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Michael A. Mogill

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WAIT UNTIL NEXT YEAR . . . AGAIN

Michael A. Mogill*

I had been down this road before but never before in this manner. Members of the congregation had solicited me in previous years to deliver a sermon on the high holy days, and I fortunately had summoned up the courage (some might say gall) to do so, especially in light of my own unresolved views on the subject of religion. While I admittedly had all along doubted my own abilities to contribute anything truly worthwhile in this context, my comments had been well received and had even led to the publication of each of those talks.¹ Thus, I felt entitled to a sabbatical from the pulpit when asked to again speak to the congregation in the fall of 2005. Yet a little voice inside of me (some might call it my conscience) made me believe that it was time to again share my thoughts, especially in light of the bar and bat mitzvahs of my children over those past two years. I had often remarked to them that they should strongly consider continuing their religious education in some manner while contributing to the betterment of the community. Perhaps my own participation in the life of the congregation would serve as a model for them, if not for others. So this time around, I did not wait for the phone to ring nor did I procrastinate; instead, I volunteered to confront my own conflicting religious demons, the result which was the following remarks presented before the Congregation Beth Tikvah on Friday evening, September 22, 2006.

As I begin these remarks, I want to recall the story of the tour of the Negev. A bus stopped at the *Markhtesh Ramon*, a huge and impressive crater. As the people exited the bus, there was one tourist (there is always one in every tour group) who went far ahead of everyone else to where he thought the tour guide was headed, in this instance doing so to get a better view overlooking the crater. But

* Professor of Law, The Dickinson School of Law of the Pennsylvania State University; B.S., University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; J.D., Northeastern University School of Law; LL.M., Temple University School of Law. The author wishes to express thanks to his children Adam, age 15, and Sarah, age 13, for having inspired these remarks by entering their teens, to the congregants for attentively listening, to his Aunt Ruby for serendipitously supplying some of the source material, to the Chicago Cubs for their consistent non-championship seasons, and to Lisa Woltz for preparing this manuscript.

1. See *Eight Simple Rules for Stating My Dogma*, 6 RUTGERS J.L. & RELIG. 3 (2005) and *Take Me Out to the Synagogue*, 14 SETON HALL J. SPORTS & ENT. L. 101 (2004).

unfortunately and without anyone noticing, our tourist got too close and fell off the ledge. Down, down he fell, until he managed to grasp a root jutting out from the crater's side. In fear, he glanced up and cried, "Is anybody up there?" The only response was silence, so again and again he called out, only to be met with more silence. As he looked up in desperation and tried to renew his grasp, he saw a cloud pass overhead and a voice, seemingly from the cloud itself, asked, "Do you believe?" The tourist responded quickly, "Oh, yes, dear God, I believe." The voice responded, "Are you sure you believe?" and the tourist called back, "Oh, yes, dear God, I believe in perfect faith." Then the voice spoke again, softly, "Then let go!" This was followed by silence, then by the tourist's voice calling, "Is there anybody else up there?"²

Faith—it is what has brought us together this evening. As Mark Twain suggested, and which our accidental tourist can likely relate to, "religion consists of a set of things which the average man believes and wishes he was certain."³ I am reminded of this when I read what has for my family become a daily requirement, the latest installment of the comic strip "Zits." This comic details the life and times of Jeremy, the epitome of what I have learned is today's teen, and the blessing and havoc he wreaks on his family. In this particular day's rendering, Jeremy places a dirty bowl in the sink while his mother tells him, "dirty dishes go in the dishwasher." Jeremy replies, "I'll do it as soon as I'm done with this phone call. . .promise." The next four captions show Jeremy's mother standing next to the sink, while the window in the background first shows the falling of leaves off a tree, then snow blowing against the now barren tree, the subsequent re-budding of the tree as birds return to nest, and finally the full blooming of the tree—during this time the bowl has not left its resting place. In the last caption, as the window again shows the falling of leaves, Jeremy has returned to open the dishwasher, taken the bowl out of the sink, and informed his mother, "See? What'd I tell you?"⁴ Had this passage of time taken as long as it felt to Jeremy's mother or was it a fleeting moment as perceived by Jeremy? In either case, each apparently had the faith that those dishes would be placed in the dishwasher at some point in time.

We are now at the time of what is commonly known as the Jewish New Year. Indeed, the very words "Rosh Hashanah" literally mean

2. HERSHEL SHANKS, 101 BEST JEWISH JOKES 52 (Moment Publications 1999).

3. JON WINOKUR, THE PORTABLE CURMUDGEON 233 (NAL Books 1987).

4. From the comic strip, "Zits," authored by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman.

“head of the year” or “first of the year.”⁵ Our typical greeting at this time is “L’shanah tovah,” which translated means “for a good year.”⁶ In reality, many of us have several new years, one being the American one that begins on January 1, another being the school year, which begins in August or September, and yet another being the fiscal year used for business purposes, which can start at different times of the year. For tonight, we are addressing the Jewish year 5767, which, in effect, does bear a relationship to the American New Year.

Indeed, many Americans view the New Year as the time to make resolutions and thus plan for a better life, while Jewish people use the time of our new year to become introspective, both in reflecting back on the events of the past year and planning for changes in the upcoming year.⁷ In these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are encouraged to be optimistic as we examine both our deeds and our misdeeds and to reassess our lives in an ethical and religious manner, all in the hopes of receiving repentance.⁸ The ten “Days of Awe” that follow Rosh Hashanah will culminate in the most solemn of the religious days in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur.⁹ And in these ten days, God will supposedly judge us by our actions during the past year and ultimately determine and seal our future on Yom Kippur.¹⁰ It is in these ten days that we are given time to change that final judgment for the better, by way of asking forgiveness, through prayer, and through charity.¹¹ In this solemn yet happy time, we gather with our family, our friends, and our fellow congregants to share in the hopes for a better year ahead. We become a new and improved version of our former selves, not just the proverbial image of being one year older and deeper in debt. In this manner, we renew our bonds with each other and our community. The shofar awakens our slumber in a prescribed manner, first to celebrate God’s kinship, second to stress the role of the individual, and third as a reminder of the events associated with the blowing of the ram’s horn.¹² We are made to realize not just what we have done but, more importantly, what we can do with

5. *Rosh Hashanah*, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/holiday2.html> (last visited Sept. 5, 2006).

6. *Rosh Hashanah*, *supra* note 5.

7. *Rosh Hashanah*, <http://jewfaq.org/holiday2.htm> (last visited Sept. 5, 2006).

8. JOSPEH TELUSKIN, *JEWISH LITERACY* 564-65 (William Morrow and Co., Inc. 1991).

9. LEO ROSTEN, *THE JOYS OF YIDDISH* 307 (Three Rivers Press 2001).

10. *The Meaning of Rosh Hashanah*, <http://www.ou.org/chagim/roshhashannah/meaning/html> (last visited Sept. 5, 2006).

11. *Rosh Hashanah Traditions & Story*, http://www.akhlah.com/holidays/roshhashana/roshhashannah_traditions.php at 2 (last visited Sept. 5, 2006).

12. LEO ROSTEN, *THE JOYS OF YIDDISH* 307 (Three Rivers Press 2001) (among these events is the remembrance of the blowing of the ram’s horn as a means of communication between moun-

our lives.¹³ It is thought that during this time of profound renewal we determine who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.¹⁴

Some people may carry their idea of religion into the sporting world. So I mention this to my children, both of who are good sports just to sit here and listen. As a Chicago Cubs fan, reflecting back can indeed be painful. In case one really needs to remember just how painful one's dedication to the Cubs can be, consider for the moment these twenty major events that have occurred since the Cubs last won a World Series championship, in 1908:

1. Radio was invented (Cubs fans get to hear their team lose).
2. Television was invented (Cubs fans get to see their team lose).
3. Baseball added fourteen teams (Cubs fans get to hear and see their team lose to more clubs).
4. Jewish comedian George Burns celebrated his 10th, 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th, 60th, 70th, 80th, 90th, and 100th birthdays.
5. Halley's Comet passed the Earth—twice.
6. Cubs broadcaster Harry Caray was born—and died.
7. The National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, and National Football League were formed (and note that each of those Chicago teams has won championships).
8. Man has landed on the moon, several times (and so have several home runs given up by Cubs pitchers).
9. Sixteen U.S. presidents have been elected.
10. There were eleven amendments added to the Constitution.
11. Prohibition was created—and repealed.
12. The Titanic was built, set sail, sank, was discovered, and became the subject of major motion pictures (All of which gives Cubs fans hope that something that finishes on the bottom can come out on top).
13. Wrigley Field was built and became the oldest park in the National League and the second oldest in all of baseball.
14. Flag poles were erected on the Wrigley Field roof to hold all the team's future World Series pennants (Those flag poles have since rusted, became worn out, and were taken down without ever holding a pennant).

tain peaks in ancient Judea and as a means to confuse Satan from trying to influence God when God judges who is a sinner).

13. MICHAEL STRASSFELD, *JEWISH HOLIDAYS: A GUIDE AND COMMENTARY* 96 (Harper and Row 1985).

14. SARA SHENDELMAN & DR. AVRAM DAVIS, *TRADITIONS: THE COMPLETE BOOK OF PRAYERS, RITUALS AND BLESSINGS FOR EVERY JEWISH HOME* 22 (Hyperion 1998).

15. A combination of 41 Summer and Winter Olympics have been held.

16. Thirteen baseball players have won the Triple Crown, leading their league in home runs, batting average, and runs batted in during a single year (Several have thanked Cubs pitchers).

17. Bell-bottoms came in style, went out of style, and came back in.

18. The Cleveland Indians, Boston Red Sox, Arizona Diamondbacks, Florida Marlins, and even archrival Chicago White Sox have all won the World Series.

19. The Cubs have played 14,315 games (They lost the majority of them).

20. Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Oklahoma, and New Mexico were added to the Union.¹⁵

Hall of Fame announcer Jack Brickhouse has added his perspective to this passage of time without a World Series championship by suggesting, “Any team can have a bad century.”¹⁶ One Cubs manager, upon taking on the reins of the team after it had finished the previous year in eighth place, proclaimed, “This is not an eighth place team”—he was soon proven right, as the Cubs were indeed on the move, finishing the next season tenth among the ten teams in the league.¹⁷

I can attest that being a Cubs fan is a nonfatal but incurable disease. Yet, as *Seinfeld* might say, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that”—this passion and freedom allows the Cubs fan to be free from the modern tendency and trend to follow today’s winner instead of having an unconditional loyalty. Just out of curiosity, and with the knowledge that the Internet has also come into existence since the Cubs last won the World Series, I decided to do a search to see how many sites there were to explain the commitment of the Cubs fan. Under “the Cubs and lovable losers,” I found 2,049 sites; under “the Cubs and curses,” I found 3,619 sites; under “the Cubs and futility,” I found 12,464 sites; under “the Cubs and wait until next year,” I found 36,632 sites; and under “the Cubs and humor,” I found 38,374 sites.¹⁸

I readily admit that this whole idea of curses piqued my attention. I learned that back in 1945, a tavern owner and Cubs fan named Bill Sianis discovered and took in a billy goat wandering the streets of Chicago, the goat most likely having fallen off a livestock truck. The goat, which he named Murphy, became Sianis’s pet; he became so en-

15. E-mail from author’s aunt (Oct. 28, 2004) (on file with author).

16. *Play Ball! Books for all Season Long*, The Sentinel, Apr. 16, 2006, at D7, available at www.cumberlink.com.

17. SCOTT SIMON, HOME AND AWAY 68-69 (Hyperion 2000).

18. From searches on msn.search on Sept. 5, 2006.

amored of the goat that he took his two tickets along with the goat to the fourth game of the World Series against the Detroit Tigers at Wrigley Field. While Sianis was initially successful in entering the park and actually took the goat onto the playing field, ushers inevitably intervened and escorted Sianis and the goat to the ticketed seats. However, they were ejected from the Park before the end of the game, supposedly because of Murphy's odor. Sianis was upset and yelled, "The Cubs will never win another pennant."¹⁹ The Cubs lost the Series, leading Sianis to send a telegram to the Cubs owner that read, "Who Smells Now?" And true to the curse, they haven't played in a World Series since, even though Cubs management has actually gone as far as to have Sianis's nephew bring another billy goat into the park to try and break the curse, but all for naught. And so in the mind of many a Cubs fan, the curse endures, as does the loyalty of the fan himself.²⁰

Maybe the best way for an enduring fan to cope is by turning to the world of make-believe. I recently read two books about baseball. One involved a teenager, Brendan, who was the star player on a team going nowhere.²¹ He had playoff dreams, which was appropriately the title of this book, but unfortunately played for a team called the Cubs. As Brendan's friend commented, "Any team named the Cubs is going to have a tough time making the playoffs."²² Whether these playoff dreams are ultimately realized is for the reader to learn; at a minimum Brendan learns that if you do your best, then you never really lose.²³

Then there is *The Cubs and the Kabbalist*.²⁴ The author of this book is a rabbi and professor who has the fortune or misfortune of being married to an attorney who suffers from a life-long obsession with the Cubs. He wrote this book for her and her fellow fans to combine both the mysterious, magical teachings of the Kabbalah with the angst of those longing to see a Cubs championship during their lifetimes. In an attempt to improve his wife's well-being, the book's protagonist, also a rabbi, secretly performs a kabbalistic ritual in Wrigley Field in an attempt to remove that legendary "Billy Goat Curse," and other supposed but previously lesser known curses, and to help the players develop the spiritual strength they need to win. Ultimately, the rabbi's

19. *Billy Goat Curse on the Chicago Cubs*, http://www.baseballhistorian.com/html/american_heroes.cfm?page+178 (last visited Sept. 5, 2006), and Steve Gatto, *The Legend of the Billy Goat Curse*, <http://www.lastcursestanding.com/legend.htm> (last visited Sept. 5, 2006).

20. *Billy Goat Curse on the Chicago Cubs*, *supra* note 19.

21. FRFD BOWEN, *PLAYOFF DREAMS* (Peachtree Publishers, Ltd. 1997).

22. *Id.* at 9.

23. *Id.* at 94.

24. BYRON L. SHERWIN, *THE CUBS AND THE KABBALIST* (West Oak Press 2006).

plans for Cubs glory depend on another character, Sandy Greenberg,²⁵ who seems to have mystically appeared out of thin air. This book brings together two ancient mysteries of Western culture—Jewish mysticism and Cubs fandom. And so, finally. . .well let me leave it at that.

The saga of the Cubs can serve as a metaphor for this time on the Jewish calendar. There is a collective hope in the Cubs devout followers that they will experience meaningful games in October. Their longing is a personal symbol of faith, desire, and perseverance. There is a common bond and an enduring connection between these fans and their team, always with the hope that next year will be the right year for them. As we sit here tonight, we too are accustomed to longing and committed to hope. While maybe the use of the word “passion” is too strong to suggest our religious connection, we surely have shown a loyalty and obligation to follow the tenets of Judaism, to clearly remember the past and maintain faith in the future. Like Cubs fans, we can learn from our disappointment and somewhat diminished dreams that there is much to be said for, as Billy Joel would sing, keeping the faith. While losing may be part of games, it is not always the same thing as failure.²⁶ As we look ahead, I suppose that we could choose to do what a group of cynical Cubs fans did on opening day of the 1980 season when they unfurled a banner—again, I would note this was on opening day—that read: *WAIT UNTIL NEXT YEAR!*²⁷ Perhaps this conduct can be explained in the words of baseball immortal Yogi Berra who once suggested, “Ninety percent of the game is talent, the other half is mental.”²⁸

Yet, I doubt that anyone here has not had disappointments over the past year or in any year that one chooses to remember. Fortunately or unfortunately, we cannot retreat to the land of fiction, however comforting that may be. Our beliefs will constantly be put to the test in order to determine if we have kept the faith in whatever has really mattered to us, whether it be our family, our friends, our religion, our community, our careers, or even baseball. We may be like the Cubs and their fans, to whom baseball is akin to a religion, with its rituals, rules, and superstitions. For like a religion, allegiance to that team is a way of life, based on faith, hope, and commitment.²⁹ Let us strive for

25. *Id.* at 160-61 (named after the two greatest Jewish baseball players in history, pitcher Sandy Koufax and outfielder Hank Greenberg).

26. SIMON, *supra* note 17, at 136.

27. SIMON, *supra* note 17, at 3.

28. SIMON, *supra* note 17, at 113.

29. SIMON, *supra* note 17, at 51.

excellence in whatever we contribute within our own community, however we may define it, with the realization that, also like the Cubs, we may inevitably face losing situations over the months to come. Still, we have the chance to remain loyal to our beliefs, and remain passionate and ever hopeful that we will succeed in our endeavors and that we will not have to wait until next year. . .again.

EPILOGUE

And so ended my own trilogy of sermons, which may in baseball lingo be viewed as a sort of personal “triple crown.” Several members of the Congregation approached me afterwards with words of praise, some even identified themselves as members of the same forlorn “club,” and others asked for copies of my remarks. And my children sparred me from an ever so critical eye-rolling by summing things up by saying, “Yeah, that was pretty cool, at least the sports part—but too bad you’re a Cubs fan.” And knowing full well the risks I was taking when I then asked my teenagers what I should do with this address, they both suggested that I should have the “faith” to have it published and maybe even prepare for future sermons. So, while I will follow their first suggestion, I will defer on their second. Just as our teenager in “Zits” always seems to delay his actions, especially when prodded by others, that decision can wait—until next year. . .