

Abbreviations

As I walk through the lobby of the European hotel where I am staying, I pause before the large TV screen to watch the English news. But instead of news, an American baseball game is about to begin. A closer look shows that the two teams are the Atlanta Braves and the Chicago Cubs.

The infections of one's childhood do not entirely disappear from the bloodstream; like measles and the mumps, a tiny residue remains. And so, when home-town baseball is available to a recovering baseball addict in the middle of Italy, who needs news? Yes, a session of the rabbinic conference is about to begin in the hall downstairs, but no harm would be done if I watched for a few moments. Atlanta baseball in Milan; what could be more piquant?

The first Cub batter swings at the very first pitch and grounds out to short. Second batter: three quick strikes and he is gone. Third batter: on the second pitch, a screaming liner off the left field wall. Fourth batter: a sharp grounder, but the Atlanta shortstop makes a great save and from a kneeling position throws him out at first. Inning over. The juices of my youth are flowing freely.

Before Atlanta comes to bat I go to the desk to inquire if the session has begun. It has not; I return to the game. It is already two outs. Two outs? I didn't realize I had been gone that long. The next batter grounds out on the first pitch. Score at the end of the first inning: nothing to nothing.

I glance at my watch. One full inning has consumed a total of five minutes. Something is wrong. Obviously, this is not a live broadcast. Have they speeded up the film?

I play closer attention now, and soon I realize what is happening. They have not speeded up the film; they have speeded up the game. Batters are not really swinging at the first pitch; the producer has simply eliminated what he considers irrelevant. Rarely does one see ball one, ball two, or ball three. These are a waste of time. Only strikes are shown, and precious few of those. Wood striking the ball, runners rounding third and scoring in a cloud of dust - this is what we are shown. Action and excite-

ment: a runner sliding into second on a steal, or being thrown out at home in a collision with the catcher, a home run, a great outfield catch—these are significant. The rest are just frills, distractions from the essence of the game.

The technique is obvious. The third base coach does not rub his chest, stroke his arm, spit in the dust, clap his hands, hitch up his pants, touch the beak of his cap in the frenzied symphony of signals that marks his august office; there are no conferences on the mound between catcher and pitcher, their spikes scratching the ground; no big-bellied manager strolls out to the mound to slap his pitcher in the hind quarters, take the ball from him, and signal to the bullpen for a left-hander; relievers do not toss warm-up pitches: they simply appear on the mound and begin throwing. The titanic struggle between lonely pitcher on the mound and lonely batter in the box—the pitcher rubbing the ball insouciantly, peering in to see the catcher's signals; the batter twitching his bat and rhythmically rocking to and fro as he concentrates on the pitcher's every move; the hush as the ball speeds towards the plate—all this is irrelevant and unsuited to people who are ignorant of the subtle nuances of the game, who demand action, are quickly bored, and who with a flick of the finger can eliminate you from their screen. And so the irrelevancies are pruned and excised in the interests of time and of maintaining audience attention.

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I am probably missing an inspiring *devar Torah*, but I am transfixed by this tasteless, tawdry parody of a classic sport.

But I should not have been surprised. After all, in our souped up generation, a Beethoven symphony can be reduced from forty minutes to ten, a Bach can be trimmed from one hour to twenty minutes, CDs feature the essence of the "Ten World's Greatest Symphonies" in less than ninety minutes, and "War and Peace" can be obtained in a scaled down edition.

Our time has no time. We live in a fast-forward age. We expend millions of man hours to speed up our computers by microseconds so that we can have more leisure time to listen to Diet Beethoven and read Tolstoy Lite.

So if the classics can be refurbished, why not a mere boys'

game that in the ultimate scheme of things has no meaning or purpose?

But what about more serious things? What about Torah and *mitsvot*? Have not these also been subject throughout our history to similar attempts at improvement and transfiguring, and have these not also been the victim of similar parodies?

How many times, then and now, have Jews heard the chiding voices of those who disparaged the need for the myriad details of Jewish life and exhorted us to streamline and modernize lest we drive people away?

Was it not Korah who sought to undermine the authority of Moshe and the significance of *mitsvot*? Humanize the Torah, he cried, give it a kinder, less authoritarian face. The goal is to be holy, so let us remove the impediments to holiness which are the commandments. Abbreviate, democratize, bring the Torah up to date lest the people abandon it.

A thousand years after Korah, Jewish sectarians railed against the Torah's details and rituals—the entire *mitsvah* system of do's and don't's—as irrelevant and unnecessary. The goal was to be spiritual, and the details stood in the way of the higher goal. The Torah was a “law of sin and death,” while the newer teachings contained the “spirit of life.” Modern man requires a higher, more relevant form of religion. To save Judaism we must eliminate the *mitsvot* and delete the frills: what goes into the mouth is not as important as what comes out.

Things have not been very different in our own century. Synagogue *mehitsot* were dropped because they would drive people away; the repetition of the *amida* eliminated because it was a waste of time; *birkat kohanim* deleted because it was an anachronism; *Shabbat* services abbreviated and Hebrew changed to English lest we lose the audience; *mitsvot* made optional because we were all autonomous; references to the sacrificial system excised from the *siddur*; rabbis urged to wear clerical robes instead of wool *taletim* in order to appeal to the youth; *mitsvot* like *sukka* and *lulav* and *etrog* and *tefilin* and *mezuzah* and *tsitsit* and *shatnez* and *mikva* ignored in order to bring Torah up to date; conversion procedures streamlined to make Judaism more accessible; *gittin* discarded because they were outdated; same-sex marriages condoned because the spirit of the times demanded it.

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The producers of CNN Sports have concocted a game that utilizes baseball uniforms and bats and gloves, but anyone who knows the game and its nuances and rhythms will find both risible and appalling these attempts to update it, as will anyone who appreciates Torah and *mitsvot* find appalling the contemporary parodies of Judaism.

Only a game, this baseball, and not to be taken seriously. But what I was seeing here was a metaphor for other, more significant aspects of human life which are in constant risk of being distorted by producers who couple their own hubris with ignorance and insensitivity.

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When I finally walk into the rabbinic session and some of my colleagues ask me why I am so late, I will reply cryptically that I was watching *divrei Torah* on Italian television. They will never believe me.



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