"A Time for Heroes"

What does the number four thousand, one-hundred and ninety-two mean to you? It may mean nothing to you, , but in the Summer of 1985, six days after my fifteenth birthday that number meant everything in the world to me. It was the combined number of singles, doubles, triples and homeruns my hero Pete Rose had amassed to surpass Ty Cobb as baseball's all-time leader in a career hits. I remember the evening like I imagine many baseball fans remember the Tuesday night a few weeks ago when Mark McGwire hit number 62. I sat transfixed in front of our TV set in my parent's living room watching Pete Rose, "Charlie Hustle", as his teammates and coaches liked to call him, standing on first base after hitting an Eric Show's curveball to left field for a base hit. There was Pete, my hero, standing on first with his son, and the fans rising to their feet for an unprecedented 7 minute standing ovation.

Pete Rose was more than a hero to me: he was baseball. As a little leaguer, I mimicked his head first slide into bases, much to the chagrin of my mother who was certain I would kill myself. Pete used to run full speed down to first base after receiving a walk, hence the nick name "Charlie Hustle", and I would do the same. Pete wore number 14, I worn number 14. I had collected every baseball card ever printed with his picture on it. One summer when I was 12 I saved all my Paper Route money to buy a mangled and slightly off center copy of his rookie baseball card. It cost $128 dollars, and I had to borrow 7 dollars from my dad to cover the sales tax, something I hadn't figured on. It was my most cherished possession.

Pete Rose was my hero, and as a 15 year old entering high school I was at a time in my life when I needed heroes. I drew upon his courage, his character, his toughness, his no quit, never give up personality to endure the harshness of my freshman year, to make it through the grueling winter of Football practices and a Spring season of baseball where I sat on the bench for all but two innings the entire year.

The following summer I turned 16, I got a driver's license, access to my Mom's station wagon and my first girlfriend. These three things, the girlfriend probably most of all made me lose interest in baseball, and my hero Pete Rose. I put away the baseball cards, the Pete Rose jersey I would wear to school for picture day, I stopped following his every at bat, the statistics came much slower to my recollection and one day they were gone all together. But as my hero he was never replaced. No rock star, politician, or movie icon ever meant as much to me as Pete and even though I no longer followed his career I somehow knew I could always look to him for courage and dedication to principle when I needed him.

Then in college during another transition period in my life, fraught with anxiety and uncertainty about what my future would hold Pete Rose was arrested for tax evasion and illegal gambling; gambling which may have included betting on baseball games he was involved in. My hero was now a crook and a cheat, the moral, spiritual center that had guided my youth was the greatest embarrassment to baseball and its stilted tradition in a hundred years, and I had every one of his baseball cards.

It not an easy thing to lose your hero, in fact I dare say, it continues to be one of the saddest moments of my life when I watched Charlie Hustle being handcuffed in a court room and led off by a bailiff to prison. I had invested a lifetime of memories and aspirations in this man's life and its perceived message and now all of that was like a house of cards, and it had come crashing down, leaving me with only an unrecognizable pile of what had once be an inspiring vision.

Pete's corruption and deceit made me lose faith in heroes, it hardened me and I started to see people for their flaws and imperfections. It caused me to seriously wonder if people were genuinely good, or only masquerading as such to further their own agenda, to feed their greed, their ego, their baseless desires. I thought my hero loved baseball more than I, yet if so, how could he destroy the thing we both loved so dearly?

These questions all came rushing back to me in these past weeks as I watched a hero of my adulthood admit to his part in a deception, cover up and abuse that may well do more damage to democracy and the office of the President than Pete Rose ever did to baseball. I'm not an adolescent any more, and I have developed the hard protective exterior of adulthood that prevents my feelings from ever getting too hurt by the actions of others I have put faith and trust in. But is it safe to have heroes anymore at all? In this age of information overload and 24 hour media coverage, can we expect anyone to withstand the scrutiny we put them under? Am I better off not believing in someone, their vision, their ideals, so as not to have them shattered when the truth comes out?

I am not a cynic, if anything maybe an idealist, I prefer to see the good in people, the humanity in others. I'm of the notion that all things being equal people will in the main do the right thing, and certainly when entrusted with the hopes, dreams and well being of others will aspire to do what is right and good. And now even with apparent evidence to the contrary I refuse to give up that conviction. I have lost two heroes in my life, but I refuse to give up the idea of heroes.

As a society and as individuals we need heroes! Now more than ever we need people that we can look to for guidance and who can model for others how to act, and how to interact with each other. This is not to say that we are incapable of being our own moral and ethical centers. We certainly can be, but we live in relationship with each other

and in that regard we benefit from the guidance and good examples set for us by others. The Mishnah proclaims it as so, "Make for yourself a teacher and you will acquire for yourself a friend." We admire people who seem capable of what we ourselves are not. We hold up as heroes those who have endured the greatest of life's hardships and still managed to give the to world the gift of their knowledge and insight. We need heroes because they inspire us to be more than we think we can be.
To be more giving when we think we have nothing more to give.
To be more caring, when we think we no longer care.
To be more honest and forthright, when it appears lying and deceit are the rule of the day.

We still need heroes but the challenge presented to us by the awareness of adulthood, by the compounded sorrow of our collection of fallen heroes is to find them not only in the abstract lives of others, in Presidents, Ballplayers and other popular icons, but to look for the heroes in everyday life, to look for the elements of heroism in ourselves.

The Talmud commands us that this is the season of reflection and introspection. On Rosh HaShanah every person is to perform the act of Heshbone HaNefesh an examination of ones own soul. We are commanded to reflect on our past year and all that we have done, to look with a critical eye to our actions and interactions with others. Have we been the best we could be? Have we done what was morally right and justified in every instance? Have we set an example for others, our children, our students, our employees, our neighbors, our friends, have we been heroes to all of them, and to ourselves? In reflecting on the events of this past week, and on those of my childhood I have come to realize that the President's heroism or that of Pete Rose are not what is ultimately important, but rather whether I have lived up to the same standards I held them too. Because in truth both their acts of morality and immorality should inspire me to be and do better.

Many in Congress and indeed across the nation worry that public and frank discussion of the President's behavior will lead others, particularly young people to follow in his footsteps, as if the public discussion of Pete Rose's tax evasion led little leaguers to cheat on their taxes. No, what it should do is cause us to examine our own actions, to perform our own Heshbone HaNefesh and see just how close we ourselves are to such impropriety and what it will take to turn away, to regain our moral center our greater purpose. We must be heroes to ourselves before we can hope to be heroes to others.

The Month of Elul which we have just completed is set aside in our tradition as a month of reflection. It is the time when we are to begin this process of self-examination and introspection. Wondering about what it takes to be a hero both to myself and hopefully to others, I introduced by a teacher to a few verses in the Psalms that touched me so profoundly that I printed them out and pasted them on my wall to reflect upon in preparation for this New Year. The psalmist asks:
Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?
And our tradition answers:
Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking gossip.
Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

In these three sentences the Torah gives us the formula for heroism, the recipe for constructing a life and character that will inspire others and should inspire ourselves. Six things the Torah commands, six things we must do if we desire our year and our life to be recorded for good in the Book of Life that is sealed on Yom Kippur.
Keep Your Tongue from Evil:
The man who said names will never hurt me, was wrong. Words hurt: They sting and burn and cannot be taken back. We have perfected the art of hurting with words, perfected it so that we can walk into a room and know just what to say so that in a room full of people only two know they have been wounded, the person we lashed out at with our subtly of speech and ourselves the one who caused the pain. This is not an art form, this is not tact, it is the cruelest form of hatred and deception. We leave our victim withering in pain while all around them people are unaware, unable to come to their aide or defense. With words we crush the insides of others while making it appear to those outwardly that they are without harm and we without guilt. To be a hero we must learn to use our words for good and the inspiration of ourselves and others.
Keep your lips from speaking gossip:
Rabbi Saul Teplitz shares the following reflection on the Sins of Speech, he writes, "There is no such thing as idle gossip, It is always industrious. The same person who thinks of reporting the faults of others to us will also think nothing of reporting our faults to others. There is a story of a Jew who came to his rabbi to relieve him of his troubled conscience. He circulated slander about his fellow man, only to discover that it was false. The Rabbi said, "If you want to make peace with your conscience, you must fill a bag with feathers. Then go to every door in the village, and drop in front of each of them one of the feathers." After the Jew did as he was told he returned to the rabbi and announced that he had done penance. "Not yet." Said the rabbi, "Now take your bag and gather up every feather that

you have dropped." Again he did as he was instructed. This time he returned and complained that the wind had blown them all away. "Yes me good man," said the rabbi, "so it is with gossip. Words are easily dropped, but no matter how hard you try, you can never get them back again."

Depart from evil:

A true hero not only does good, but shuns evil. What is most disturbing to me about the actions of the President both in his relationship with Ms. Lewinsky and his relationship with the American people is that at any point he could have turned away from his path of deceit, at any point he could have said this far and no further and begun the process of repair and repentance. A hassidic rabbi once asked a member of his congregation. "If you are going east and suddenly you want to travel west, how far do you have to go?" The man gave him many complex answers, but the rabbi answered simply, "If you are going east and you want to go west, all you have to do is turn around! It's as simple as that!"

It is not for others to turn us around, that is our task, we must recognize the evil before us and say this far no further. It should not take the awe and importance of the High Holidays to prompt us toward Tshuvah, to turn us back toward goodness and righteousness. We set the example when we turn ourselves around, when we stay far way from evil and falsehood. The Talmud explains that the Rabbis built a fence around the Torah with all of our rituals and customs of the Torah service so we would never come close to taking it for granted, and indeed our Torah service is so imbedded with pomp and circumstance that we cannot help but see the Torah as more than just a scroll of parchment and ink. So the Torah proclaims it should be with our lives, building a fence around our lives through the doing of mitzvoth and the commandment of Heshbone HaNefesh that we never come so close as to confuse wrong with right, good with evil, instead we turn and go the other way.

Do Good:

The converse of shunning evil is the doing of good. Spike Lee called it "Do the Right Thing" and it has become sort of a mantra in our society. But in the view of our collective tradition it must be for each of use more than a mantra but a sacred commandment, a mission. The prophet Isaiah proclaims that we are to be a light unto the nations. It is not only those of us who are in public office, or in positions of leadership that must set the example for others, but this commandment was given to the whole of Israel, from prophet to priest, from the head of the line to the back of the line. Admiring the work of Habitat for Humanity or the Religious Action Center is not the same as building a home or defending the free practice of religion. We cannot do goodness vicariously through others, we must do it along side others, getting our hands dirty in the doing of good in the world.

Seek peace and Peruse it:

In Hebrew the word for Peace is Shalom, it caries the root meaning of shalem which is a verb meaning to complete something. Our task as heroes to others and to ourselves is to put things back together, to be the restorers of the breech as the prophet Isaiah declared.

I had a professor once who made the observation that there are two kinds of people in the world, those who like to pull things apart and those who like to put things back together. Let us be of the latter, let us be healers in this world, putting the pieces back together in our lives and our communities. I am of the opinion that with regard to our current moral crisis in Washington what history will record is not those who tore down the President and the presidency, but those like Senator Lieberman of Conneticut who stood up with conviction and tried to rebuild, to put the pieces back together is an ethical and non-partisan way. Our task is to pursue peace in our lives, to repair the destruction we have wrought, to seek the peace that comes with completeness, with putting together rather than breaking apart.

Six things, six very difficult and taxing things are required of us to be heroes to ourselves and others, to do any one of them would feel like a great accomplishment. But our task and the reason for these High Holy Days is to figure out a way to do them all, and to do them well, so that they inspire others to do the same. I know families that give gifts to each other on Rosh Hashanah, this year let us give the gift of inspiration and heroism, the gift of our own example of goodness and righteousness to the world, to the ones we love and to ourselves. No gift could be more needed at this time of hurting in our country and in our lives, and no gift will have a more lasting effect. In a time when heroes fall, may we each strive to be heroes ourselves. Cen Y'hi Ratzon, may it happen in our day.