

The Pre-Season: Getting Ready

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
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I have a confession to make: I am always a little bit nervous whenever this, the first bar mitzvah of the year rolls around. I am worried that I am rusty and a bit out of practice, since the last bar mitzvah I conducted, and the last sermon I wrote and delivered was a little over two months ago, in June. So, if my timing is a bit off, my delivery a little stiff, hopefully you will be understanding and patient with me. Not to worry, Jeff, Lynn, or Eitan – by next week, I should be fine.

If you think about, it is hard to just go out and do something without adequate warm-up or preparation.

Baseball players don't just go up to the plate without having taken batting practice. When a relief pitcher comes in from the bullpen, he has already thrown a number of pitches, and then he gets to the mound, and what does he do? Warm up some more.

We are in the midst of a practice season of sorts, the NFL pre-season. Only the NFL could come up with a way to get fans, advertisers and tv networks to get people to pay to watch them practice. After all, the pre-season means nothing. It is just one long extended series of practice games. Yet a lot of people take it very seriously, even though it is just the prelude to the actual season, which begins in a few weeks, in September, and which, for Redskins fans of late, is usually over by the end of October.

Athletes, performers, musicians, are not the only ones who require warming up and getting ready before taking on their next challenge.

In fact, we Jews may very well have been the ones who invented the whole concept of practice, of warming up, and of a pre-season.

The Talmud tells of a rabbi whose habit it was to take an hour to prepare for his morning prayers. He would focus on getting extraneous thoughts out of his mind so that when it was time to pray, he would be ready for the big event.

A mishnah in Pirke Avot views this life as an ante-chamber to the World to Come, the Olam HaBa.

The mystics developed the concept of introducing some prayers and rituals with a mediation, which usually begins with the words: *Hineni muchan u'mezuman*, Here I am, ready and willing to fulfill... whatever commandment one is about to do.

Preparation is important, and our pre-season has just started.

Yesterday was Rosh Hodesh Elul, the beginning of the month right before the High Holidays. Traditionally Elul is a time our rabbis looked upon as a special time, a time of preparation for the tough season ahead. In a month we will be celebrating the Yamim HaNoraim, the Days of Awe, also known as Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance, or as sports aficionados would refer to it, "The Super Bowl of Holidays."

At this time of year our fate hangs in the balance. Our liturgy emphasizes this and strives to have us understand that much depends on how we do during this ultimate "sweeps week."

Elul is the time when we think about the message of the impending season. At the weekday morning services the shofar is sounded, in the words of Maimonides, to awaken us from our slumber, and so that we begin to think about the difficult work of getting our house in order, of reflecting on what we need to do to prepare for the days of Awe.

In earlier times, we might have referred to it as time to check our tzitzit, in other words, to make sure that all is in order with our ritual observance. Yet while it is important to check our ritual objects, I cannot help but think of the scene we saw a few weeks ago of New Jersey rabbis being taken away on by FBI agents on charges of money-laundering and fraud, worst of all, perpetrated through the Talmudic institutions they headed. Somehow, these rabbis didn't get the message that the purpose of living a religious life is to prevent us from committing fraud and other crimes.

Now is the time for us to prepare for the High Holidays by thinking about and reflecting upon what we do. We need to summon up the strength to look within and to make a conscious decision to turn if the path we are on is not in alignment with the expectations of our faith and heritage. That is why this is known as the time of turning.

A popular saying that adorns the walls of many a dorm room is, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Our Jewish sages put it slightly differently. The Talmud says one should repent one day before you die. A bit of a contrast. In popular culture, the saying evokes the sense that today is the harbinger of new beginnings, endless possibilities and horizons yet to be explored. Whereas in Judaism we remind ourselves that this could be our last day. Though not meant to be morbid, I can only imagine what Jackie Mason would have to say about the different approaches conveyed by the two aphorisms. Or as in the classic definition of a Jewish telegram: "Message to follow. Start worrying now."

If pitching, batting or playing football all require preparation, why shouldn't the difficult work of repairing our soul?

We should take advantage of this month by focusing on the meaning of teshuvah, of turning. It is the time to work on our relationships, not just with God, and not just so that we can enter the sanctuary ready to accept the divinity of God. It is also the time for us to work on repairing our relationships with those we may have wronged in the past year, with those from whom we may have drifted. If there is a loved one from whom

you have grown distant this past year, if there was a quarrel, or hurtful words were exchanged, perhaps an unintentional slight may have been misinterpreted, now is the time to reach out, to apologize. This is an important part of how we prepare for the holiday.

I worry about the people who don't take the time to adequately warm up, who rush into services on the holidays. They rush out of the house in the morning, cell phone still in their pocket and turned on as they rush to find a seat. They have not taken the time to prepare and get in the mood of the holiday.

I hasten to add, I worry even more about the ones who don't bother to come at all. At least the person who comes to shul hears the prayers, the sound of the shofar, and the rabbi's sermon, and the melodies, and is part of the community. There is potential and the possibility and hope that this person may be moved, touched or inspired. At least that individual is here, and there is a greater chance that they will heed the message of the season.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote, "On holidays we run away from our duties. On holy days we face up to them. On holidays we let ourselves go. On holy days we try to bring ourselves under control. On holidays we try to empty our minds. On holy days we attempt to replenish our spirits. On holidays we reach out for the three things we want. On holy days we reach up for the things we need. Holidays bring a change of scene. Holy days bring a change of heart."

A famous story is told of Reb Zusya. As he lay on his death bed, surrounded by his beloved and devoted students, they asked why he was crying. He said, "I cry not because I worry that my Creator whom I will soon encounter, will ask me: Why was I not Abraham. Nor do I worry that he will ask me why was I not as great as Moses or wise as King Solomon. No, I am fearful, for I worry, God will ask me: why was I not Zusya?"

That is the question we each must face, and that this season helps us to confront. This is the time to focus on how to align ourselves with the teachings of our faith. May we use this upcoming month wisely. As Pirke Avot tells us, "The day is short. The task is great, and the Master is summoning us."

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*