

Silver Bans Sterling For Life
D'var Torah -- Parashat Emor 5774
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How is this for a news headline from the week: "Silver bans Sterling for Life."

That's from NBA.com, the official website of professional basketball.

Usually, "sterling" is the most refined kind of silver, but this week it's been the opposite. Sterling is Donald Sterling, owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team. A week ago yesterday, a tape came to light on which Donald Sterling told his girlfriend not to be seen with Black people, including famous basketball stars like Magic Johnson. When she challenged him about it, he described his relationship to his players the way a plantation owner would describe how he makes life good for his slaves.

Silver is Adam Silver, commissioner of the National Basketball Association. Within days after the tape came to light, commissioner Adam Silver banned owner Donald Sterling from the NBA for life.

"Silver Bans Sterling for Life" -- this is also a headline about two American Jews. *Parashat Emor* opens by exploring Jewish leadership, and while it's not the same, Silver and Sterling are two Jewish people of authority and power in a prominent part of American culture. It's not just basketball, but a wider urban culture of music and taste that professional basketball is a part of. If you were Phillip Roth inventing this story, you would have called the main characters Silver and Sterling.

When I heard a brief clip of Commissioner Silver's remarks from Tuesday in passing on the radio, I had a hunch that I should go back and watch them. You could imagine that a situation among powerful, rich men, with public relations people and lawyers lined up, might end up couched in complicated, nuanced language. But Adam Silver started his news conference by boiling down his findings. He said that the words spoken on the tape were indeed spoken by Donald Sterling, and then he said, "the hateful opinions voiced by that man are those of Mr. Sterling."

I want to read for you some of the other words in Silver's statement. Now Adam Silver on TV does not seem like a natural public speaker, and bear in mind that he had just taken over as NBA leader in February from his mentor and an American

icon, David Stern, who led the league for thirty years. Of course another Jew. As he read certain parts of his statement, Silver looked up and down from his paper. But for each of these statements, punctuated by the word “I”, he made a point of looking right into the camera:

I am personally distraught that the views expressed by Mr. Sterling came from within an institution that has historically taken such a leadership role in matters of race relations and caused current and former players, coaches, fans and partners of the NBA to question their very association with the league.

To them, and pioneers of the game like Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Sweetwater Clifton, the great Bill Russell, and particularly Magic Johnson, I apologize. Accordingly, effective immediately, I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA.

I am also fining Mr. Sterling \$2.5 million, the maximum amount allowed under the NBA constitution.

As for Mr. Sterling's ownership interest in the Clippers, I will urge the Board of Governors to exercise its authority to force a sale of the team and will do everything in my power to ensure that that happens.

It's striking as you watch the tape. Adam Silver looks up and looks right into the camera, deliberately, to give his full “I” in body as well as in word. This is what it looks like to take moral responsibility. This is what moral clarity looks like.

As kids we are told to avoid using “I” when we write, to let our words represent our views. But there are times you have to say “I”. *I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA.*

In Judaism, the word for *I* is אֲנִי *ani* or אֲנוּכִי *anochi*. It can be a word that represents ego; it can stand for self-centeredness. But as we heard repeatedly in this Torah reading, אֲנִי *ani* stands for אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם *Ani Adonai M'kadishchem*, I am Adonai Who makes you holy. In moments of moral clarity, saying I or אֲנִי *ani* means speaking as God would speak. Holding in your words and body God's teaching. Saying “I” as Adam Silver did wasn't selfish -- it's letting people know: Look at me, to see what you should say and do in a situation like this.

The NBA story this week is not only a story about race in America, or about class

in the U.S. -- not only a story of rich white owners and black players who come from poor neighborhoods. It's a story about a Jewish villain and a Jewish hero.

Basketball is a unique part of the history of relationships between American Jews and African-Americans. According to an article in *The New Republic* this week, by Marc Tracy, basketball spread in America in two forms. There was a small-town, rural game, which is why the Hall of Fame is located out in a place like Springfield, Massachusetts. Then there was the urban game, which is the more direct ancestor of today's professional basketball. Urban basketball in the U.S. was pioneered by Eastern European Jews more than anyone, Tracy writes, often in gyms built to make them more respectable and American by wealthier German Jews who had been in America longer.

Tracy writes: "The shortest player in the Basketball Hall of Fame is Barney Sedran (born Sedransky), one of whose early teams, known as the Dizzy Izzies, compensated for their small sizes by incorporating concepts from lacrosse such as backdoor cuts, no-look passes, and frequent ball movement." (Some of you know exactly what he's talking about, and others have no idea.) Jews and Blacks dominated the ranks of basketball players into the 1950s, and Tracy's article credits Red Auerbach, a Jewish coach, with fielding the first all-black starting team in 1964. You could say this is a more extreme part of the same history in which American Jews helped found and fund major American civil rights organizations, during roughly the same period.

And just as Jews have climbed the socioeconomic ladder more quickly since the 1960s, and the lives of urban blacks and Jews have diverged, professional basketball has developed its own exaggerated relationship between blacks and Jews. As far as I can tell, today nine of the thirty professional basketball teams are owned by Jews, and about three-fourths of the players are African-American. Both of those percentages are more extreme than in any other professional sport. So the relationship of American Jews and African-Americans in basketball is a complicated one, with possibilities that range from partnership and respect, to paternalism (which David Stern was often accused of), to exploitation of black players by owners, to the downright plantation mentality that Donald Sterling expressed.

For me as an American Jew, all of this is why watching American Jew Adam Silver look right into the camera and ban a racist American Jew from basketball forever was so... thrilling! And I saw it right next to images of African-Americans in basketball who I admire. Like Doc Rivers, who used to be our coach and now

coaches the Clippers. In the middle of all this, he stepped up to the true, moral leader of the Clippers. Not only for his players, but for the office staff and ticket-takers and custodians, whom he took time for. For a few days, American blacks stood up not in mere outrage, but in articulate moral outrage. And then, after, they were joined by Adam Silver, the American Jewish white commissioner.

Who are we? Some American Jews are Donald Sterling, and some are Adam Silver. How quickly, in less than a century, many American Jews have forgotten that we were immigrants, unwelcome, mostly poor. It was Jews who were considered punks. Being Jewish is no guarantee of being a mensch.

But we are, at least for the foreseeable future, in a unique position as American Jews. We can pass for American; we are on average more wealthy than society as a whole; we can remember being looked at as a group, as colored and outsiders. We can choose to be Sterling or Silver. Being Silver is a choice. It's not an automatic choice, and American Jews won't automatically be accepted as the voice of the minority. Not when from some 2% of the population we own 30% of the NBA.

But we can uniquely in American be in both places. We can walk among the whitest, the wealthy, and the insiders, and play the role that Adam Silver did this week. We can be ambassadors in a way no one else can between different worlds of color and class. That's what it should mean to be a Jew in the world in 2014. That's a destiny we should claim and embrace for ourselves. How fitting for all this to come down the week of Yom Hashoah, the anniversary of hate.

Who are the Jews of America? Donald Sterling thinks of his players like slaves on a plantation. Perhaps he believes that "he who the gold makes the rules." But here again is the news headline, and it's charge to ourselves as American Jews that we should embrace:

Silver bans Sterling for life.