

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

A High Fly Matzah Ball into SHALLOW Center Field

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

[This article appeared as an Op-ED in the Jewish Press. The Jewish Week rejected the article. I wonder why. :-)]

Life is filled with choices. Continuing his final sermon to the People of Israel, Moses reminds them of their choices:

“See that I place before you today a blessing and a curse...” (Deuteronomy, 11:26)

Moses proceeds to lay out before the Israelites the fact that true blessing is found in observing G-d’s Torah. He tells them that they are about to enter a land that has different values than those that they have learned at Mt. Sinai. He warns them to avoid the pitfalls of foreign influences, and to remain steadfast in their observance of Mitzvahs.

As this week’s Torah Portion continues, Moses goes on to describe in detail how to live as a Jew. He tells us how, and where, and when, to serve G-d. He tells us what we may eat, and what we may not eat. He tells us not to listen to those who would suggest that we ignore G-d’s Commandments. In short, Moses tells his beloved nation, *“Observe and listen to all of these things that I command you, so that it should go well for you and your children when you will do that which is good and just in the eyes of your G-d.”* (Ibid. 12:28)

My son and I went to a baseball game the other day. I usually try to take him to a game or two every season, and this particular day fit into my schedule. Coincidentally, it happened to have been Jewish Heritage Day at Shea Stadium. What, I wondered, is “Jewish Heritage?” Well, now I was going to find out.

It was, in many ways, a wonderful day. Fortunately for my son-the-Met-fan, the Mets beat the Rockies. (Again!) The weather was great. Cliff Floyd had four hits and an intentional walk. Al Leiter pitched a season-high ten strikeouts. It was a good day at Shea.

Oh, and the “Jewish Heritage Day?” To be honest, I was, at best, underwhelmed. The center field video screen was filled with tidbits of valuable information such as how to say “complain” and “belly button” in Yiddish. We were exposed to the uplifting news that Paul Simon, Neil Diamond, and two hideous-

looking “musicians” with face paint are Jewish.

There was a “Name that Tune” contest, in which a spectator at the game proved that she knew the difference between “*Hava Nagila*” and “*Yoya*.” Her prize was a disc jockey for her next family “*Simcha*.”

I was concerned that there would be a very long line at the Glatt Kosher hotdog stand, due to the large Jewish turnout. Sadly, I needn’t have been worried.

How sad. After all that Torah and Israel have given to the world, THIS is what we celebrate?! Are these empty concepts all that "Jewish Heritage" stands for? Abraham taught the world that there is one G-d in the world. Our People have given their lives for Torah values. They marched through the fires of the Inquisition and the gas chambers of Auschwitz singing *Ani Ma'amin* and Shema Yisrael, and the best we can do is “Hava Nagilah?!”

Unfortunately, the great American melting pot has created a superficial “Jewish culture” of bagels and lox, pickled herring, and pastrami on rye. A Jewish mother once complained to me that she couldn’t understand why her son had turned his back on Judaism. “Every Friday night we had gefilte fish, and chicken soup and EVERYTHING!”

I performed a Bris a few years ago during Passover. The grandmother remarked that she knew that a Challah during Passover would be inappropriate. I offered to pick up some Kosher for Passover platters for her. “Oh, that won’t be necessary,” she replied. “It doesn’t have to be strictly Kosher. I just don’t want to do anything that isn’t traditional.”

A Judaism that consists mainly of Gefilte fish, chopped liver and Matzah balls may be gastronomically inviting, but it tends to leave one with spiritual heartburn.

Jewish Heritage Day was a celebration of symbolism without substance. The video screen may have been in DEEP center field, but its message could not have been more shallow.

To be fair, it was pointed out that some Jewish ball players considered Yom Kippur important enough a day to sit out a ball game. But hasn't anyone ever heard of SHABBOS?!

Let me share with you a bit of baseball history that SHOULD have been mentioned at Shea:

"M.M." was a Jewish baseball player. He excelled in high school baseball, and was offered a baseball scholarship at a prestigious university. His other choice was Yeshiva University.

M.M. had a dilemma. He had before him the chance for a free education, and a shot at being drafted into Major League Baseball. It also meant likely compromise of Shabbos and other values. His other option, Y.U., offered a Torah education. No baseball, no limelight, no multi-million dollar contracts or adoring fans.

Moses reminds us in this week's Torah Reading that "... *I place before you today a blessing ...*" Life is filled with choices. Difficult, gut-wrenching choices.

Baseball or Shabbos? Millions or Torah? M.M. chose Torah. Today, Rabbi M.M. is a Torah educator who has enriched the lives of countless Jewish children.

Sandy Koufax sat out a World Series game. And I genuinely respect him for that decision. But a once-a-year day off for Yom Kippur is a commitment to Jewish culture. A 52-times-a-year day off for Shabbos is a commitment to TORAH.

Sandy Koufax is a man. Rabbi M.M. is a superstar.

Let's live a life of Torah. Save the culture for your yogurt.

Have a great Shabbos.

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