

## Sports, Loneliness, Community, Companionship

Two weeks ago Ronald P. Stanton made the largest ever donation to Jewish education, a 100 million dollar donation to Yeshiva University, to enhance the quality of undergraduate education. But that was not the largest donation to a university. This summer, T. Boone Pickens donated 165 million dollars to the Oklahoma State Athletics Program to ensure that the team remains competitive. We all know how tragic it is when a major college football program can post only 3 wins in a season. Mr. Pickens' donation will help to build a state of the art training village for the football program complete with an indoor practice field, a new stadium and parking for the above. The donation is raising controversy not because it is one of the largest gifts to any university, and not necessarily because its aim is to make the football team more competitive, but because building the dream athletics village will force the eviction of 1,300 low income residents, who suddenly don't feel quite as connected to the football program.

Why is it that Mr. Pickens greatest dream for his charity is a football program? So I did some research on Sports Psychology. There is some serious mishigas going on with sports - I could not make this material up if I tried.

The German soccer club Hamburg SV (I admit a team I do not follow with any regularity) plans to open a graveyard 15 meters from the main gate of the stadium. The chairman of the club said, "For a large number of people, it's important to be close to the club after their lives are over - the cemetery will have the look of a small, open stadium."

Like I said, I could not make this up if I tried. Eternal Image Inc., which makes customized caskets and urns, announced this summer that it has signed a multiyear licensing agreement with Major League Baseball that allows the company to reproduce the names and logos of all 30 league teams on a new line of caskets and urns, "Fans incorporate baseball in nearly every aspect of life," Eternal Image Chief said "that the caskets could appeal to a market that is just waiting for a way to make team loyalty a final statement of a great passion in their lives."

Ke'vurah, burial is something that we consider sacred, so how is it that there are some who think that their life's ambition will be fulfilled if they are buried in a stadium style cemetery, or if the Blue Jays are with them L'netach, for eternity? Don't they get it, it is a game and sometimes the game is actually over.

What I discovered in my quick research is that the great attractions to being a sports fan are a sense of community and identity. Being a Canucks fan, a Red Socks fan or a Lakers fan gives you instant identity and community. Think of the new Canucks advertisement that says, "We are all Canucks" - it speaks of a son-in-law and mother-in-law, natural enemies of course who were able to bond over 5 skaters and a goalie who push a piece of rubber into a net. When you are at the ice rink as they say "Ladies and Gentleman your Vancouver Canucks," or when Hank Sedin might score an overtime goal, you will instantly feel your community shout with you. There is almost nothing like it - a sense

of excitement and participation. But even as that emotion wells up in you, you scratch your head and say, “why exactly is it that I am so happy.”

The Talmud teaches us that it was only ten days ago that we celebrate the anniversary of the creation of man. God created many things and saw that his creations were good.

#### בראשית פרק א

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר:  
(ד) וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:

And God said let there be light, and there was light, and God say the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.

#### בראשית פרק א

(לא) וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי:  
And God saw all that He created, and behold it was very good, and it was evening and morning of the sixth day.

However there was one item in creation that God examined and found that is was not good,

#### בראשית פרק ב

(יח) וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהִים לֹא טוֹב הֵיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה לוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

And God said it is not good for man to be alone, I will make for him a fitting companion.

The one element in creation that God identified as not good is man’s being alone. But what was it about being alone that was not good. Was it an unshared life time? Was it the inability to use the special gift of language? Was it a life without appreciation? The answer is, of course, all of these. In truth, the feeling of being alone is one of the most crippling for the descendants of Adam. We know from our own experience how *not good* it is for a person to be alone.

We also know that not all companionship is good. What kind of companion? The translation I just read you is that God made a fitting companion, but if you take each of the words at its most accurate and literal translation it would translate that God made man a companion against him. כְּנֶגְדּוֹ means against, opposing.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz explains these words with a very important insight: a fundamental aspect of companionship is challenge. The Ishbitzer cites the Talmud’s description of the relationship between two great Talmudic rabbis, Rebbe Yochanan and Reish Lakish. When Reish Lakish died Rebbe Yochanan said of him, “When I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the Torah.” Rebbe Yochan expresses this after years of trying to find a fitting companion. Alas he could only find

those who would agree with him, but not those who would challenge him. The Talmud continues, “Thus Rabbi Yochanan went on rending his garments and weeping, ‘Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;’ and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.

The Ishbitzer Rebbe is teaching us something very important and that is companionship and by extension community requires challenge. True companionship is the person who gives you 24 reasons to challenge yourself; he/she asks you to question decisions when you venture into new territory or a new stage of life; those who quietly judge you, asking you “are you as good as you can be?”; those who force you to prove the veracity of your opinion in the cauldron of conversation.

There is a wonderful Midrash about Abraham’s rebuke of the Philistine King Avimelech. The midrash says, “*Kol ahavah she ein ima tochacha enu ahava*. All love that has no rebuke in it is not love.” No relationship, no companionship, no friendship can be real if one friend cannot challenge the other, offer words of constructive criticism. It is simply not a relationship worth having.

In fact the sin of Eve when she ate of the forbidden fruit, was perhaps the sin of Adam who failed to respect and challenge his wife properly. Instead of properly educating her with regard to the tree, he literally dumbed down the information to the point that the serpent knew more than Eve. Had Adam properly challenged his wife, well who knows what might be.

Here is where you can get confused with sports and the implied offer of companionship. It is well summarized by the quip about Monday night football. Every Monday night 22 million viewers who need exercise, sit around and watch 22 men who don’t Sports would seem to have it all, it has companionship it has challenge. It is just that the challenge is to the wrong people. It is the 22 men who don’t need exercise who are challenged. The 22 million other people think they have challenge but they don’t. For them it is only a vicarious challenge. Yes Naslund and Kessler are challenged, but we in the seats are not.

Today more than any other day we stand as a community as a group of companions. And we are like a team, one that has been active for 100 years. You can sit in GM place and feel the emotion well up and you can wonder what it is all about. But then you sit in the seats in Schara Tzedek and you don’t have to wonder. You know you belong to a team and a heritage, one of whose mission is Kindness, Truth, and Challenge. You can wear Naslund’s jersey, but that doesn’t make you a player. Here your name is on the back of the seat, and you inherit your place on the roster from those who came before you.

Two years ago at this moment on Yom Kippur I asked you “whose seat do you sit in?” Many of you came to me and said “that question had a lot of meaning. to me because I sit in my father’s seat or my mother’s, or I am from South Africa but I have strong memories of sitting next to my father in Shul”. This synagogue is a true community

because we do challenge you. We ask you to be better, more thoughtful, more generous, more careful of act and of thought.

And it is not just those who sit next to you who do that. Those who sat in the seats before us may not be here, but they challenge us. I personally feel challenged by those who have been Rabbis here before me. I feel challenged by Rabbi Pastinsky's chesed of finding new jobs for immigrants, challenged by Rabbi Heir's mission of the Jew in the broader community, by Rabbi Feuerstein's scholarship, and Rabbi Baumol's sense of making this synagogue a more welcoming place where all feel comfortable. I get up and I am challenged by that every day. I know that you are motivated by the lessons and the examples of your parents.

If we did not challenge our community we would not be doing our job. This year we as a community are celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We are the next link in the team that our parents and grandparents started. As a Board and a synagogue we have given detail to this challenge. We know that we must continue to invest in our youth to follow the successes of the Pinchas Bachs and Avi Bermans. And we know that we have to ensure that this building remains a center for the community.

So we will be meeting with you to be your Ezer Kenegdo, your companion in challenge. And we know that we will live up to the demands that our heritage places on our shoulders.