

Of Pennants and Penitents

I could not have foreseen what it would all lead to. It was a friendly call from one of my Atlanta congregants. He had World Series tickets; would I like to go with him to the game? They're great seats, he said. Right behind third base, field level.

I hesitated, because there are many more important things to do with one's time. But the sports juices of my youth began to stir within me, and the rationalizations fell quickly into place: it will be a study of Americana in the raw; it will be a moment of relaxation; you have always liked baseball, its non-violence, its patience, the solitary struggle of lonely pitcher against lonely batter. And consider its religious undertones: the goal is to circle the infield and then come back to the starting point, to return to beginnings. Unlike football or basketball, where the clock ultimately runs out, baseball is timeless: a tie game can theoretically continue unto eternity. Besides, this particular layman is a solid supporter of all the important communal causes, and he would be very pleased if you went. Go. It's not so terrible.

So did the *yetser ha-ra* work its cunning upon my soul. And I, author of a dozen exhortations against yielding to temptation and another dozen urging strength and fortitude in the face of the Clever Enticer, succumbed. Thus innocuously begins this morality tale.

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I hung on every pitch and every Atlanta Brave hit, but a vague sense of discomfort hovered over me: why are you here among these rabid fans, who are doing "tomahawk chops" and Indian chants and who growl "Rrrruff Rrrruff" whenever cleanup man Fred McGriff, dubbed the "crime dog" by the press, comes to bat. You with the black yarmulke on your head and the not-so-black beard on your face, do you really belong here? You, a veteran rabbi, a person who attends *daf yomi* early every morning in Jerusalem and *shiurim* at night, who is from a family of *talmidei bakhamim* and the son of a European Rav who was a respected *baki beShas* and *posek*—do you really belong here among these sixty thousand screaming people who are passionately following the flight of a little round ball? And why are you avidly watching

these nine young men who are multi-millionaires simply because they are able to catch and throw a ball, strike it with a piece of wood, run swiftly, and slide in the dust? Why does it matter to you when your home team scores? (Home team: if they are offered more money tomorrow, they will play for another team, until they sell themselves to still another team.) Why does it please you when one of these boys strikes a ball that sails high over the fence for a home run? In the eternal scheme of things, does it matter? Does it even matter in the non-eternal, temporal scheme of things?

The self-flagellation ebbed and flowed as the game progressed, but I dismissed it. It was the eighth inning, Atlanta had taken the lead, six more outs and we—did I say we?—are winners.

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A high pop fly is veering foul this side of third base. Slowly it heads toward my section of the stands, gracefully it completes its parabolic arc, hangs in the air, and begins its descent. The ball comes closer; it is heading toward me. Suddenly I am eighteen years old again, and instinctively I find myself on my feet. I leap from the ground, reach backward for the ball, and feel the satisfying slap into my outstretched palm. I clutch it and tumble down into the row of seats behind me, where a dozen hands and arms break my fall.

As soon as I sit down, the flagellation intensifies: What have you wrought here? You don't belong here in the first place, and now you've gone and made a fool of yourself in front of thousands of people. This is probably the beginning of a genuine, old-fashioned, major-league, World Series-quality *hillul Hashem*.

The people around me cheer and applaud: "Great, Rabbi . . . Attaboy . . . Sign him up." They ask to see the ball. It is emblazoned with the words, "Official Ball, 1995 World Series." The usher comes over and hands me a certificate which reads: "Contract: Grandstand Outfielder for the Atlanta Braves." I am sitting in my yarmulke and beard and am the hero of the grandstand. As I walk up the aisle to stretch my legs, people raise their fists in triumph, waving to me and shouting, "Way to go . . . Great grab. . . ." Could it be, I ask myself, that this is really a *kiddush Hashem*?

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The next morning at the *minyan*, the *Gabbai* greets me. "Was that you who caught that ball last night at the game? Saw it on TV. Great going, Rabbi!" He is genuinely proud. All week long I am the celebrity of the Shul, the block, the community. Friends who have not spoken to me in years call from around the country. By the end of the week, I manage to convince myself that I have in fact brought glory to the name of the God of Israel.

But how fickle is the roar of the crowd; how swiftly does acclaim become mortification; how rapidly is the elixir of triumph reduced to dregs. Our daughter from Jerusalem called. "Abba," she asked quizzically, "I don't believe this, but people here are saying that you caught a ball at a World Series game. Is that true?"

I was stunned. "They heard about it in Jerusalem? In Mattersdorf, in Har Nof, in Bayit Vegan, they heard about it?" "I think it's funny, Abba. It's hysterical."

Akhen noda ha-davar. In a month, I was to return to Jerusalem. My Jerusalem neighborhood is not America. That which in America brings approval can in my Jerusalem neighborhood bring ignominy. In my neighborhood, entertainment is serious business: it consists primarily of *melava malkas*, *sheva brakhos*, *shalom zakhars*, *brissin*, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and listening to the occasional visiting *maggid*. Ball games are for the vulgar.

How could I face these people in Jerusalem? How would I explain it to them if (when!) they ask? How would I *daven* in the Shul on Shabbat? I sit in the front row next to my late father's seat, and bask there in his reflected glory and that of my brother the Rosh Yeshiva, who sits nearby. What will happen to their good name when the true nature of this American rabbi becomes known?

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On the first Shabbat after my return to Jerusalem, I walk with a certain trepidation into the Shul. I am comforted by one thought: the Shul is comprised of Israeli, Swiss, South African, British, French, Dutch, and some American Jews. They are a fine group of people, very proper, staid and upright. Sports and friv-

olity are not in their lexicon. I am hoping that they have never heard of something called a World Series.

After davening, I greet my friends and walk with them to the door. No one seems to know.

An elderly Swiss gentleman approaches me with a smile. "Nice to have you back among us. By the way, I heard you caught a ball at a baseball game in America."

I started to say that it wasn't just a baseball game, it was a World Series game, but thought better of it. "Oh?" I said nonchalantly, "Where did you hear that?"

"Everybody knows about it. That's quite exceptional, I must say."

"Well, yes, it's true. In a weak moment I went to a game. You know how we Americans are."

"I didn't realize you were such an athlete." There was a twinkle in his eye. Whether it was an amused twinkle I cannot say. In this Shul, athlete is not a term of endearment. In the hierarchy of adjectives, it rests somewhere between barbarian and lout. "Ha, ha," I laugh weakly, "in my youth I used to play a little ball."

"Well, everybody here thinks it was quite a feat."

"Everybody here?" How do these TV-less, baseball-less people know of a World Series game in Atlanta, Ga., seven thousand miles away? Is there nothing secret any more, nothing hidden, nothing just between us? Because the eye of a camera caught me for an instant, am I now condemned to lose my good name and that of my family for eternity? (Thank God my children are all married.)

To be sure, these good people will not talk behind my back, for these are seriously religious Jews. They do not gossip. But who can control one's thoughts? "There goes the son of a *talmid hakham* and the brother of *talmidei hakhamim*. What a pity; he's the one who catches baseballs on television at American baseball games." Will they wonder how it can be that the selfsame person can say the *Shema* with *tallit* over his head, listen attentively to the rav's *divrei Torah*, never talk during davening—and then go to the USA and attend sporting events and catch baseballs on television? Well may they wonder.

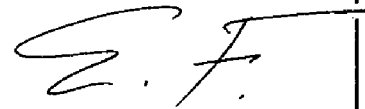
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I am, please God, heading back to Atlanta before very long. I am hoping that in this 1996 baseball season, those nine boys of

summer will do as well as they did in 1995. But this time, it is not for the usual reasons that I cheer them on, but for personal religious reasons. I am praying that they win the pennant and go on to the World Series and then, when a friendly congregant calls to invite me to the game, I will have the strength to beg off and thereby become a true penitent in fulfillment of Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 2:1:

“What is complete repentance? When something which a person has previously transgressed presents itself to him again under the same circumstances, and he has the option to transgress once again, but withdraws from the transgression . . . this is complete repentance.”

But if perchance the Enticer works his cunning on me once again and I fail the test and somehow find myself at the game, I humbly pray for two things: 1) that no balls, fair or foul, come my way; and 2) if one does happen to come my way and I instinctively leap for it, that I have the good sense at the very least to drop the ball.



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