

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### END OF A LEPER'S HOLIDAY: CARL HUBBELL COMES HOME

As summer turned into fall in Eastern Europe, so they say, even the fish in the water trembled at the approach of divine judgment. In America, there was another cause for trembling: for second generation Jews, the fear of God vied with the excitement of consummated pennant races and the culminating World Series. Much bittersweet humor took as its subject the frequent coincidence of *Yamim Noraim* and the all-important games determining the baseball championship—the ensuing collision of religious duty with the civic obligation of the fan, with the latter, more often than not, coming out on top.

For Jews, the thrill was especially intense when both competing teams hailed from New York. For stretches this was a common, almost perennial occurrence. One such period occurred in the late 1930's. Our text for today is the 1937 Fall Classic, when the protagonists were the Yankees and the Giants. The Yankees came close to sweeping the Series. By winning game 4, the Giants deferred their execution to game 5. Game 4 is our subject. This contest is remembered, according to the Baseball Encyclopedia, as the great lefthander Carl Hubbell's last World Series appearance, and for Lou Gehrig's last Series home run. Hubbell was the winning pitcher in the 7-3 triumph, beneficiary of a 6-run second inning.

Each year the World Series captured the attention of Americans throughout the length and breadth of this great land. By 1937 millions of fans were glued to the radio, hanging on every play and every word. Before we turn to the big inning that determined the outcome of game 4, let us not forget the inhabitants of the Carville Louisiana hospital for lepers. Shunned by their neighbors, many had changed their names to protect their stigmatized families. Yet lepers, like other people, listened to their radios and cared passionately about baseball. Perhaps for them, more than for others, the World Series half a continent away was a high spot of the year. For a leper, you see, experienced the Fall Classic not as an afternoon's entertainment or as a ritual of Americanization. If you were a leper the World Series promised a temporary but delicious

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respite from the physical and mental woes of leprosy. For the incarcerated and the outcast, spectator sports are not a negligible escape.

So, it's the second inning, with the Giants' already trailing by one run. The bottom of the order rallies, and, on Dick Bartell's single to center, Hubbell attempts to score from second. The young DiMaggio's throw is unexpectedly wide. Veteran plate umpire Bill Stewart calls Hubbell safe at home, with the Giants' fourth run. Now action comes to a halt as the Yankees insist vociferously that Hubbell had gone out of the basepaths to avoid Bill Dickey blocking the plate.

The genial play-by-play announcer had the agreeable job of bringing this tumultuous scene to verbal life. Describing the umpire's isolation, he heartily intoned: "The umpire is the leper of baseball: everyone despises him; nobody touches him." The jovial note was missed in Carville: radios silently switched off, not to be turned on again. What happened next didn't matter. Vacation from leprosy was over.

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Gratuitous denigration of others is often treated nowadays as a legitimate species of humor. Radio personalities who engage in such behavior are often regarded almost as if they were members of the intellectual and cultural elite. Correspondingly, we have a genre of moral preaching that specializes in ostentatiously condemning such offense. Had the radio announcer indeed spoken recklessly, with the snarling careless cruelty some people find amusing today, we might want him punished. Perhaps sentenced to sensitivity training, whisked off to Carville for ostentatious atonement, posing for photographs with the aggrieved lepers, perchance even hugging them would be a satisfying ritual of atonement. In this version of justice and reconciliation, all are relentlessly re-educated to the facts: that leprosy is not a particularly contagious disease, and that it is not identical with the Biblical condition so identified by the Greek translator of Leviticus. Political correctness would expunge the word leprosy from the dictionary, to be replaced by the neutral term "Hansen's disease." On second thought, the scenario is unlikely: Hansen's victims aren't a big voting bloc, have little disposable money and lack a PR machine. A leper, in this respect, is like an umpire: we all feel for him, but he has few advocates.

Just as well. The urge to punish would be misguided. Sportscasters are not shock jocks. To the contrary, they are, as a group, professionally

highly solicitous of their audience. It is hard to imagine one, handling an august national event, not feeling mortified by the thought that a casual figure of speech could hurt the people he had been paid to entertain.

Seekers after religious knowledge are haunted by the Talmudic exegesis of Job 28:17: “It [Wisdom] cannot be valued in gold and glass”—these are words of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as gold and as easy to shatter as glass (*Hagiga* 15). Our fellow human beings, too, are sometimes as fragile as glass. Sanctimonious verbal vigilantes burnish their reputations as would be arbiters of virtue by pouncing upon and denouncing the possibly hurtful language of those they monitor and admonish. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, showed the misleading effect of using cancer or tuberculosis as metaphors for the human condition. Such metaphoric language is thus, from their perspectives, both vicious and stupid.

Reality is not that simple. Metaphors falsify, but often they illuminate. *Pace* Sontag we cannot, and probably ought not, eradicate all such figurative language from our vocabulary. As for the language police, once you get to know them up close, their tartuffery is often worse than the disease they purport to remedy. The tragedy is that all our good will and all our precautions cannot prevent an occurrence like the one that ruined the 1937 World Series for the lepers of Carville.

Though we can't help these occasions of harm inflicted unintentionally and unawares, we regret them deeply. Despite the passage of decades, the passing of the announcer and the closing of the facility for Hansen's sufferers in Carville, the festive mood turned to pain on that long ago October afternoon can fill us, the faraway spectators, with a powerful sense of chagrin, even shame. Why dwell on bygone events that neither the perpetrators nor we can rectify, and for which nobody bears guilt?

The cynic whose voice we ignore at our peril proposes a self-serving reason: it is simply more convenient for us to feel sorrow for actions for which we are not responsible. We grieve vicariously like spectators in the theater. We weep for Dido, but not for our own sins. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible for contemplation of such events, fictional or real, to help us become better people, if that's what we want.

When we consider actions for which we clearly or obscurely have moral responsibility, our first instinct, in the face of accusation, is to look for justifications, excuses, or extenuating circumstances. The greater the responsibility, whether we have inflicted harm deliberately, in anger, or merely through negligence, the less inclined we are to assess objectively

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the consequences of our actions. Instead, we minimize the pain, or concentrate on why the injured human being deserved or at least invited mistreatment. We dread having to confront those whom we have wronged. We have no idea how to seek their forgiveness sincerely. We defend ourselves, and sometimes, even when we are not directly involved, we defend others because we anticipate being in their position.

When we are not responsible, by contrast, nothing impedes our full consciousness of the humiliation or damage visited upon the victim. It is easier for us to place ourselves in his, or her, place, because we feel no impulse to put ourselves in the place of the offender.

The idea that moral insight is often best learned through “indirect communication” is not a new one. It is one motive for religious people to study literature and history. Kierkegaard, who claimed to have constructed his pseudonymous works on this principle, liked to cite II Samuel 12. There, the prophet Nathan chastises King David, not by accusing him directly of violating Bathsheba and Uriah, but rather by presenting the parable of the rich man who robs his poor neighbor of his only ewe. When David judges him harshly, Nathan holds up the mirror: “You are the man.” And David’s immediate response—“I have sinned”—made him a paradigm of repentance ever after.

The example of Nathan and David contrasts direct accusation with the communication that invites the sinner to judge himself. The parable moves the sinner from the defendant’s dock to the judge’s bench and back again. The story we have been discussing functions differently. It does not call upon us to pronounce a verdict on the radio announcer. Instead it forces us to experience the shock of the victim, the faces turned trustingly towards the baseball broadcast like a plant turning to the sun, and the enjoyment suddenly, rudely extinguished. It is a story that commands us to change the way we feel.

The Gemara tells us that one should ever arouse the good inclination against the evil inclination (*Berakhot* 5a). We live in a society that does not much encourage genuine moral sensitivity. Even the fish in the water no longer tremble with outrage, inured by now to shock. In the perpetual battle between good and evil we are told to be resourceful. Many weapons are at our disposal if we wish to deploy them. The anecdote we have considered, culled from the 70-year-old diary of a nurse, is one such implement.

*Shalom Carmy*