

Dear Chavraya,

Not one inclined to nationalisms, I nevertheless hereby acknowledge devotion to Red Sox Nation. Along with legions of the Nation's citizenry, and fellow travelers drawn by human empathy, I have felt the burden and the pain of David Ortiz' season-long slump that mercifully appears to be ending. Big Papi's saga of tribulation seemed to touch a human chord in the way few things do in the sports world, perhaps not even in much of the rest of life, which is sad. Most amazing to me is the concern that came to be felt and expressed for him, the person, as well as the great ballplayer. While of course there was ample consternation for the impact of the slump on the team, a bond of empathy seemed to form, joining citizens of the nation to each other as well as to their recognizably human hero. Fans, who can be so merciless and fickle, would rise and cheer as he came to the plate, showing *rachmones* / compassion of a sort I have never seen at Fenway. It made me proud to be a fan. It was as though "Dovidl," as I like to call him, became part of everyone's family. A newspaper survey sought out ordinary people, asking everywoman and everyman what advice they would give to Papi. The responses were beautiful, drawn from the depth of people's own experiences. To a one, they were uncritically supportive, even loving, "hang in there Big Papi, hang in there."

As the slump wore on, we became aware of a different person coming to the plate. A giant of a man, full of life and fun and confidence, as we had come to know him, having carried the team in the clutch so many times, Ortiz now seemed to approach each at bat with his shoulders bowed. Opposing pitchers started to anticipate an easy out from the once great slugger. Usually they were right, as strikeouts mounted. It became so painful to watch him head back to the dugout, head down, almost dragging the bat behind him. The question for everyone, well beyond the "Nation," for school kids, around the dinner table, in the office, at the ballpark, "What was wrong with Big Papi?" Was it his timing, his wrist, perhaps not really healed from an injury last year, was he just getting older, his skills declining? Then came the much-anticipated eye exam. Medically, everything seemed to check out. His eyes were fine.

But therein, it seems to me, the answer began to emerge. At the nadir of his slump, after another bad day at the ballpark, reporters approached a dejected David Ortiz in the clubhouse. Not in any mood for an interview, he said simply, "just tell 'em Papi stinks." Not to minimize mechanical factors that may have been the trigger, it turns out it wasn't about how Ortiz was seeing the baseball, but about how he was seeing himself.

So it was at the ballpark, at Beit Fenway, that we learned an important lesson from this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Sh'lach L'cha*. Moses sends scouts out to search out the Land prior to Israel's arrival. They bring back an "evil report," sowing discord and despair, telling the people there is no way they can enter the Land, for they saw giants there, *n'philim*, "the sons of Anak, descendants of the giants." And then the scouts offer a most revealing insight into human psychology, saying to the people gathered around them, *We were in our own eyes like grasshoppers, and so, too, were we in their eyes.*

We don't need the commentators here, though their offerings are rich, because they too, in whatever age they lived, are as human as we in all of our glory and frailty. In the Torah of our hearts, reflected in the mirror each morning, we know the truth that how we see ourselves affects how others will see us. If we see ourselves as grasshoppers, so we shall come to be and be treated by the less than kind.

Something began to change for Big Papi. He seemed to lift his head a bit, and then his shoulders. He hit that first homerun, and then another, and another. With each one the crowd continues to rise, demanding a curtain call, cheering as though it was one of the slugger's once signature walk-off home runs. We cheer for David Ortiz and we cheer for ourselves. Tzvia and I were at a game this week, among the cheering crowd as Dovidl crossed home plate after hitting another homerun. Before heading to the dugout, he looked heavenward, and raising both arms he pointed with his forefingers to the sky.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor