

**ROSH HASHANA – 5775 – SECOND DAY**  
**“Sports and Responsibility”**

Tradition says that King Solomon authored the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes. Whether or not that is accurate, the book does contain a wealth of wisdom, along with a healthy dose of cynicism. Among the most often quoted lines is אין חדש תחת השמש “there is nothing new under the sun.”

OK, the king didn't know much about smart phones and modern technology, but he did understand human nature. We tend to be creatures of habit. We repeat the same routine over and over until something, like the sound of the shofar, jars us out of that routine.

As a sports fan, I note for the record that Sunday is the final day of the regular season in Major League Baseball. Over the past six months, millions of Americans have had their hopes dashed, their dreams shattered for yet another year.

Yet all is not lost, because for most of those fans, there is football! A fresh opportunity to hope and dream again until, as we suspected at the beginning, reality sets in.

For the basketball or hockey fans among us, the process will repeat itself in the winter. The rest of us will follow the path of one of the greatest

hitters in baseball history, Rogers Hornsby. When asked what he does in the winter, when there's no baseball, he replied "I'll tell you what I do. I stare out the window and wait for Spring."

Most sports fans have a passion for their teams which is totally out of proportion to that which is reasonable and rational. In one scene in the movie "Fever Pitch," about a fanatical Boston Red Sox fan, Jimmy Fallon and his friends are despondent following a Red Sox defeat in the 2004 playoffs. They go into a restaurant and sees Red Sox players Johnny Damon, Jason Varitek and Trot Nixon smiling and enjoying themselves over dinner. The fans who took the defeat as a personal blow were stunned to see the players treating it as just another day at the office.

Why do reasonable and rational people pay billionaire owners \$5 for a bottle of water or \$10 for a beer in order to watch millionaire athletes compete in an expensive palace? It probably is because so many of us live out our fantasies through these athletes. That's why we take it so seriously when they don't hustle, when they don't seem to appreciate the special privilege they have been granted, getting paid a fortune to live out our dreams.

Though we have been hurt so many times, we continue to look up to them as role models. If we were them, we would try harder and succeed more.

We try to get them to see the error of their ways, whether it is an errant pass or a lack of hustle. We all become the rabbis urging them to repent and do better next time. Don't keep making the same mistakes!

We know, deep down, that we are being manipulated, but we put up with it because our fantasy includes the belief that we have some type of personal connection with these elite athletes.

Sixty years ago, the Brooklyn Dodgers did connect with their fans at such a level, but that rarely happens today. Yesterday's Torah portion repeated the phrase "vayayl'khu shnayhem yakhdav," and the two of them journeyed on together. So many sports fans are willing to suspend reality and believe that we mean a lot to these highly-trained warriors, these pampered and protected individuals who can do what few others can.

Throughout the country and around the world, sports serves as a religion to millions of people. Worshippers pay for tickets to go to temples where their idols wear uniforms and the parking is atrocious. We hope to emerge uplifted, though that often fails to happen. However, there is always another service, another chance to pay homage.

Most of us have been following the sad series of events associated with the violent behavior of National Football League players in recent months.

The truth is that these cases of domestic abuse have been going on for years and they have rarely received the attention or the punishments that were warranted. The teams and the league have generally covered the cases up or treated them with minimal consequences.

What made the Ray Rice case different was not the abuse, but rather the disparity between fourteen NFL players being suspended this year for at least four games for marijuana use as compared to Ray Rice being initially suspended for two games for physical abuse of his then girl friend.

And when the videos went public, the public went wild. The National Football League could no longer treat this horrific violence as it had in the past.

To be a star athlete has always meant to be pampered and protected from consequences. As deplorable as the violence of the young men towards their girl friends and wives has been, these athletes have grown up in a world which rarely held them accountable for their actions off the field.

While athletes do not generally seek to be role models, we the public, have built them up into more than they are. Today's athletes are learning the painful lesson that this is part of the deal for pursuing their life's dream.

Thousands of years ago, the pharaoh of Egypt, worshipped as a god, understood that gods don't excuse themselves to go to the bathroom. And so, early in the morning or late at night, the pharaoh did his thing well out of sight of the public, in the Nile River.

We don't really want to know the reality about the idols we worship, whether they are athletes or other entertainers. We pay attention to them for the emotions their performances bring us. We pay attention to them because of their talents; we just want them to help our team to win; we are not all that interested in their personal shortcomings.

However, in an age where almost every word and act is made public, it is important for our idols to learn the lesson being preached on these High Holy Days, that we are now all accountable for our actions. Indeed, if we all went through life believing that everything we said and did would be made public, we would probably live lives more consistent with the words we have spoken today.

Whether or not our mother favored our older sister, our fourth grade teacher yelled at us without cause or we grew up poor, we are all accountable for the choices we make.

Being a multi-millionaire or billionaire executive has also usually exempted one from answering to the public. Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the Nation Football League, earns \$44 million a year to pad the profits of his owners, not to answer to the fans. As a result, when he got called out by the public after the Ray Rice scandal, he was totally unprepared to deal with it. He botched it badly and went into hiding for a week and a half.

During an April, 1977 interview with David Frost, former President Richard Nixon was asked if there were any limits to what a president can do, including burglary, forgery, even murder. Nixon responded “if the president does it, that means it’s not illegal.”

Though the interview occurred after his resignation, Nixon’s statement reflects the reality which many in positions of great influence experience. Star athletes in high school and college have people to assist them in fulfilling and getting around requirements. So why should we be surprised when they are suddenly held accountable for their actions? Yes, they are to blame, but it is not entirely their fault.

While idolatry was considered to be the most serious sin in Biblical times, today we assign it to the basket of archaic concepts. Yet if we think carefully about it, the concept still holds plenty of sway in the lives of many people.

Sports is big business and it's all about the money to those in charge. As a result, we have allowed the baseball game that used to run about two hours to now take three and sometimes four or more, in order to fit in all of the commercials and promotions. As fans, we will allow ourselves to be manipulated, we will even genuflect at the altar of bad behavior, if we get the entertainment we crave. The question is "when will sports hit the point at which the fans rebel?"

On this Rosh Hashana, all sports fans must confess that we have worshipped gods who are no gods. We have believed in and worshipped at the shrines of A-Rod, Sosa and McGwire, Palmiero, Canseco and Braun, Rice, Peterson and, of course, O.J.

Sports and other entertainment enable us to blow off steam. They can take our emotions to places where our daily lives rarely reach. In the words of the classic ABC "Wide World of Sports," we experience "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

The role of the entertainer is to bring us along for the ride, but we are responsible for remembering that fantasy is a diversion from, not a replacement for reality. Though we may enjoy watching them perform

their craft, we probably don't want Adrian Peterson OR Rihanna babysitting for our kids.

Entertainment seeks to move us emotionally, however our emotions serve us best when they guide our intellect, not control it. When emotional fantasies about wealth, love, power or success overwhelm our logical core, the results are rarely good. As Jews, we worship with eyes wide open, not shut. We question, we don't blindly accept.

My mom has always treasured her handwritten Ronald Reagan postcard from the 1940's, but she would never vote for him. On this Rosh Hashana, we resolve to enjoy our emotions, use our emotions, but not be controlled by our emotions.

On the High Holy Days, we confess to our sins in the plural. The current scandals in professional and collegiate sports should prompt us all to ask: what part did I play in enabling these athletes and owners to think that they could live lives free of consequences for their actions?

The sound of the shofar reminds us to look at where we are going and where we have been. Enjoy the ride, but don't lose sight of reality. AMEN