In the Big Inning
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – March 12, 2004

As this congregation is well aware I love baseball, and as I have mentioned more than a few times from this pulpit, just as Ecclesiastes once wrote to everything there is a season, so to do I believe that to everything there is an analogy to baseball. It is I think a truth as eternal as the Torah itself that viewed through the lens of baseball one can find wisdom and understanding in even the most complex of matters, even in the complexity of Jewish tradition.

Baseball and Judaism both teach many things. For tonight's sermon I would like to focus on three things I have learned about Judaism from Baseball and then explain how those three teachings along inform our reading of this week's Torah portion, and by extension inform our view of the world as Jews, not to mention mine as a baseball fan.

(1) Rabbi Richard Agler points out that Baseball like Judaism is sophisticated. You can't just bring someone to their first game and expect them to "Get it" right away. Baseball, like Judaism is filled with nuances. We need a knowledge base before it begins to make sense. The batting order, the setup man, lefty righty, guarding the lines and a thousand other things have significance and importance, but we have to have knowledge to appreciate them. Tommy Lasorda, once said, "Baseball is like church. Many attend but few understand." I think as Jews we feel that way a lot of the time, because we don't understand our rituals, our traditions, our history we often miss why we make such a big deal out of them. Judaism, like baseball is something that is followed much more than it is watched. To understand it, one has to invest in it. The Rabbi's taught, "lo am ha-aretz chasid--the unlearned cannot rise higher." You can't be a real fan if you don't understand

baseball and we can't fully appreciate the richness of Judaism unless we understand Judaism. If we find ourselves bored or lost, G-d forbid, the solution is obvious: we must seek understanding, we must seek knowledge -whether it's Baseball or Judaism.

(2) In baseball you've got a 162 game season before the playoffs even start. If you want you can just watch the playoffs, you can just watch the highlights of the playoffs, no problem. You'll get something out of it, but nowhere near as much as if you've been there all season long. Judaism is similar, it requires patience, it works best when given long term commitment. If we want, we can show up just on the High Holydays and on special occasions in all likelihood, if we come with an open mind and heart, we'll get something out of it. But even if we do, it will not be nearly as much as if we were practicing, learning, believing, attending and participating continually. Weaving Judaism into the fabric of our lives "all season long" through the highs and the lows, through the extraordinary and most importantly through the ordinary. Judaism like baseball requires patience, its about the journey, every pitch, every inning, the moments in between, not just the final score.

(3) Baseball is also a historical game. Every baseball game is part of every other baseball game that has ever been played. The Yankees in the outfield today are there w/Ruth, Dimaggio, Mantle & Reggie and so are the fans. To be a true baseball fan you have to do more than understand the game you need to recognize its history. The long term is an essential part of baseball. Every game is not only a part of what now is but what once was. Of course we can say the same for Judaism. We say that when a Jew is born we are already 4000 years old, we are part of something that came before us, that animates us and guides us and will be part of the legacy we leave to those who come after

us. Judaism, like baseball, like family, like everything of value in life works best when we make the long term commitment to it.

What you may ask does this have to do with this weeks Torah portion, the story of the Golden Calf? Ah, I am so glad you asked, first we know that God is a baseball fan, I mean the Torah even begins with the immortal words, 'in the big inning.' But beyond that as we, or at least the cantor and myself, even though she is a Dodger fan and I am a Giants fan, await opening day, we are reminded of another period of waiting another period of impatience that takes place in this weeks Torah portion, the 40 days that Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the 2 tablets of the 10 commandments and the Israelites assembled at the foot of the mountain grew impatient in there waiting and constructed and prayed to the Golden Calf. Just 40 days before, just as Moses was leaving the people to head up the mountain, God appeared to all the Israelites in a great and dramatic blaze of fire and clap of thunder. In the presence of all God proclaimed the covenant with the Jewish people and declared the 10 commandments for all to hear. It was a historic and awe inspiring moment, meant to write the memory of what took place on the hearts and minds of not only the 600,000 Jews assembled at the foot of the mountain, but to leave such an impression on there souls that even the unborn of future generations would know of it and recall that moment with awe and wonder. But 40 days later, with Moses, seemingly delayed in his return the people grew restless and began to loose faith not only in his return, but in God as well.

Hearing this, God tells Moses of what awaits him at the foot of the mountain and a heated argument then ensues between God and Moses. God has had it with the Jewish people, and wants to wipe them from the face of the earth and start over, even offers

Moses his choice of other people that he can lead. But Moses invoking God's early arrangement and relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, argues with God, reasons with God, pleads with God not to destroy his creation. God agrees, and Moses descends the mountain to confront his people.

Coming down from the mountain, a day later than the Israelites had calculated Moses discovers there transgression, for only 40 days before God had spoken directly to all of them and decreed the Ten Commandments, number two of which was not to make an idol and worship it, number one being, "I am the Lord your God, and don't you forget it." Seeing what they have done, and at Aaron's direction no less, Moses smashes the Ten Commandments to pieces, burns the Golden calf and feeds its ashes to the people that it might leave a bitter taste in there mouths, the biblical version of washing one's mouth out with soap.

Moses then goes back up on the mountain for another 40 days and carves a second set of tablets by his own hand, and inscribes on them yet again the Ten Commandments. The parsha finally concludes with God establishing a new covenant with the Jewish people, were God promises to protect them and hold them accountable for there actions.

The biblical scholar Nachama Leibowitz asks the seemingly obvious and troubling question, "how is it possible that the very generation that had witnessed the miracles of Egypt and has scaled the loftiest and most intimate heights of relationship with God when he spoke to them directly and gave them the Torah could descend to the depths of pagan idolatry and make a golden calf, in a period of just 40 days, with the

words of God, “you shall have no other Gods besides me, and shall not worship idols still ringing in there ears?

Perhaps had they been baseball fans all of this could have been avoided. For had they viewed Judaism through the lens of baseball, they would have first and foremost learned the value of patience. Just as a season takes 162 games and a game takes at least nine innings, so too, a covenant, a relationship with God requires patience and commitment. There is no clock in baseball, the game can take as long as it needs to in order to reach its right conclusion, even if extra innings are needed. So to the relationship between God and the Jewish people is timeless, once entered into it has not expiration date, it stands for all times, in that way it is as much like the love of a parent for a child as it is the game of baseball. The Israelites forgot that, or didn’t trust in it and with out trust in any contract, in any covenant there can be no sense of wholeness not sense of peace. In many respects baseball like Judaism is a pastime, and for some a way of life, when we invest time in it, when we sit back and commit ourselves for the long haul we can enjoy the journey as well as the outcome. The Israelites at the base of the mountain were focused on the outcome, the final score and forgot about the journey, the innings and moments of holiness in between.

Similarly, the Israelites who built the golden calf sought simple answers to complex questions; they failed to appreciate the sophistication and seek knowledge about the covenant between them and God. They thought they merited God’s blessing only thru Moses and with him gone they would be forsaken, they didn’t study, they didn’t questions, they didn’t seek answers they just reacted and threw up there hands. But Judaism and our people’s relationship with God is much more complex, much more

nuanced. There is a reason why, they are called the children of Israel, because at this time they had a child like understanding of God. As a child I grew to love baseball, but now as an adult and through the constant and annoying questioning of my dad I grew to understand it and appreciate it. Any relationship be it with a sport, a religion or a loved one, must grow from being based solely on love and eventually come to be based also if not in the main on respect and understanding. God seeks a sophisticated relationship with the Jewish people, one that will stand the test of time, in the same way that we seek that relationship with those we care about. There will be bumps in the road, misunderstandings, our favorite team may make a terrible trade, have a slump. But we must not be fair-weather Jews, abandoning our beliefs because of this or that. Rather the message of the Golden Calf is that our insecurity should propel and compel us to become more secure.

Lastly, the Israelites forgot there history, they failed to see themselves as part of a larger continuum of the Jewish people. Just as every baseball game is in part connected to every other game, so too every Jewish experience is intrinsically tied and connected and bound to those of past and future generations. Nachama Leibovitz explains that we should not be surprised that this generation of Jews who had heard first hand the voice of God lost faith so easily. One single religious experience, however profound, was not capable of changing the people from idol worshippers into monotheists. Only a prolonged disciplining in the teachings of Torah could accomplish that. It goes to patience, it goes to sophistication and it goes to history, understanding and faith thought it may appear to happen in an instant is actually the product of a long period of experience, for success and failure. Indeed it may take a life time. God did not abandon the Jewish

people after the Golden Calf, with Moses help he came to understand there short sighted reaction in the context of there collective experience. If God can learn patience, nuance and an appreciation for history, even without baseball to guide him, so to can we learn that in our lives, our relationships and our faith, because in the end we have both baseball and torah, surely one of them holds the keys to the mysteries of life,