

Dust and Ashes: The Spirituality of Imperfection
Yom Kippur Morning 5762
September 27, 2001

Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pshishke told his disciples: Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: >Bishvili nivra ha=olam. For my sake was the world created.= But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: ani eifer v=afar; I am but dust and ashes.

My friends, this day we come together in solemn assembly. We have united in prayer, we have entered a period of spiritual challenge and sublime mystery. So now, at this moment of unique intensity, as even heaven prepares to record and recount, as the book of our deeds stands open, I want to move from weighty matters, to a truly serious subject. I want to talk about baseball. And the home run race. Barry Bonds. And Mark McGwire.

A couple of years ago, the eyes of the world were on the chase, the drama and suspense. Would the 61-home run record be broken?

And who would get there first? Now, of course, the feeling is quite different. Our attention is diverted by the tragedy of recent days.

It was lessened, even before recent events, by how frequently this once sacrosanct milestone is now challenged. But still we might ask: this slug-fest and record breaking, this whole business of baseball: is it good for the Jews? Now, for most of us, we have had to follow the Home Run chase through the daily paper. Some of you have adopted the Orioles as a home team, and one of my colleagues

has now made a habit of throwing out pitches in Camden Yards, but I still consider Baltimore another city. Neither Bonds nor Sosa have been to Washington. Here, a major player in everything else, we are, in this sport, a minor league town.

Now, I really enjoyed the Buffalo Bisons: the stadium is terrific, the team works hard, the game is fun. But minor league ball has... challenges all its own. I remember the *first* minor league baseball game I ever attended. I was happily watching the crowds and enjoying the sun and diligently looking for hot dogs without pork when I noticed the first dropped ball. Then there was a second. And a third. I left after five innings that summer day. Between the two teams, there had already been *nine errors*.

Some of you know that I prefer football to baseball. I find baseball slow. And, as a youngster, I was traumatized when the Senators left town.

And yet, there is something profound about baseball that is not true of football. One of its former commissioners, Fay Vincent, expressed the lesson when he said:

"Baseball teaches us... how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often -- those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth."

Errors are part of the game. Failure is common to us all.

And one in three is greatness. This is profound truth indeed. This is great Torah!

The baseball season is winding down, football just getting under way. But we have a season all our own, we Jews. In between the diamond and the gridiron, in between the fire and the ice, comes the highest stake game of all. The season of the soul. The game of our lives.

So much of the liturgy of these Days of Awe is a litany of faults, a recollection of failure. It seems that we are expected to be saints, to strive for perfection and, always, come up short. No wonder we Jews are so ridden with guilt, so filled with anxiety. *Our expectations are impossible!* This season seems to mock our overblown sense of ourselves, to list our faults and laugh.

But we can look at this time in another way as well. It is a challenge, yes; it prods us to do better. But it is an opportunity for *acceptance*, as well. This day, this time, the marathon of the whole holy day season, Yom Kippur, is called the Day of Atonement, a day, in another way of looking at the word, of *at-one-ment*. A chance to be at peace with ourselves at last.

Our actions are judged. That is part of what this season is about. But it is not just that. Our actions are judged... **but we are accepted.** We are not expected to be who we are not, and who we cannot ever be. As Rabbi Zusya said: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

My friends, it is only in facing ourselves as we are, in looking at ourselves in the mirror, in painting an honest picture, in telling the hard truth that we can step towards the other side of this season -- the aspect of embrace, of healing, of wholeness, of peace. One small step for each of us, is one giant leap... towards the spirituality of imperfection.

Spirituality. Everyone=s after some sort of spirituality. So often people say: >Oh, I=m not *religious* or anything. But I am a *deeply spiritual* person.= It=s in vogue, this spirituality. It=s all the rage. Even though no two people seem to mean the same thing when they use the word. Or why they prefer it to religion.

But I did, once, here a way of stating the difference that appeals to me. "Religion,@ said a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, Ais for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for people who have been there." For people, in other words, who have had to face their faults head on. **Who work their way from *failure*, through *struggle*, towards *acceptance* of themselves.**

Failure. We are all imperfect. It is the story we all share.

In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "there is a crack in everything that God has made."

You know, it=s often so very easy to see the cracks in others.

To find fault, to point fingers, to tear down. To ruin reputations. To *kvetch* and whine and complain. So easy to see the cracks in others. So hard... to own up to our own.

But we are all broken. Every one of us. Each with our own anger, each with our own agony -- pain and suffering only slightly submerged under the thin veneer of everyday neutrality. The respectable face we try to show to the world.

The person behind you being rude. Do you know about her infant's illness? People who act obnoxiously. People who make mistakes. One has an ailing parent. Another has a child falling behind in school. A spouse who left, a friend who died, a test they failed.

There are families who have children they cannot handle, and those who yearn for little ones to love and have none. Do you know the secret pain that may explain the traits you do not like? Do you know the fires that rage in the soul of a stranger?

We are ships that pass in the night; we might see the shadows of the hull. But there is that which is inside, and submerged, which we do not see. We do the best we can. We sail with as much grace as we can through the stormy waters of the world. But all of us have problems. Our own pain. Our woe we try not to show.

A rabbi put this question to a group of children "If all the good people in the world were red, and all the bad people in the world were green, what color would you be?"

Little Lori thought mightily for a moment. Then her face brightened, and she replied: "Rabbi, I'd be streaky!"

To be human is a mixture of the unmixable, to be streaky. To

live, someone once wrote >incomplete, yet yearn for completion; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness.=

Or, to quote the opening sentence of *The Road Less Traveled*, that book that was on the bestseller list for six hundred weeks or so: "Life is difficult."

Struggle. Life is difficult. There is a God. You're not it!

Three young Hasidic Jews hid themselves in a barn one Shabbat in order to smoke -- which is, of course, forbidden on Shabbat. Older Hasidim found them, and sought to punish them. One youth exclaimed: "I deserve no punishment, for I forgot that today is Shabbat!" The second youth said: "And I forgot that smoking is forbidden on Shabbat." The third youth raised his voice and cried out: "I, too, forgot." After a moment, the others prompted him. "So, nu, what did you forget?" The lad replied: "I forgot to lock the barn door."

Life is hard. Disappointments abound. Things do not always come out the way we want. We cannot control everything. Often we are not in control of events at all.

Letting go the illusion of control is one of the very hardest lessons of life to learn. For some, it has to do with control of other people. For most, we really want to be in control of what happens in our lives.

I remember hearing about a woman with cancer, who was arrested

for mailing envelopes with cyanide to the doctors who had diagnosed her, and others who had slighted her in any way. She was -- how do I put this scientifically -- not playing with a full deck. But the malady is actually fairly common: vicious, furious anger when an *outcome* is not what we want. As if the people around us really caused it. As if it will do any good at all to shoot the messenger.

Our efforts are our own. But outcomes are a mystery. At most we are partners with the Eternal. We are stuck in the middle. We want to control everything. We completely control nothing. We are told we should at least be able to control ourselves. But we are imperfect, and filled with faults. At best we manage a semblance of control. That is all. Life is difficult.

Acceptance. Acceptance is the final step.

In the face of loss, in the process of grieving, we go through stages. The process is similar, for all human beings. First there is denial: this cannot have happened, I'll wake up and it will all have been a dream. Then there is anger: it's his fault, it's my fault, it's God's fault. Then there is the aching pain of loss, the absence fully felt.

Some never fully stop denying what has happened. Some never let go of the anger. Nor should they -- completely.

But beyond the first three stages can come acceptance. Not

happiness, not contentment, never that. But a sense of adjustment, and of moving on with life.

We go through these same stages not just in dealing with death, but in the face of any pain and problem that confronts us. We deny that we are not in control; we become angry that we cannot change something; we mope around dejected for a while... and finally we face the facts... and do what can be done. Acceptance is the final step in dealing with problems.

Acceptance is the final step in life, as well. Not just of time, of event, of loss... but of self. Of our own place in the web of life.

At some point in each of our lives, we review our lives. Perhaps we feel a sense of missed opportunities, roads not taken... and we despair. Better, if we feel the pull of the web, if we see ourselves as part of a pattern, for then, with all our faults, with all our errors, we reach the final goal. We can accept our lives. We can accept ourselves.

And in acceptance, there is peace.

A Zen teacher saw five of his students returning from the market, riding their bicycles. When they arrived at the monastery and dismounted, the teacher asked the students: "Why are you riding your bicycles?"

The first student replied: "The bicycle is carrying this sack of potatoes. I am glad that I do not have to carry them on my back!" The teacher praised the student.

"You are a smart boy. When you grow old, you will not walk hunched over like I do."

The second student replied: "I love to watch the trees and fields pass by as I roll down the path!" The teacher commended the second student, "Your eyes are open, and

you see the world."

The third student replied: "When I ride my bicycle, I am content to chant the *nam myoho renge kyo* of our tradition." The teacher gave his praise to the third student, "Your mind will roll with the ease of a newly trued wheel."

The fourth student replied: "Riding my bicycle, I live in harmony with all sentient beings." The teacher was pleased, and said to the fourth student, "You are riding on the golden path of non-harming."

The fifth student replied: "I ride my bicycle to ride my bicycle." The teacher then sat at the feet of the fifth student, and said to him: "I am your student."

Failure. Struggle. Acceptance. That is the game we live.

The season we are in. The players we are. Only this game is not a competitive sport. This game we can lose together. Or we can win together. Those who are so critical of others are often in great pain themselves. And those who truly accept themselves... can most fully embrace another.

Wisdom comes, in the end, from those who have learned that life is not really a game after all. Who know about making mistakes, and paying the price. Of truth, and consequences. From those who have been to hell. And through luck or will, have lived to tell the tale. Again, from Alcoholics Anonymous, words that are so very fitting for our own High Holy Day season, the words... of the serenity prayer.

"Dear God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Avinu Malkeinu, sh=ma koleinu. Avinu Malkeinu, hear our voice.

Avinu malkeinu, chaneinu v=aneinu, ki ein banu ma=asim. Avinu Malkeinu, be gracious to us, and respond to us, for we have little merit. Asei imanu tzedakah vachessed, v=hoshiyeinu. We are but dust and ashes. Nevertheless, we pray. Treat us generously, and with kindness, and be Thou ever... our help, and our hope.

L'Shanah Tovah.