Holding out for a Hero
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom
November 10, 2017

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 remember the Canadian Hockey team winning the Olympic Gold Medal in 2010 here in Vancouver.

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 most deflating 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 with shame, horror and downright disgust the parade of sexual assaulters and abusers from highest stations of the celebrity and political castes.

I'm not an adolescent any more, and I have developed the weathered awareness that people are imperfect and those placed on pedestals will eventually come toppling down. But that cynicism is itself deflating. I want to live in a world of heroes and people that my children and I can look up too.

Yes, you could counsel me that true heroes are not in spotlights or on the screen but in the everyday heroic acts of first

responders, teachers, single parents, veterans, the list though often nameless could go on and on. So many people do heroic things, but are not recognized for their heroism.

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 many 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 world the gift of their knowledge, creativity, talent and insight. We need heroes because they inspire us to be more than we think we can be.

The psalmist asks: Who is someone 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. (Psalm 34:12)

In these three sentences the Torah gives us the formula for being a good human being, but in our world today – being a good human being is a form of heroism.

The Talmud instructs, ובמקום שאין אנשים, השתדל להיות איש

"In a place where no one is acting like a human being, strive to be a human being." (Avot 2:6)

Six things the Torah commands, six things we must do if we desire to be a human being, and in our world today if you can do these six things with consistency you should be called a hero.

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, and we have amplified that power with social media. 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 also disturbing to me about the actions of the celebrity sexual abusers, is the silence of those around them who knew buts said nothing or helped them cover it up. In a free society when something terrible occurs, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, few are guilty, but all are responsible.

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. It's the part of the Larry David joke on SNL that really stung. Yes Jews are sexual abusers too, and we of all people should hold ourselves and each other to a higher standard.

Seek peace and Peruse it:

In Hebrew the word for Peace is Shalom, it carries 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. Our task is to pursue wholeness, to fix the brokenness, broken souls, broken morality, broken trust in each other. Building trust and wholeness rather than tearing it a part.

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 we true heroism is figuring out a way to do them all, and to do them well, so that they inspire others to do the same.

Maybe if celebrities had been held to this standard they would have lived up to it, or perhaps they would have not been celebrities at all to begin with, and those that lived in this way would be celebrated as the true heroes that they are.