The Pursuit of (Group) Happiness

Just a few weeks ago we commemorated an important milestone in modern American history. It was 60 years ago this past April that #42 Jackie Robinson jogged out to firstbase at the old Ebbets field in Brooklyn and broke the major league baseball color barrier. Historians record that Robinson knew in that moment that he represented far more than himself, the Brooklyn Dodgers or even major league baseball. As he jogged out to second base to cheers and jeers Robinson knew that if he couldn't cut it, as a ballplayer and as a man fighting enormous forces of racism even on his own team, it would be a huge setback, not just for him professionally, but for all African Americans, indeed all of those black, white and other whose hope for racial equality rested on his broad shoulders.. Baseball was the American sport, nothing else was close. If integration worked in baseball, the trickle-down effect would be significant, in sports and in society. But, and this what worried so many, if baseball's so-called great experiment flopped, how much longer would other Negro League stars, remain in the back of the bus of American sports? Another year? Five more years? Beyond sports, the nascent Civil Rights Movement was very much at stake as well.

Monte Irvin, a friend and fellow ball player who followed Robinson to the Major leagues 2 years later summed up the impact of Jackie Robinson on America at the time. He said, "Jackie made it better not only for baseball players, but for athletes in other sports. Plus, he made people sit up and take notice of all the talent that was around. Black females started getting secretarial jobs, he made it better for us financially as well as athletically, Jackie made it better for all of us in all departments."

It may seem unreasonable that so much responsibility should rest on the shoulders of one man, that future generations in all manner of industries and professions owe there present day opportunities at least in part if not in total to this one man. Baseball, perhaps more than any other team sport is game of individuals, and so to say that one man's individual achievements and comportment on and off the field impacts every African American from that time forward is a grand statement, but history has shown and the present affirms that while it is grand it is also quite true.

The whole notion that the actions of one person can have a ripple affect for good or for ill on all associated with that person is so contrary to the American ideal. Our culture, perhaps more than any other celebrates individuality and autonomy. Think of the Time Magazine cover for person of the year, it was a mirror, the subject was You! The foundation documents of the United States affirm the right of each individual to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This week we celebrate 400 years since the settling of Jamestown, an even that merits a visit from the Queen of the very nation that those Pilgrim individuals fled from to practice religious liberty and to find individual freedom. Even those Americans who came later were in search of economic freedom and personal expression. The ability to move wherever one chose to work in any field one could, to rise as one's talents could propel a career, speaks still to the core of our ideals as Americans. We are a nation of individuals, who celebrate our individuality as an inherit right. Each person judged on his or her own merits and abilities.

Which again is what makes the example of Jackie Robinson so important and to be frank its what makes it so Jewish. Where American law and culture speaks of and celebrates individual rights, Jewish law emphasizes duties to others. America understands freedom as an absence of restraints; Judaism perceives freedom as the ability to be fully caring, involved and responsive.

The syntax of this week's Torah portion reflects this notion of interconnectedness. In describing the anonymous man who curses against God, the Torah informs us that 'his mother's name was Sh'lomit, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan."
Why do we need such a lengthy presentation of this anonymous hooligan's family and his kin? Alone, he provoked a fight and alone he cursed God, so why involve his mother, grandfather and tribe?

Rashi, one of the greatest torah scholars of our tradition saw a message about human responsibility and belonging in this unexpected list of lineage. He wrote, "The wicked bring shame on themselves, their parents and on their tribe, similarly the righteous earn praise for themselves, praise for their parents and for their tribe.
In other words, our deeps implicate those who love us and those who are connected to us through family or through culture. We may think we act alone, but we touch more lives than we know and our deeds have the power to taint or adorns the loves of those who love us. As the famous Welsch Poet John Donne wrote a few hundred years after Rashi, "No man is an Island."

Each of us affects the reputation of all. In the words of the midrash, "Why is Israel compared to a sheep? Just as if you strike a sheep on its head or on one of its limbs, all if its limbs feel it, so if one Jew sins, all Jews feel it.

All Jews and I would extend that to include all humanity have a stake in one another. Our deeds, our behavior, and our character alter the way other people perceive us as a people. Indeed, the behavior of one Jew can even influence how other Jews perceive Judaism. To use another example from baseball, think of Sandy Koufax and his decision not to pitch on Yom Kippur. Jewish boys all over the world walked a little taller that day, and they went to shul on Yom Kippur because they said to each other, if Sandy is going to pray instead of play, so can I. It was the Jewish I wanna be like Mike moment.

Our tradition is explicit about our interconnectedness.

- When Jews engage in fraud, we shame the values cultivated by our tradition
- When Jews express contempt against other Jews – either through word or deed – we betray our common ancestry and endanger our shared future.
- When Jews ignore the suffering of other people – in our own communities and around the world – we implicate the God in our own inhumanity.

But again the above is not only true of Jews, or African Americans or baseball players it is true of all people, because we are all part of a group, we are all interconnected.

When a police officer shoots rubber bullets into a unarmed group of families and reporters, all police offers are tainted by the actions of a few.

When an elected official uses the powers of his office for personal gain or partisan politics, all public servants are diminished.

When a celebrity derides and denigrates his child on a voicemail and when another leaks that recording to the media. Parents, divorced families, even celebrities, for whom I know it is hard to find compassion, feel the collective shame and piercing guilt.

We are all members of a group, indeed we are part of many groups and to them we responsible and accountable. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, but the path to that wall was beaten down by the hard work and tenacity of those who came before him. He owed his opportunity to them, and he owed his success tot hose who would follow in his footsteps.

So too as Jews we agree implicitly to preserve the Jewish people as an "or l'goyim" a light to the nations. How we act will affect how non-Jews think of us all. How we act will mold how we think of ourselves as well. Jewish self-hatred is often absorbed from the attitudes or behavior of our fellow Jews. And one courageous, pious or decent Jew can inspire a score of us to emulate those same precious ideals. Think of Professor Lebrescue of Virginia Tech, a holocaust survivor who held back the door of the classroom from the gunman so that other might live. We were not surprised by his actions and we were proud .

The kippah on your head right now, the mezuzah near your door that your neighbor and mailman see everyday, the Star of David that hangs around your neck is a pledge to reflect the highest standards of Jewish morality, it is a statement that *Kol Yisrael Areivin zeh l'zeh* all Israel are brothers, we are one.