

Dear Chavraya,

Sitting at my desk into the wee hours on Wednesday night, learning and exploring the week's Torah portion, *Parashat K'doshim* and its crescendo call to love one's neighbor as oneself, I suddenly wondered how the Red Sox had done. Assuming the game to be long over, I looked at my phone to check the score. To my surprise, the game was still being played, still a pitcher's game, tied at only one all in extra innings. With the permission of all the Torah commentators gathered with me, reminding me to search out Torah in all realms, books left open on my desk, I went to turn on the TV just to take a quick look. My timing was almost as perfect as Jackie Bradley Jr.'s leap in that very moment. As the voices of the commentators, those who comment on the Torah of baseball, cracked with disbelief, I saw Jackie, "Yankel," as I affectionately like to call him, virtually climbing the outfield wall, seeming to defy the laws of gravity. As though floating in air, he reached over the wall and caught the ball that should have been a homerun, that should have won the game right then for Baltimore. It was a stunning display of acrobatic skill, of concentration, of someone pushing beyond human limits, a personal act on behalf of one's team. And then Jackie Jr. calmly tossed the ball back into the infield as though it had been just another catch.

Immediately after THE catch, as it may come to be known throughout the entire season, there was another star performance. That one too was caught on camera, though it may have been missed by many, or not appreciated in the glow of Yankel's catch. As Baltimore's Trey Mancini stepped out of the batter's box shaking his head in disbelief, he suddenly stopped in his walk back to the dugout. He looked out toward Jackie Bradley Jr. in centerfield, and then he took off his cap and tipped it in the direction of the player who had just robbed him of a game-winning homerun.

As I came back to my desk the Torah commentators wanted to know just what had happened, gathering around me, it seemed, like the players surrounding Yankel in the Red Sox dugout. "You are right," I thought, "there is Torah everywhere, if we are but open to it." I was so glad that I had seen THE catch, but I was equally glad that I had seen what followed it. I am so glad that in that moment I had witnessed in real time such a graceful act of *derech eretz*, of *menchlichkeit*, a simple act of human decency and respect, the essence of neighborly love expressed by one human being for another.

I was drawn back in time, even beyond the far outfield wall, engaging with the Talmudic sages, Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai, their great debate continuing to echo in the late night blariness at my desk. The two sages were still at it, debating what might be the great principle of Torah. Rabbi Akiva insisted it must be the very verse from this week's portion, *Parashat K'doshim*, the verse so well known, *v'ahavta l'rey'acha kamocha* and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). Ben Azzai demurred, worried lest the beautiful verse be misunderstood, that the word *kamocha* be translated, as it could be, to mean *who is like you*, that you should love your neighbor who is like you. Perhaps that could mean who is like you as one created in the image of God. Ben Azzai knew, though, how tribal we can become, worried that *who is like you* might be understood by some to refer

only to another Jew or only to one with your own opinions, perhaps one of your own nation and not from another. I could feel the great Maimonides smirking nearby at Ben Azzai's sensitivity, too sensitive, the Rambam must have thought. And then the great doctor, scholar, and rabbi snapped back through time, right there at my desk, his words distressing me as they always had, surely distressing Ben Azzai, and I believe they must have distressed even the saintly Rabbi Akiva, whose embrace of this verse, I believe, is with a view to its universal import. Maimonides words sizzled, hurting as they always had, as he explained that love of one's neighbor indeed refers to one who is *just* like you, and not only for your fellow Jew, but for your "brother" in the study of Torah and in the performance of the commandments (Mishne Torah, Judges 14:1) Maimonides' view becomes one of the most narrow interpretations of neighborly love, not only as love limited for another Jew, but for another observant Jew.

Feeling Ben Azzai's concern magnified now, his words sent back through the ages, as though a baseball's long throw back from outfield to infield, racing across page and time, "No, this is the great principle in Torah," and then his offering, from Genesis 5:1, a verse that seems so unlikely, hardly carrying the beauty of Akiva's choice: *This is the book of the generations of Adam/zeh sefer toldot adam. On the day that God created the human, God made the human in the likeness of God. This is an even greater principle.* The universal scope of this verse could not be misunderstood or denied. It is clearly about all people.

The challenge becomes how to join Akiva's verse with Ben Azzai, how to foster love for every human being, to recognize very person everywhere as our neighbor. Time traveling then to mid-nineteenth century Germany, I sought comfort from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. He knew why I had come, seeming to feel his own pique with Rambam. It seemed clear from his own commentary how much Rabbi Hirsch appeared to think that Rambam had sorely missed the mark. Of the other, every other human being as our neighbor, Rabbi Hirsch speaks so soothingly in words that come to me as a portent of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "you don't have to like everyone, but you have to love them." In regard to another, Rabbi Hirsch teaches, *we are to rejoice in "his" good fortune, and grieve over his misfortune as if it were our own.... [This] is required of us even toward somebody whose personality may be actually antipathetic to us....* Drawing on the etymology of the word for neighbor, *rey'a*, Rabbi Hirsch sees the word *mireh/pasture*, and says, *everyone is to find and recognize in everybody else his 'mireh,' the 'pasturage of his life.'* Related to the root of neighbor is also *ro'eh/shepherd*. In the pasture of life, as on the baseball diamond, we are shepherds to each other. In that way, Rabbi Hirsch teaches further, *Nobody may look on the progress of another as a hindrance to 'his' own progress, or look on the downfall of another as the means for 'his' own rising, and nobody may rejoice in 'his' own progress if it is at the expense of his neighbor's....*

It is the Torah that came in the wee hours of night on a field of dreams, one player tipping his cap to the greatness of another's skill, the skill of one who then humbly threw the ball back to the infield without display or celebration, each one offering a lesson in what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor