

This is the Year: For the Red Sox and Us!

Rabbi Michelle Robinson

My husband pulled the wool over my eyes. When we got married he was a sensitive, “new-age” man. He knew how to make a mean stir-fry, baked bread, and would nonchalantly flip the channel past sports games on TV. These days he’s a changed man. He’s fallen hard – for the Red Sox, that is.

His transformation into a true blue Red Sox fan is incredible. He checks the stats, watches Sox games and games of teams he couldn’t care less about just because they impact the Sox’s chances of making the playoffs. He’s caught that amazing bug that’s endemic to this region, the unabashed faith that this will be the year the “Curse of the Bambino” is broken.

I keep telling him it is a lost cause, but he won’t hear of it. “This year,” he says, “this year, is the year they can go all the way.”

What is it about Red Sox fans? I mean, this is a team that hasn’t won a World Series since 1918. And yet, every year, the fans believe all over again that it’s possible. Even when all hope is lost, you’ll never hear a Red Sox fan say it’s over. Instead, they’ll say, “Just wait ‘til next year.” Each year there’s another chance, another possibility to shake off last year’s sad news and start afresh. Each year there’s the glowing hope that our team will rise above last year’s failures, and, this time, end the season as champions.

The irrepressible faith of the Red Sox fan is the faith of the Season of Repentance. No matter how much we’ve lost in the past year, no matter how many times we’ve failed or how many times we’ve come just short of our goals only to watch them slip away, at this time of year we believe in new beginnings.

We believe in ourselves, in the possibility of getting a clean slate. The Midrash tells us that this was always so, even from our very earliest existence as human beings. The first sin, the first failure to live up to our potential, came on the very first day of our existence in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. When Eve took the fruit and Adam followed, when they hid from God in the garden, the chain of transgression began. But so too did the possibility of repentance.

The Midrash continues that this day was the first Rosh HaShanah, that Adam and Eve turned their hearts to God, and God judged them, forgave them, and set them out into the world with this promise, “Just as you have been judged by me on this day and forgiven, so too will your children be judged on this day and always have the possibility of forgiveness.”

Every year, at this season, we come once again before God. And if we allow ourselves to be open enough, our tradition offers us the belief that transformation is possible, that we’ve been promised since the time of Adam and Eve that there will always be an open door for change, there will always be a chance for renewal in the coming year. We simply have to swing the bat, and this could very well be our year.

At this season, we believe in starting anew with others, in giving family, friends, and even ourselves a second (or umpteenth) chance to try again. The idea that we can't come before God to ask for forgiveness until we've first gone to ask forgiveness from each other, is so familiar to most of us that sometimes the power of that teaching can become dulled. But, take for example, one of the greatest ball-players to ever live, Mickey Mantle. His brilliance at bat was only limited by his life off the field – drinking, womanizing, troubled family life.

In his early career he was heralded as the next Babe Ruth and the rightful successor to Joe DiMaggio. But he was his own worst enemy. His drinking and late nights abused and beat his body for four decades.

He mused later in his life, “There is no doubt in my mind that alcohol hurt my career terribly. The numbers are important because baseball is built on them, and this is the way you are measured. And the point is, I played in more than 2,400 games, more than any Yankee player in history, and I hit 536 home runs, and I shouldn't be griping about my career. But I know it should have been so much better, and the big reason it wasn't is the lifestyle I chose, the late nights and too many empty glasses.”

In the years before his death, it was not just the wasted potential in his career that Mickey Mantle lamented, but the lost years with his family. “God gave me everything,” he said, “and I blew it. For the kids out there, don't be like me!” His drinking and emotional absence had taken a heavy toll on his family. He'd betrayed his wife, and his sons were following in his footsteps, becoming alcoholics themselves.

In 1994, Mickey Mantle entered the Betty Ford Clinic and reached out to his family and friends for forgiveness. It was a difficult road, and there was no total redemption to be won. A year after he became sober, he was in need of a liver transplant, and the journey back to his family was not easy. But he recognized his failings clearly and owned up to the hurt he had caused, and in the end, his family opened their hearts to his repentance and allowed him to ask for forgiveness.

They were at his bedside as he was dying, and together they wrote a book about his life and struggles. It is titled, [A Hero All His Life](#).

You see, to them, his heroism was not in the ballpark – it was in how he learned to own his mistakes and face his family honestly. They, who had suffered from his destructiveness for so long, understood that his ability to see his wrongs and struggle to correct them could allow them to move forward, without forgetting the past, into a different future, with a different man, a man changed by *teshuvah*. And we can be too. We simply have to take a step, and run toward home. This could very well be our year.

At this season we believe it's never too late. No matter how bleak it looks, the game can always be turned around. We believe in the possibility of reaching inside to find our spirit, even if that spirit feels beaten up by loss or pain or rejection. Even if it seems there is no hope.

This morning's Parasha [Nitzavim-Vayelech] says it best: "Surely this instruction which I enjoin upon you is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens...neither is it beyond the sea...No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." No matter how far away we are, at this time of year we're invited, once again, to believe that we're never too far, that we can always come back to rediscover and recreate our lives.

And re-creation is possible, no matter how far our lives are from the lives we had hoped they would be. There's a story about a man whose brother died, and by mistake, the paper printed a eulogy for him instead of his brother. It began, "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday." Alfred – the inventor of dynamite – was horrified. This was not the legacy he wanted to leave. He determined then and there to spend his entire fortune rewarding people who better the world. Long after his death, his Nobel Prize continues as the gold standard of excellence, inspiring brilliant minds the world over.

In Elul we're the ultimate Red Sox fans. We believe again that change, that redemption, is possible. But I suppose there are some former Red Sox fans too – some people who grew up passionately hopeful each year, but who have finally given up after so many years of disappointment. There are some of us who can't muster the energy for another year of new starts. We've tried too many times, failed too many times, been hurt too many times. It just isn't happening for us. Better to not hope than to hope and fail yet again.

But we must not let that glimmer of faith in the impossible fade. Because the playoffs are coming and God is a Red Sox fan.

God believes in us, even though God knows all the reasons not to. We're down in the 9th, and yet God believes we can still get all our bases loaded and hit it out of the park. God gives us that chance each year, a new season. God is watching all our games, checking all our stats, giving us opportunities to shine, another chance to muster the courage to get up and swing that bat, another chance to run for another base, to steal home. We may not win it this time, but, there are more games to be played, and, hey, this could very well be our year.

This is the year. Red Sox fans know it. This year, may we all be Red Sox fans.

Shanah Tovah!

Rabbi Michelle Robinson is an Associate Rabbi at [Temple Emanuel](#) in Newton. She delivered this sermon on Shabbat morning, September 20, 2003.