

Sermon for Kol Nidrei

Chabad of Port Washington, 5776

Rabbi Shalom M. Paltiel

*"Let's play ball!"*

At kol nidrei I like to keep it light... I thought I'd choose something from big stories from the year that's ending... with a Jewish connection

First I thought Theodore Bikel of Fiddler fame, or Leonard Nimoy with his Cohen Vulcan salute...

But then it hit me - the biggest Jewish story of the year by far... is the New York METS!

Yom Kippur is all about turning things around... making a comeback...

Any of us trying to start a new leaf, to really make changes and turn things around...

G-d says to us:

If the METS can do it, anyone can do it...

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See how G-d works... He'll do whatever it takes to get the message to us

The day before Rosh Hashanah... not a week before, the DAY before... it's the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>, METS are down 7-4, 2 outs, no balls, 2 strikes, no one on... hello... and they turn it around to a 10-7 victory!?

If that's not TESHUVA, repentance, turning a new leaf, what is ☺...

## SUBWAY SERIES:

Then Before Yom Kippur there's the subway series thing...

In Judaism there are two categories of Jews – the Tzadik and the Baal Teshuva...

Tzadik is the perfectly pious Jew... very few of those around...

And then there's us, the "baal teshuva" the struggling Jew, who messes up at times, and then does Teshuva, and turns things around

Big Talmudic debate which one of the two is more special in the eyes of G-d

On the one hand, the tzadik, he's a saint, he's perfect, wonderful, does everything right, can't get better than the tzadik

The struggling Jew feels inadequate... makes mistakes, can't do it all, it's always a struggle

But says the Talmud, on the other hand, there's something even more special about the baal teshuvah, the struggler, because he turns things around... He makes a comeback...

When there's a great comeback, the thrill it's much greater than when you just win in the first place...

You see – the YANKEES – that's the TZADIKs

The METS - that's the Baal Teshuva...

GAME ONE of the Subway series between Rosh Hashana & Yom Kippur, just as we're contemplating all of this stuff

Who wins the game?! The METS! The baal teshuva! And they win big!

You guys probably know I'm a long time YANKEES FAN... but after that game, I gotta tell ya, for the first time in my life... I was seriously thinking of converting...

Then of course the Yankees went on to win the series... so we're staying put...

But the Mets did win a special place in my heart...

It's like the "other shul"... everyone's got their Shul... and then there's the "other shul"... they won't be found dead in that place... but they really like it too... "Some of my best friends go to that shul..." That's me now with the Mets... it's the other shul

So in honor of all of this, please grab the song sheets on your seats and join in with me... feel free to stand up, take a stretch, even do a little *shokeling* while we sing...

*Take me out to Chabad House*

*Take me out to the shul*

*Get me a siddur and yarmulke*

*I don't care but I'm comin' back*

*Let's pray, pray, pray for a good year*

*This year I won't be the same*

*For it's One, Two, Three new good deeds*

*For this great new year!*

Then there's the Koufax connection:

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This YK is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary from when Sandy Koufax sat out game one of the World Series, LA Dodgers against Minnesota twins... Because it was Yom Kippur!

He still helped his team – starting in games 2, 5 and 7, and the Dodgers went on to win the series, and Koufax was awarded Most Valuable Player

But he was MVP for something else he did... He taught people all across this great land that there are values worth sacrificing for

And he taught Jews all across this land that we need not be ashamed or afraid to stand up proudly and be who we are

Moshe Feller of Chabad of MN went to his hotel next day with tefillin... LEFT HANDED Tefillin for the southpaw... (as tefillin arte meant to be placed on one's weaker arm, symbolizing the fact that Judaism is meant to give us strength where we are weakest and most vulnerable...)

This year, in honor of this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Mayor of S. Paul, Minnesota, where that famous game one took place, has proclaimed September 23, Yom Kippur, as "Sandy Koufax Appreciation Day"

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Friends, I share with you a fascinating story of the Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson, as told over by the then little boy the story is about (from [www.meaningfullife.com](http://www.meaningfullife.com)):

"The first time I met the Rebbe we discussed baseball. It was a month before my bar-mitzvah, and my grandfather, a devout Jew and second-generation American, wanted me to meet the Rebbe and receive his blessing in preparation for my attainment of Jewish adulthood. My parents had all but abandoned religious practice of their faith, so it was Grand-father who assumed the primary role in my Jewish education, giving me lessons in the rudiments of Yiddishkeit several times a week and taking me to the synagogue on Shabbat.

My first surprise was the Rebbe's youthful appearance. I had expected a chassidic sage with a long white beard, but the Rebbe, who was in his early fifties at the time, had the appearance and manner of a man 15 years younger. My second surprise was the Rebbe's first question to me: "Which is your favorite sport?"

"Baseball," I replied.

"How do you most enjoy the game," asked the Rebbe, "when one team plays or when two teams play against each other?"

"Rabbi," I said, "you can't play baseball with only one team."

"Why?" asked the Rebbe

“Rabbi,” I patiently explained, “the entire point of the game is which side is going to score more runs than the other. You must have two teams.” I was relieved to see that the Rebbe understood.

“So who usually wins?” the Rebbe pressed on.

“Whoever plays best,” I said, proud of my inspired reply.

I don’t know what Grandfather thought of our conversation, but the Rebbe continued to direct all his attention to me. “Tell me,” he now asked me, “do you and your friends play much baseball?”

“Sure. We play a lot.”

“Do you also go to watch the baseball games at the stadium?”

“Sure.”

“But why do you have to go watch others play, if you know how to play the game yourselves?”

Again I felt the frustration of needing to explain the obvious. “Rabbi,” I said, politely suppressing my smile, “when we play, it’s just a bunch of kids playing. With the Major League teams, it’s the real thing.”

“Joseph,” said the Rebbe, a warm smile illuminating his face, “your heart is a baseball field. There are two teams competing there: the ‘good inclination,’ the yetzer tov, and the ‘evil inclination,’ the yetzer horah. But up until now, it was a kids’ game. Now, with your bar-mitzvah, the real game begins. G-d is giving you a special gift—a major league yetzer tov, with the skills and talents to beat the yetzer horah and guide you through a righteous and constructive life. Remember, Joseph, just like in baseball: whoever plays best, wins...”

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Grandfather repeated the Rebbe’s baseball analogy at my bar-mitzvah and I fondly remembered my visit with the young personable rabbi. Beyond that, I do not recall the Rebbe’s words making much of an impression on my 13-year-old

self. But as two events in my young adult years were to testify, the Rebbe's words affected me far more deeply than I was aware at the time.

The first event took place three years later, the 16th year of my life and my second in High School. My class had won a school-wide competition and was awarded a weekend trip to a luxurious resort in New Orleans. I came home that evening bursting with excitement and joy; my parents, however, received the news in uncomfortable silence. Finally, mother said to me: "Joe, there's a problem. Yom Kippur is that weekend. As you know, we've always observed Yom Kippur. We fast and we attend services at the synagogue. We have never desecrated the holiness of the day, and we expect the same of you."

"Mom," I protested, "you don't understand. This is an opportunity of a lifetime! All year we've been dreaming of winning this prize. I'll never forgive myself if I miss it!"

The arguments at home continued all week. My parents said they understood how important the trip is for me; nevertheless, they maintained, there are certain hallowed values which one must set above all else. I countered that I've always kept Yom Kippur and I shall continue to do so all my life, but nothing will happen if I made this one exception for a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

In the end, my parents, who prided themselves with their liberal approach to child-rearing, said to me: "Joe, you know that we never forced our convictions on you. We've told you how we feel about the matter. Now, the decision is yours." The "decision" was easily made: New Orleans, here I come!

The night before the trip I was watching a baseball game at a friend's home. The game ended with a breathtaking comeback in the last inning by the team that had been trailing by several runs throughout the game. Over the cheering of the crowd we heard the broadcaster say: "Well, after all is said and done, there are no two ways about it in baseball: the team that plays best, wins!" Suddenly, I remembered my conversation with the Rebbe. I stayed home that Yom Kippur.

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The second event took place five year later, during my college years. The year was 1962 and everyone on campus was searching for “meaning to life.” Two friends, who had fallen in with a group of Mormon missionaries operating on campus, invited me to a lecture and discussion. Soon I was attending regularly. My meager Jewish education was no match for their sophisticated presentation; soon I began to see my own faith as shallow, bourgeois and devoid of spiritual content, and theirs as inspiring and rejuvenating. The more involved I became, the more I felt that, for the first time, my life had meaning and direction.

My only problem was how to break the news to my parents. I knew that, liberal views notwithstanding, they would be extremely upset by my conversion. I decided to say nothing as of yet and wait for an opportune time to tell them of my new life. I even harbored hopes of eventually bringing them to see the light themselves.

Shortly before I was to be baptized as a Christian and Mormon, I played shortstop in our weekly baseball game on campus. We played atrociously and lost badly. As we left the field, I found myself walking alongside the captain of the winning team, slapping him on the back, and saying: “Well, there are no two ways about it in baseball: the team who plays best, wins!”

I was barely able to finish the sentence. I’m sure my friend wondered why I suddenly turned white. As did my Mormon teachers as to why I suddenly severed all contact with them, and subsequently got more involved in my Judaism.

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Friends, tonight G-d asks us to join His team, His ball club... He asks to draft us. And it’s our choice how to respond to His draft invitation:

YES OR NO?

We have a choice, we can either say yes or no... YES, G-d we’re on your team for the new year, or no, G-d, we’re not prepared to step up to the plate as Jews

You're thinking – since when is Chabad so black and white – YES or NO? Chabad doesn't believe in all or nothing Judaism. Rabbi, you always tell us to take steps, baby steps, in our Judaism... what do you mean it's a YES or NO proposition?

But in fact it is.

We can either say YES – we're prepared to grow in our Jewishness

Or NO, we're not prepared to grow...

What Hashem is looking for from us is not YES or NO whether we'll do it all... who can do it all?

But He is looking to see if we're prepared to grow. Which means, that no matter how early on we might be in our Jewish journey, we're on the team.

Or NO, we're not prepared to grow, than no matter how advanced we might be in our Jewish journey, we've said no, we've chosen not to be drafted.

But why? Why is our growth so important?

If I'm at a very elementary level, I can try to grow but do I hold a candle to the much more observant Jew?

Conversely if I'm well advanced in Jewish observance, how important is it really that I grow? Regardless I'm still way ahead of the pack...

So here too baseball helps me illustrate this:

1. When you're up at bat, the goal is to get to first base... not to second or third... the coach will even tell you, don't swing for the fences... just get on base! That's all you gotta do.

In fact, if instead of heading to first base you decide to go straight to second or third, you're out... Don't jump the gun, just go to first.

2. Conversely, if you're on third base, and the ball was hit hard and the coach tells you to run, if you stand there like a klotz and say "what's the big deal..."



why should I run... what's the rush, look at me, I'm way ahead of the other guy, I'm already at third, let me stand here for a while..." You're an idiot...

So you see? Wherever you are you gotta keep on moving. That's the name of the game!

3. And finally, when you move to first base, you're advancing the runners... its team. We're all one Jewish people, we're one community... when a Jew walks into Chabad House for the first time and takes those first baby steps...maybe Shabbat candles, or tefillin, a mezuzah, whatever, baby steps... he's moving us all ahead... those who've been involved for more time, now realize it's time to take the next step and maybe think about becoming kosher... those who are well advanced, they're already on second or third, they're in shul every Shabbat, or every morning., maybe they're thinking it's time to come on home and start to keep Shabbos!

Friends, welcome to the team! I'm proud to be your coach. I'm happy to be available at any time to help you practice... your Judaism... I'm not expecting homeruns... I just want you to get on base... join our monthly family Shabbats, get some mezuzahs through the Sater Mezuzah program, tefillin, become a member and help us that way, join the Minyanaires or Sisterhood... just get on base... get out of the dugout, grab a mitzvah, any mitzvah... tefillin, shabbat candles, mezuzah, shabbat dinner, maybe to observe the one Shabbat on October 23... choose your mitzvah, give it a swing or two... choose whichever mitzvah feels right... step up to the plate, get on base...

I'm gonna email out a mitzvah resolution form the day after YK for you to choose from...

You're helping your own game get better... and at the same time you're making a real difference in our community's collective Jewishness... You're part of the team!

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May Hashem bless us this year with the ultimate world champion... the ultimate grand slam... when you bring all the runners home...

For 2000 years we've been running... they've been trying to pick us off... to get us "OUT", to throw us out of the game... But we keep on playing...

Time for the grand slam – bring the runners home...

You promised us when we were first drafted, at Sinai, that it'll all work out and we'll bring a world of goodness...

It's been a tough season... lots of ups and down...

It's time to win the game!!! The world championship... the whole WORLD coming to its purpose and perfection...

Shana Tova!