

**Rosh Hashanah 5777 – First Day****How Good Do I Have To Be?**

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

Temple Beth Abraham, Nashua

How good are we supposed to be? Let's get straight to the heart of why we are here. This is the Day of Judgment, *Yom Hadin*. It seems like we need a standard to judge ourselves by, as we look back on the year we have lived and especially toward the new one that is just beginning.

We are fortunate to be asking these questions about our lives in New England, home of one of the world's great monuments to morality and spirituality. I refer, of course, to Fenway Park.

Most people know about the giant wall in left field at Fenway, the Green Monster. More than 37 feet tall, it is the highest in all of major league baseball. To hit a home run over the Monster once is an achievement, a highlight of anyone's career. But to do so with regularity -- that's the mark of a special player. A mark of excellence.

If the Green Monster is an iconic test of excellence, not nearly as many people know what's across the stadium in right field. It's a tall yellow tower known as Pesky's Pole. The base of this tower marks the *shortest* home run it is possible to hit in all of major league baseball. Johnny Pesky was an infielder basically my size, a little taller, who stayed in the league for ten years despite *almost never* hitting a home run. According to legend, a teammate named the pole after him in mock admiration, after Pesky hit a ball that just barely made it past for a home run.

The Green Monster, and Pesky's Pole. The mightiest home run and the least.

What is the standard we should be applying as we think about how good we ought to be in our lives? If you think my message is that a home run is a home run, they all count exactly the same – and any good deed one person does is as precious as every other good deed from another – yeh. But that's just the start.

Because I don't think that's all you came to shul to hear on Rosh Hashanah. The truth is, we come also

to be challenged. For judgment – to judge ourselves. The Baal Shem Tov taught that God never judges a person until we have finished judging ourselves. And as much as we find it automatic to make judgments about other people in our lives, or out in the world – it's harder to judge ourselves right. Oh, we judge, but often we're either too hard on ourselves, or we make excuses. But today of all days, we want to get it right.

So we need a good standard, one that's fair but demanding, one that gives us something to strive for and something to give ourselves credit for when we meet it. Something we would be proud to work toward, without feeling like failures when we fall short.

One of my favorite songs, ever since I was about 17, is called *Od Lo Ahavti Dai*. In Hebrew that means “I Have Not Loved Enough.” It's a classic Israeli song, written by Naomi Shemer:

באלה הידים עוד לא בניתי כפר, עוד לא מצאתי מים באמצע המדבר  
*B'ayle hayadaim od lo baniti kfar, od lo matzati mayim b'emtza hamidbar...*  
 With these two hands, I have not yet built a village  
 I have not yet found water in the middle of the desert  
 I have not yet drawn a flower, I have not yet discovered where the path is leading me...  
 אי אי -- עוד לא אהבתי די  
*Ai, ai, od lo ahavti dai...* ah, I have not yet loved enough...  
 אי אי -- עוד לא אמרתי די  
*Ai, ai, od lo amarti dai* – I have not yet said enough,  
 ואם לא, אם לא עכשיו אימתי  
*V'im lo im lo achshav, ay-matai* – And if not now, when?

The song has always spoken to the dreamer in me, the striver. And as I've gotten older, to the sense of not having done enough. Of having failed to do the things that I am supposed to in my life. I'm not talking just *not yet*, but *not ever*. I know that I won't ever build a village from scratch, and I won't discover water in the desert. Or ask my kids, I'll never draw even a tolerable flower. But even though I am sure I have not yet loved enough, and I have not spoken out enough – I'm not willing to let go of the striving. Or even the sting of failure, or the rebuke of failure. I love this song.

But how do we carry the striving, the risk of not living up to the right standard -- how do we live with some failure without feeling like failures? I know a lot of you think of the High Holy Days as stern

affairs, with these books all about sin and begging God abjectly for forgiveness. Is it possible to set the tone differently? To strive, to fall short, to take responsibility for that, and yet to be glad and proud that we have striven?

Where exactly should we set that bar?

If Naomi Shemer's song is the Green Monster, Pesky's Pole might be the famous teaching of Reb Zusya of Hanipol. He said to his students: When I die and arrive at the gates of the next world, God will not ask me, "Why weren't you Moses or why weren't you Solomon or why weren't you David?" God will simply ask, "Why weren't you Zusya?"

I think a lot about that teaching. It helps with the question of comparison, which is so much part of how we judge ourselves. I know people personally who have built a village, or found water in the desert, or drawn a flower – but of course it's not the same one person. We don't have to do it all.

But Reb Zusya's teaching is not complete. It begs the question. In this day and age, especially, Reb Zusya can be an excuse to slide into relativism. Into accepting who we are today as basically good enough, as the measure of who we ought to be.

The Babylonian Talmud puts a finer point on Reb Zusya's teaching. In *Masechet Shabbat*, we learn: If a person is born when the planet Mars is high, the red planet – that person will be someone who draws blood. Maybe a surgeon. Maybe a thief. Maybe a *shochet* – someone who slaughters animals for kosher food, or maybe a *mohel* – someone who performs the ritual of circumcision to bring boys into the covenant.

The Talmud is saying that each one of us has certain built-in qualities and certain circumstances of life that we don't create. And these give us a range of possibilities, of choices. Within our unique range, we can choose to be evil, we can choose to be average, or we can choose to be a *tzaddik* – a person of integrity, who makes a great difference.

Built-in qualities – If you're gifted verbally, you can use words for insult, for practicality, to teach, or to

inspire other people. Unique circumstances – If you're in a friendship, you can ignore, you can be fun to be with, you can be interesting, you can be loyal.

The Talmud is saying that there *is* an absolute scale – of good and bad, from hurtful to caring, from apathy to seeking justice. But it looks different thought each of us. We each have an utterly unique set of qualities and capacities and circumstances to answer for, as Reb Zusya said. Not in Heaven, but here and now.

The Yehudi of Peshischa taught that every Jew should therefore find two specific *mitzvot* to work on that are unique for your soul.

Why two? And how do we go about figuring out which two? Reb Zusya, meet Naomi Shemer. *Ai – od lo ahavti dai* – I have not loved enough. *Od lo amarti dai*. I have not spoken out enough.

One mitzvah toward those you love, and one mitzvah toward the wider world.

Each of us, I would suggest, has two kinds of things to really strive for in the new year – two ways to be a surgeon or *mohel*. For all the rest, as long as you aren't a thief, it's all right to be a *shochet*.

I can't tell you from up here what your two should be. But let me say something about what it looks like to select one of each kind.

*Od lo ahavti dai* – I have not loved enough.

*Et chata'ai ani mazkir hayom* – as the cupbearer said to Pharaoh, let me bring up my own wrongs today. I was not born under Mars. I was born under Mercury. My mind is always speeding, and I think and talk fast – you all know it! At my best, professionally, I use this quality to generate ideas, to imagine possibilities, and I can be working on five different initiatives all at the same time in my mind or in my office.

But at my worst, I am impatient, waiting for other people to catch up. At home, and even with friends, I

can be prone to interrupting. I talk faster than anyone else in my family. It's been pointed out to me by my life partner and guide that I expect everyone in the house to think, listen, and respond as fast as I do. That comes out as not giving my wife and kids time to respond even to simple questions before jumping on them.

So I have been very deliberately practicing, especially the past few months, counting a couple of seconds ... after I ask a question... literally, 1, 2. And what do you know – it turns out that it works, and I can be slower and calmer. And I can think and say just as much as I would have wanted.

*Od lo amarti dai* – have you spoken out enough in the world?

Not everyone is standing under the same planet, or in the same spotlight. What it means to be a thief or a surgeon is different if you are in elected office, if you're serving in a local organization, or if you're a private citizen.

Take the case of Adam Silver, commissioner of the National Basketball Association. He happens to be Jewish. When he came into his position he would have had every reason to think his planet would be running a sports and entertainment business.

Only a few months into the job, the owner of one of the teams was recorded saying absolutely horrendous things about African-Americans. For about a week there was a clamor for punishment of some sort. No one was quite sure what the outcome would be. It was in the hands of the new commissioner.

Adam Silver didn't respond in the first moments, and he took some time to figure out what to do. During that week, many people did speak out – athletes, coaches, political figures. Compared to his experienced predecessor, Adam Silver didn't have a long track record on these issues. nor a lot of polish when speaking in public. Nor the commanding physical presence of the man he replaced.

I caught some of the press conference on the radio when Adam Silver announced his decision to ban the owner, Donald Sterling, from the league. There was something so striking about it, even though

Silver was clearly not in his comfort zone speaking to the microphones and cameras. So I went home and pulled up the video.

And talk about someone pushing himself, visibly, within the set of qualities and capacities he had, in a circumstance he did not create. As Adam Silver read his statement, he looked up and down from his paper. But for each of these statements, when he got to 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 ... I apologize. Accordingly, effective immediately, I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA.*

There were more sentences like this, more “I”. It was so powerful to watch. Adam Silver would look up and look right into the camera, each time, deliberately, to give his full “I” with his face, his eyes, his body as well as his words.

As kids we are told to avoid using “I” when we write. 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.*

Adam Silver isn't a civil rights leader, or a street protester, or an elected official. He is a business leader and entertainment producer. For that person in his situation and with his unique qualities, that day was his home run. That was what it looks like to take moral responsibility. To make an effective moral difference.

What does it look like for you?

So, how good are we supposed to be? It is possible to find a standard, something to strive for beyond ourselves, but that is also unique to each of us at this time in our lives. A kind of goodness we would

*want* to be judged by, in the eyes of God.

Each of us is born this new year under a different Mars. For some of you, the difference you make in the world will be in the same role or the same job you have had – and for others, there is a new circumstance to explore, a new opportunity to figure out. For some of you, the challenges of love are with the same family members and the same friends, while others are in new marriages or navigating very new patterns with your children or parents or others in your family. All of us have unique personality traits or patterns of communicating. None of those are inherently good or bad – but within each, it's possible to be a thief or a healer.

Johnny Pesky, the rabbi-sized Red Sox infielder, hit an average of two home runs every year of his career. But he got around the bases in other ways, scored far more runs than average, playing his role in concert with others. Let's each figure out how to take care of two mitzvot in the next year in an extraordinary way. Two home runs -- two ways to stretch toward a demanding standard of goodness that will show differently for each of us. The Green Monster, or Pesky's Pole. If we each tried to love more in our unique way, and to speak out a little more in the roles we have – then between us we'll take care of all 613 mitzvot, no problem, and it will be extraordinary.

It's important to learn from other people's example, and to be inspired by them. But we shouldn't judge ourselves ultimately against the specific yardstick of someone else, no matter how admirable a parent or giver she might be. And when it comes to judging other people, at least the ones up close in our lives, have some understanding. It's hard enough to know our own two mitzvot – you can't know what their two home runs are supposed to be.

The New Year is the time not just to stand in judgment, but to get clearer about what judgment should be. It's not easy to place the bar. But doing that well will help us be better sons and daughters, fathers and mothers; better colleagues, better leaders and followers. It's what other people need from us, and the world needs too.

*V'im lo, im lo achshav, ay'matai* – And if not now, when?