Why Are They Throwing Fastballs At My Head?
The Codes of Baseball & Jewish Life Learn'm
or Learn to Duck
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Temple Judea - July 23, 2010

- The connection between Judaism and baseball is well established
    - Torah begins with "in the big inning"
    - Both baseball and Judaism are understood best in a historical context. What makes baseball so meaningful to so many is that the game has remained essentially the same over generations. You can honestly compare players of one ear to another, asking how would Babe Ruth fair against Nolan Ryan? Would the Yankees of today hold a candle to the Yankee teams of Ruth, Gehrig and DiMaggio? So too Judaism has remained true to its core values and traditions even as new ways of expression have emerged.
    - For me baseball was the game of my father and grandfather, they taught to me, like our tradition says we should teach Torah, slowly, with patience and repetition. Countless groundballs and pop flys, hours answer questions as we watched together at the ballpark or listened on the radio. But even still baseball like Judaism has to be experienced to be understood. You know this if you have ever entertained visitors for a country that does not play baseball and tried to explain the game and its rule to them
    - Rabbi Steven J. Rubenstein writes, There is wisdom to be found in the game of baseball. Whether one

concentrates on the base paths as the boundaries within which we live, or focus our attention on the umpires as our rabbis, our arbitrators of the law, or the fact that the game itself has no time limits like other sports — there is something to be learned in how we play the game and how it relates to life itself.

- Tuesday night I went to the Dodgers v Giants game. It was one of the craziest games I had ever seen.
    - Three batters were hit by pitches
    - Two players and three coaches were ejected from the game
    - The starting pitcher, one of the best in baseball today was so wild that he hit a batter and twice was unable to throw the ball from the mount to home plate.
    - There was a 9th inning bases loaded come from behind rally
    - There were home runs and brush backs and at least 3 broken bats

- Through all of this I was consciously aware of the game within the game, the unwritten codes of baseball that dictated much of the action.
    - How a manger has to argue a close call, and can do so adamantly, but if the brim of his hat touches that of the umpire he will be ejected.
    - Or that if a pitcher hits your batter with a pitched ball and does not tip his own hat in apology then the next inning your pitcher must hit the batter of the other team in retaliation.

- How you don't walk in front of the catcher when you step up to the plate – that would be invading his space.
- How if you hit a homerun you jog briskly around the bases and don't stop to admire your effort – that would be disrespectful to the pitcher.
- How the umpire always puts his back to players when bending down to brush off the plate – don't give the fan's one more perspective about which to criticize you.
- To the untrained observer these things are lost or worse misunderstood as somehow suigenerious from the game itself
- But they are not they are the unwritten codes of baseball conduct that must be observed right along side the written rules of the game.

- And so it got me thinking about two things:
  - What are the unwritten codes of Jewish conduct that must be observed along side those written in the Torah and Talmud?
  - How are these unwritten codes passed down and related *l'dor vdor* from one generation to the next?

- To take the lead-off question first – let me ask you. What are the unwritten codes of being a Jew. Not the written mitzvoth of the 10 commandments but the things about being a Jew that you know go hand and hand with living a Jewish life?
  - *Eat Chinese food on xmas eve*
  - *When something good happens to someone we plant a tree*
  - *You don't wear jeans to shul.*

    - *Shrimp is never kosher unless it is in sweet and sour sauce or on the buffet line*
- But in all seriousness there are other unwritten rules of being Jewish that we know we must live by
    - No mater how far removed from our tradition we feel, we go to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and we say kaddish for our parents when they die.
    - We stay close to our families, we call our mothers even if they make us crazy and feel guilty
    - In general Jews don't hunt – its allowed but just not something we do
    - Food is an expression of love in Judaism – even if it causes problems for many of us.
    - Only a Jew and honorary Jew is allowed to make Jewish jokes. Christians, Muslims, Buddhist, etc. are not allowed to make said jokes. Also only a Jew and honorary Jew is allowed to call another person a Jew. Otherwise it is offensive. Don't do it.
    - We speak truth to power and value the art of asking a good question more than a thoughtful answer
    - We can argue with God and struggle with our belief – its part of being Jewish.
    - The most important thing in life is to be a mensch – and we all know what that means even if it would take us pages to define it.

- These unwritten rules have been learned through trial and error, passed down from generation to generation and for many they are as important if not more than the 10 commandments. They have become Torah even if you can't find them anywhere in the Torah.

- As to the question in the on-deck-circle, how did they become such a part of who we are as Jews? And how do we transmit these unwritten codes from one generation to the next? The answer to those questions – can be found in this week's Torah portion, V'etchanan.
    - We read in this parsha the words of the Vahavtah and the 10 Commandments
    - By those standards alone this parsha contains the most important verses in the entire Torah.
    - But though they go together like hand and glove, they could not be more different
        - The Ten Commandments are written rules that are so starkly worded they are not at all open to interpretation.
            - Thou shall not murder
            - Thou shall not steal
            - Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy
            - Do not down to idols
            - Do not have any other gods
        - The v'ahavtah however speaks of loving God with all your heart, your soul, your might it is not specific it is general and presumes that the Jew who prays these words knows what loving God with heart, soul and might means in practicality. It assumes you know the unwritten codes of Jewish conduct.
            - We could spend an evening just talking about the incalculable various of how we might love God in one or all of those three ways.
            - Indeed our Rabbis spend pages and volumes in the Talmud doing just that – trying to explore the innumerable

possibilities of fulfilling that seemingly simple commandment to love God.

- **We are left then with the question, how do you teach someone to love? How do we transmit the things that need to be part of who we are but don't lend themselves to written rules?**

- The answer is the line in the vahavtah, "*Vishinantam lvanaecha*" which we wrongly translate as teach them to your children, but more accurately is **impress** them upon your children.
- We transmit the codes of Jewish life, the way to be a mensch, to live with a love for God and God's creations by making a lasting impression on our children through our actions and example.
- There are things that you cannot learn from a book, rules about life an ethical life that cannot be taught but must be experienced with a mentor and guide rather than a teacher and textbook.
- In his book the Baseball Codes, Jason Turow writes: That because so many of the rules in baseball are unwritten they must be picked up through experience, through trial an error, through the patient and sometimes not so patient tutoring of opposing teammates who punctuate some lessons with a fastball to your ribs. Players learn what Major League Manager and former catcher Bob Brendly described as the basic tenants of the unwritten rules, Respect your teammates, respect your opponents and respect the game."

- It may sound simple but teaching respect, like teaching a love for God and Jewish tradition – is best taught through modeling and doing rather than telling.
- That is what *v'shinantam* reminds us, if we want our children and our community to live Jewishly, to respect the tradition of our ancestors both by word and by deed, then we must respect and live it ourselves. We must impress it upon them through our example, not separating it from the rest of life, as something that you could turn on or off, take or leave but as a part of life in the same way that baseball has its written rules and its unwritten code – inseparable from each other.
- To have one without the other would just seem wrong, like ham and cheese on a bagel, it's just not something you do.