THE VIEW FROM HERE

A Message for My Son ... and Us All

BY JOSHUA RUNYAN

MY DEAREST SEFI,

Our tradition tells us that upon the sun going down this Wednesday night, you are now a man. So I find it fitting to pass along some fatherly wisdom, and although you’ll hear some more this Shabbat and at your party on Sunday, nothing beats having it in print. (See, there are perks to your father being an editor!)

By Divine Providence, your Bar Mitzvah portion contains the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, receiving his Jacob struggled as the minister of Esau. If you view the twins as essentially mirror images of each other — in the womb, one was attracted to idolatry, the other to Godliness, while as adults, one hunted and the other was a homebody, although both of them sought in his own way to honor his parents — and if you associate Jacob with the good inclination, then Esau would by default be associated with the evil inclination.

That’s fitting for a man whom the commentaries tell us was a murderer. So if Esau is the evil inclination, that would make his minister Satan, the accuser referenced sparingly in the Tanach. It just so happens that the gematria of Israel, 541, is the sum of Jacob, 182, and Satan, 359. Meaning that Jacob could not become Israel, a name associated with a higher level of spirituality, until he wrestled his evil inclination.

It’s important to remember that Israel didn’t eradicate his evil inclination; he merely overcame it. As the lofty manifestation of the Jewish ideal, Israel represents our values and convictions — our pursuit of life and of justice. As polar opposites, however, Jacob and Esau are like political parties, struggling against each other in the pursuit of a higher purpose maybe they themselves don’t fully comprehend.

At the level of Jacob and Esau, right and wrong is not so clear cut. Recall that in order to secure the blessings of his father, a hesitant Jacob had to deceive his father by dressing and acting like Esau. When you were a boy, it was very hard for you to square your heightened sense of justice with what you perceived to be routine unfairness. But as a man, facing the rough-and-tumble field that is life — from politics to economics to whether or not to go for it on fourth down and 2 — what I want for you is to appreciate the shades of gray and the colors that make the world around us.

It is quite possible — sometimes even necessary — to sacrifice planks of a doctrinal platform in order to achieve a hoped-for greater good. Free speech is a must, for example, but not all speech might or should be protected. An American must always be able to express his religion in public, but theocracies without prophets are dangerous — and neither you nor I, nor anyone else for that matter, is a prophet.

Do not confuse your votes with your values, your party and policy preferences with your convictions. The one may change; the other never should. Above all, value the struggle, as it was through Jacob’s spiritual wrestling match that he was able to merit such a lofty name as Israel. Instead of dwelling in the black and white, appreciate the colorful tapestry that is the human condition, much like the coat of many colors that Israel bequeathed to another famous Sefi.

Mazel tov! •

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BASEBALL

Continued from Page 15

— some parts archaic, other parts arcane. We fans love to debate the rules, argue against or advocate for amendment, and often with resignation accept what has been decided. (I’m still not sure if I recognize the American League since the designated hitter rule was instituted.)

And while Judaism always moves us toward the more perfect, we realize we may not achieve it and there will be times of failure and discouragement, but within the effort reside the attainment and the value. The baseball fan watches with satisfaction every successful pitch, hit or play, but also endures the error, the blown save, the individual slump and team losing streak, certain that the struggle will make the player better, the team soon a winner. We have no expectations of a 1.000 batting average or 0.00 ERA. Instead we fans extol hustle, grinding out hits, hitting the right cut-off player, and repetitively working on pitching mechanics believing that in these daily dedications our team will harvest October victories.

Our bible stories are tightly wound, bringing us into the power of the narrative in a “you are there” manner. Think of the Akeidah story interaction between Abraham and Isaac when Isaac says: “There’s the fire and the wood, but where’s the lamb for the sacrifice?” And Abraham answers, “God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.” And they traveled on together.

We trudge along with them filling in the emotional confusion, apprehension and terror we’re sure Isaac must have felt, grappling with Abraham’s anguish and our anger with him, and finally exalting the moment the drama is resolved. We are with our progenitors as they lived their lives, and they remain with us through ours.

The progression of a baseball game along with the cadence of its rendering by the great announcers, particularly on radio, evocatively overlap for me with the way we respond to the tersely conveyed bible stories in the Torah. Thinking back, I’m sure my Jewish ears were primed for participation when I listened to the iconic Phillies announcer of my childhood. Here’s my memory of Saam’s transmitting one moment of a Phillies-Dodgers game, each comma representing a pause: “Robinson waits at the plate, Roberts stretches, he looks at Gilliam dancing off first, the pitch ... ” At the edge of the radio, I was left to fill in the pauses. What will Roberts throw? Will he try to pick off Gilliam? Will Robinson bunt? Will Gilliam try to steal a base? What decision would I make? Through these instances of repeatedly held breaths and exhalations of small triumphs and defeats, ties and memories of the games were formed in me.

Within many of us from early on, Judaism and baseball have meshed together beautifully. Thus, as we have traveled our road, Jewish major leaguers have walked and run with us. As we progressed, we watched with awe and pride Hank Greenberg slamming 58 homers in 1938. Revertently, we sat together with Sandy Koufax at Yom Kippur services in 1965. We welcomed younger travelers such as Alex Bregman, who contributed greatly to the Astros winning this last World Series.

Now, I as a fan and Gabe Kapler as the Phillies manager, have our Jewish baseball journey ahead of us in the spring. May we go from strength to strength and from pennant to pennant.

Saul Golubcow follows his beloved Phillies from Potomac, Md.