible to organize and become an activist without being disrespectful of others. The truth is, your voice and your spirit are vital. As an audience we know how to raise our voices and project our will, project our energy to lift up the experience. But now we are not the audience. We are the players. This is our community, our country, our world. It is not enough to sit passively and let the events wash over us. It is time to show our spirit. It is time to demonstrate that we will not be manipulated by pundits and politicians. We will not be baited into a war that divides us by color or culture, religion or region, gender or sexual orientation. We are frail, vulnerable human beings, but we are blessed by God with a sacred soul, blessed by God with the ability to love, create, nurture and heal.

As we read this morning:

Atem nitzavim ha-yom, kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheikhem

You stand this day, all of us, before Adonai our God.

L'ovrekha bivrit Adonai Elohekha

To enter into the covenant of Adonai your God.

These words address us both collectively and individually. *Atem nitzavim*, *All of you standing here this day*, “you” written in the plural, refers to our collective responsibility to and for one another. The passage lists the spectrum of society: from the leaders and officials to the least powerful;

from the home born to the stranger; men and women; elders and children. We all are in this together. We need each other. And when we come together, our collective strength and will provide for the common good: supporting the fallen, healing the stricken, protecting the weak and fulfilling our highest aspirations.

But this effort, this movement starts one individual at a time.

L'ovrekha bivrit Adonai Elohekha. So that you (each one of us personally) will enter into the covenant, a sacred relationship with Adonai your God. It is written in the singular in order to assert that each one of us has a personal stake and a sacred role. This covenantal relationship is affirmed and celebrated and strengthened every time we come together for worship. Spirituality is not experienced passively. It doesn't wash over us like a wave. Spirituality does not happen to us. Rather, spirituality is what we can generate when we come to help create an elevated moment.

We are here to combine our voices and make a communal offering, a pledge of spirit which is the most precious gift of all: our sincere offering of hope and thanksgiving, our heartfelt plea of forgiveness and renewal, and our collective pledge to help heal and improve this world.

Each one of us stands here this day carrying years of life experiences. We come here bearing our memories of victories and defeats.

Our emotions, sense of awareness, talents and quirks, tastes and opinions, passions and strengths define us as individuals, but we stand here today not alone. We stand here with family and friends and neighbors. We stand here on the edge of tomorrow filled with both longing and worry. What will the next day bring? That is in great part up to us.

As we come to services throughout the year for Shabbat and Festivals, let us bring our offerings of spirit and voice. The spiritual power of the service is created by each and every one of us. The power of this day, the power of every service to elevate and to transform is in our hearts and hands. Let us lift up our spirits, O Israel, for the world needs you. The world needs all those who are willing and able to be lights to the nations.

Let us stand together to shine the light of respect and compassion. Let us shine the light of hope and justice. Let us shine a light so bright that bigotry, racism, fascism, anti-Semitism and intolerance are so overwhelmed that the haters flee, shrink and disappear. And let us shine a light so compelling that those who have cowered in fear can stand proudly with us and with all good and caring people as partners in God's promise of peace.

Ken yehi ratzon.