

ROSH HASHANA 5774 – 1st Day

Kreplakh: an often meat-filled dumpling, placed in soup when served in Jewish homes. Well, there was this little Jewish boy and every time a nice bowl of soup with kreplach was placed in front of him, he would take one look and shriek “aaaahhh! *Kreplakh!*”

It turned out that the boy’s parents liked their *kreplakh* and they were very concerned about their son’s rather extreme reaction. They went to a psychologist, who said that this was actually quite common, simply a fear of the unknown. “Show him exactly what goes into *kreplakh*,” the psychologist advised “and his fear will disappear.”

So, one day, the boy’s parents took him into the kitchen and rolled out a piece of dough. “Just like a pancake. You love pancakes, right?” “Yes,” exclaimed the little boy. “I love pancakes!”

The parents then chopped up some meat and rolled it into a ball. “Just like a meatball!” “Just like a meatball,” said the smiling little boy. The parents then placed the meat on the dough and folded the dough over. “Just like a little hat,” they said. “Just like a little hat,” the boy calmly repeated. The parents then cooked it up: “just like a dumpling in the Chinese restaurant, right?” “Yes, just like a dumpling,” the boy repeated.

The parents now poured some soup into a bowl and offered it to their son. Before putting the bowl in front of the boy, they dropped the dumpling into the soup. The boy took one look at it and screamed “aaaahhh! *Kreplakh!*”

Sometimes there is logic in that which we fear and dislike and, at other times, it makes no sense. Personally, I can take or leave *kreplakh*, but mushrooms? Well, anyone who knows me well knows what I think about the slimy fungus.

And yet, Ruthie tells me that I don’t know what I’m missing. “They’re delicious,” she claims and I read about how nutritious they are. Still, I have absolutely no desire to eat something which once grew out of the carpet of my 1969 Chevy Impala, with a cracked windshield.

And then, there are the New York Yankees. For more than 28 years, I have had a good-natured rivalry with many of you who connect so strongly with this team, known to its detractors as “The Evil Empire.” And yet, as much as I dislike the Yankees, literally booing and hissing every time I drive pass the stadium on the Harlem River Drive, I have to reluctantly admit that, like *kreplakh*, the individual components are not so objectionable. In fact, they often are worthy of praise.

At this season of revelation and confession, I come to you with a little bit of both. King Solomon, in writing the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, wrote “there is nothing new under the sun.” And yes, like millions of people nationally, I still hate the New York Yankees. As the words of Adon Olam conclude “*v’hu haya, v’hu hoveh, v’hu yihiyeh*,” so it was, so it is and so it shall be.

However, that is not to say that I don’t respect the Yankees. Today I confess that, like many Yankee haters, I have a case of Yankee envy. As a huge baseball fan, I cannot fail to notice how often mediocre and underperforming players begin to blossom and excel once they are signed by the Yankees. This year, it was Alfonso Soriano, Lyle Overbay and even Travis Hafner and Vernon Wells for awhile. Over the years, the names change, but the phenomenon remains constant.

It is a subject of continuous frustration that the broken-down, has-beens of baseball, who sputter and fumble in Cleveland, Seattle, Kansas City and elsewhere, come to the Bronx and suddenly rediscover their abilities. Just what is it about the Yankees that causes these mediocre players to become productive again once they don the pinstripes?

I believe that much of it comes from the Yankee attitude. The team simply expects excellence. Now, I don't know if Derek Jeter sits down with every new player and has a talk with them, but there is a certain "aura and mystique" associated with the Yankees.

Yankee haters all know that it really doesn't matter if the Yankees are losing a game or far behind in the playoff race. The team will keep up the pressure and find a way to challenge and often succeed, when other teams would have just called it a day. The Yankees are constantly waiting to pounce if opposing teams relax or make a mistake.

The Yankees stress professionalism and excellence, qualities that the Jewish people used to care about. The Yankees expect to win and that revitalizes and resurrects the careers of many of those who had been playing with teams which lacked that winning spirit. The power of positive thinking worked for Dale Carnegie half a century ago and it works for the Yankees today.

Of course, winning takes more than just attitude, but that attitude is an important ingredient in achieving success. Just look at this year. With all of their injuries and other drama, the Yankees have no business being in the heat of the playoff race. Whether they succeed in reaching and

winning in the post season or not, the team's focus on being its best is something all of us should try to emulate.

The Yankees have always had individual players, from Jeter to Bernie, Mariano to Sabathia, who let their actions speak louder than their words. The Yankees teach new players "The Yankee Way." That is putting the group ahead of the individual. It is striving to maximize one's potential and always being ready to contribute to the team, as opposed to worrying about individual glory.

There is so much to admire about the Yankees. The problem is that they are "the Yankees." The issue is not the player or the philosophy. It is the team. Despite their often noble ingredients, many of us will always root against the Yankees. They are our kreplakh!

Whether we root for the Yankees or not, whether we like sports or not, Yankees values are exactly what we are trying to teach and preach on these High Holy Days. So many of us have fallen into bad habits. Though we are educated and talented adults, we settle for embarrassingly low levels of Jewish literacy. We are content to get by with a smattering of Jewish phrases, foods, jokes and forwarded emails.

We have no lack of excuses for ourselves or our children, but we know that when there is something we really want to do, we find a way to get it done. Like the Yankees, excellence is something which is expected in Judaism. When we fail to strive for it, we fail ourselves, our families and our community.

The essence of being a Yankee is knowing that you may sit on the bench for several days, but when your chance to contribute arrives, you are expected to be ready. How many of us are ready, as we begin this new year, to do anything which registers on the social justice meter? How many of us have any plans to improve our communities? How many of us take pride in how much tzedakah we give? How many of us use our b'nai mitzvah celebrations as an opportunity to teach and live tzedakah, as opposed to garish celebrations of our personal ability to spend?

I will never like the New York Yankees for reasons that may be more visceral than rational, but I do respect what they stand for, what they expect of their people and what they try to project to others.

The Yankees, like the Jewish people, never give up. As Jews, it is not enough that we have risen from the slavery of Pharaoh, from the persecu-

tion of the centuries, from the ashes of the Shoah and from the current anti-Semitism which pervades Europe and much of the world.

We need to know what we stand for, we need to live what we stand for and we need to take pride in the principles we stand for. It is a mark of pride to be a Jew. It is a commitment to personal and communal excellence which defines being a Jew.

We dare not let anyone, be they anti-Semites, entertainers or others change what our people has built up through nearly four thousand years. We can laugh at ourselves, to be sure, but our heritage is one which others view with envy. As one who teaches at a Catholic college and does a lot of interfaith work, it often seems to me that everyone understands how special the Jewish heritage is . . . except for us.

On this Rosh Hashana, as we begin the year 5774, let us recognize and recommit to the excellence of living our Jewish heritage. Let us never accept mediocrity and defeat. Let us do what we have done for centuries and millennia: study hard, work hard and when we do not succeed, study harder and work harder until, our dreams come true.

As Theodor Herzl, the visionary of modern Zionism taught 120 years ago, im tirtzu, ayn zo aggadah; if you truly want it, it need not remain a dream.

Herzl knew nothing about the Yankees, but he and the Yankees share a commitment to communal success. We come together today recognizing that if we are not building ourselves and our community, then we are weakening ourselves and our community. And if we are not strengthening ourselves or our community, just what is it that we are doing which is taking up all of our time?

On these holy days, we re-evaluate, we recalibrate, we anticipate how we can make the year ahead better than the year just past. It doesn't take a huge payroll to succeed; all it takes is a commitment to be our best, to do our best and to never stop trying.

Many years ago, a European synagogue hung lamps in the Sanctuary, one for each family. When a family showed up for services, their lamp was lit, but if a family was not present, that part of the Sanctuary remained dark. So it is with all that we are trying to do at this critical crossroads in our congregation's history and our people's history. To maximize the power of our light, we need people to be there and to do, rather than to sit back and ask what's in it for us.

If we will not be for ourselves, who will? And if not now, when? ~ AMEN