

THE HOME TEAM
ROSH HASHANA 5775
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The major sports event of the summer didn't occur in the United States. It occurred in Brazil. It was, of course, the World Cup of soccer. Millions of people watched the games around the world and cheered for their favorite team. When the games were broadcasted live businesses stopped, entertainment places were empty, everyone concentrated on watching the matches. In Israel there were big screens placed in restaurants and on public street corners so people could observe the games. During the final game between Germany and Argentina even the war in Gaza seemed to stop.

I was in Modiin with my family during the final game of the Mondial. I watched it with my daughter Hadassa. My son-in-law Haim, originally from Argentina, and a devoted soccer fan, was too nervous to watch with us. He went to a friend's house even though we were concerned that on the way he would hear a siren warning of incoming rockets. Thankfully it was quiet. The next morning when I saw him he was quite disappointed, as was my grandson Shmuli, but they were proud that Argentina made it to the final game.

David Brooks, in an essay on July 10 in the *New York Times* asked this question: "Is life more like baseball, or is it more like soccer?" He writes: "Baseball is a team sport, but it is basically an accumulation of individual activities. Throwing a strike, hitting a line drive, or fielding a grounder is primarily an individual achievement. The team that performs the most individual tasks will probably win the game."

Basing himself on an article written by Simon Critchley in the *New York Review of Books*, he says that soccer is not like that, except for the penalty kick which is intrinsically individual. Critchley writes: "Soccer is a collective game, a team game, and everyone has to play the part which has been assigned to them, which means that they have to understand it spatially, positionally, and intelligently and make it effective."

You may agree or disagree, especially since baseball is known as America's sport, and has been romantized by such authors as Bartlett Giamatti and George Will as the quintessential American experience. However, Brooks makes some very interesting points.

He suggests: "Most of us spend our day thinking we are playing baseball, but we are really playing soccer. We think individually, choose whatever career path to take, whom to socialize with, what views to hold. But, in fact, those decisions are shaped by the networks of people around us more than we dare recognize."

In our parlance, I would say that it takes a family, a village, a community, a people, to be successful. It is not a sprint, it is a marathon. Soccer takes 90 minutes of controlled action and there are very few substitutions. You must be prepared for the long haul even sometimes going into overtime.

The question I want us to look at today is: Who is our community? What team are we on? What is needed for success? Are we ready for the marathon, for the long run, to play our positions correctly and make our lives worthwhile?

Today we begin the new year of 5775. How do we base that count? According to Jewish tradition it is five thousand seven hundred and seventy-five years from the creation of the world, or, according to some, the creation of humanity. Whether this is factually correct or not does not matter, we have accepted it. This is a universal response to the passage of time. It is interesting to note that the other Abrahamic religions date their calendar from the decisive event of their own particular histories: the birth of Jesus; Muhammad's escape from Mecca. As we well know, nothing distinctively Jewish is even mentioned in the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is only when G-d is disappointed first with Adam and then with Noah that G-d changes the plan from working with all of humanity to working with one family – that of Abraham – the father of the Jewish people.

If one follows the liturgy of the High Holy Days, it is possible to see universal themes. G-d judges all people and not just our nation. The Haftorah of Yom Kippur afternoon is the Book of Jonah, stressing the theme of the repentance of the people of Nineveh, not an Israelite city, to state only two examples. It would seem then that we could make the case that the team that we should be on is that of all humanity, stressing universal themes and intergroup solidarity. We should be citizens of the world and be concerned solely with those items on the world's agenda. For after all, have we all not been created by one G-d, and part of the same human family?

There are some who believe that this is the Jewish mission. It is our task. Classical Reform Judaism in Europe in its early stages suggested that the Jewish role was not only to be “a light to the nations” as Isaiah detailed it, but to pull down the barriers between us and the other nations of the world. We were to be citizens of the world of Mosaic persuasion. While biblical, rabbinic and liturgical sources can be found to support this attitude, I believe it is a dangerous one for us to profess at this particular moment in our history.

In 1970, Cynthia Ozick, in an essay entitled *Towards a New Yiddish* wrote: “If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar - we will be heard far. But, if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part – we will not be heard at all.” Ozick is informing us that if we choose to be universalistic and blow into the wide end of the shofar, our message will not be heard, our people's mission will not be accomplished, we will simply assimilate and be like all others. However, if we begin with the particularistic, with our Jewish voice, with our Jewish agenda, with the narrow end of the shofar, then the sound will be heard loud and clear for all. For the Jewish people to be Isaiah's “light to the nations,” we need to be Jewish first and universal second.

In a chapter which I have authored in a book on *Tikkun Olam* which will appear in early 2015, I discuss the prayer Alenu, which was written as early as the 2nd century and was originally part of the liturgy of Rosh Hashana. It was only around the 13th century that it was moved to our daily liturgy and is now recited three times daily. If you look closely at the prayer you will notice that there are two paragraphs. The first speaks of the greatness of G-d and the particular

relationship between G-d and the Jewish people, while the second is much more universalistic in tone, suggesting that Divine sovereignty will encompass the entire world. This dichotomy between the particular and the universal is not uncommon in our texts or in our liturgy. To which do we give prominence? Are we members of the Jewish people first and citizens of the world second, or vice versa?

This type of issue arises for us in so many walks of life. Let's take for example the question that confronts many of us. To which charities should we contribute? Should our major gifts be to organizations, institutions and causes of the Jewish world? Or, since we are citizens of the world as well, should we primarily support the great universities, museums, and causes of all humanity? This is not an easy issue, for we want to be supportive all worthwhile causes. However, since we have limited financial resources and volunteer time, we cannot do everything.

I take as my primary source a quote from Maimonides, the Rambam, in his Mishneh Torah in the Laws of the Gifts to the Poor (7:13). He states: "The needy in your home precede the needy of your city. The needy of your city precede the needy of another city. As it says: 'to your brothers and to the needy and the poor throughout the land.' (Deuteronomy 15:11)" In other words, you are to give first to those closest to you and only then to those outside your closest circle. Your first concern should be for your individual family and their well-being. You should not forget those outside your family, but they do come second according to Maimonides. Maimonides is basing himself on the famous quote of Hillel in Pirkei Avot (1:14): "If I am not for me, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, who am I?" In other words, according to Hillel, we must start with ourselves. But stopping there is not enough. We must then move beyond ourselves as well. Using Ozick's language, we must blow into the narrow end of the shofar first because only then will it be heard through its wider end.

I believe that this is one of the major issues with which American Jewry must contend. Since we are an integrated part of American society it is easy to lose our particular nature and become universal in mindset, actions, and philosophy. Our sources teach us that we must begin with ourselves first and then proceed beyond that inner circle to causes and issues which are important to all humanity.

This was a very difficult summer. All of us watched with great trepidation what was occurring in Israel during Operation Protective Edge. Many of us traveled there and had to find shelter when rockets rained down upon Israel's soil. Having been there at that time, I can tell you that wherever you walked you were conscious of where you could hide. Most of the country, not only those communities around the Gaza strip, was susceptible to rocket fire. All of Israel felt vulnerable. And that vulnerability increased when the many underground tunnels were found leading into Israeli population centers. Imagine having dinner in a restaurant in Tel Aviv when the first rocket attack occurred, being told to stand near an outside wall, watching the Iron Dome do its work in the skies above. Imagine sitting with your grandchildren in Modiin and hearing the siren once more, scooping them up and entering the safe room in the apartment. I don't have to imagine these situations, I lived them. I cannot even imagine what it must have been like to be in the constant line of fire every day for fifty days.

The world's media was concerned with the death and destruction in Gaza. Any human being, and we in particular, must state that it was horrible to see the devastation. Judaism, the Jewish state, the IDF, has no interest in taking the lives of innocent civilians living in the area. All lives matter, every human being is a precious soul. We know that Israel warned of upcoming attacks, sent messages by phone and text to evacuate areas while Hamas deliberately sent rockets from schools, mosques, and marketplaces. As the Prime Minister of Israel stated, "We use rockets to protect children, they use children to protect rockets."

Perhaps, if more people would have been killed in Israel, the world's media would have been more interested in what happened there. Thankfully, the Iron Dome protected Israel and its civilian population. If that had not been the case, I don't even want to imagine what would have occurred.

We watched anti-Semitism grow across Europe. In Paris, Brussels, London, and other cities, marches against Israel's policies became anti-Semitic in tone and rhetoric. The social media was filled with it. One can legitimately criticize Israel's policies. One cannot and must not de-legitimize Israel as a state. That is not simply anti-Zionism, that is anti-Semitism and we saw too much of that during the summer. And some of it is continuing, unfortunately, today after the conclusion of the war.

While all this was going on, Ukraine was a place of turmoil. The Jewish community in Ukraine suffered as well. The Jewish Agency brought dozens of Jewish teenagers from embattled areas of Ukraine to a special summer camp in Israel. Hundreds made aliyah, all while the State of Israel was under siege. Only two weeks ago, I was informed that 24 Jewish refugee children from Donetsk and Lugansk arrived at a Masorti day school in Kharkov, which is quite close to the Russian border, with only the clothing on their backs. With everything occurring in Israel, we have heard very little about what happened to the Jewish community in Ukraine this summer. I can tell you that there have been major difficulties.

It seems to me that if we don't take our own predicament seriously, no one else will. And, I haven't even begun discussing issues raised by the recent PEW report concerning Jewish identity, our Jewish students on campus, the needs of Jewish education, or the myriad of other Jewish causes that need our support and help. Being a Jew is a marathon, not a sprint. It is positioning yourself as part of a team knowing that you have a position to play, a task to do, and a mission to perform. If you don't do your job, if you don't position yourself properly, if you're not part of the team, then the entire match can be lost.

It is time for us to declare loudly and proudly that our first concern is the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and Jewish communities around the world. We need not be apologetic for that. As Hillel taught us: "If I am not for me, who will be for me?" On Rosh Hashana we celebrate the creation of the world. However, we do not read the story of creation; instead we read the story of one family – the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac – our family, our lineage. Our story comes first.

As I write in my article: "This is one of the challenges of being both a Jew and being a citizen of the world today – that is, being both particular and universal at the same time, being

supportive of the Jewish community while still being an active citizen of the world, recognizing both phrases of Hillel's teaching." It is only through the particular that we take the path to the universal. I do not want to negate the need and the responsibility to be citizens of the world but our needs and priorities must come first.

The first paragraph of Alenu is particular, only then do we move to the universal. We blow through the narrow end of the shofar so that it can be heard through its wider end. We are part of a team, and that team, whether we like it or not, is the team of the Jewish people. We must find our place on the field, we must work together as a collective, we must be part of its long story, and we must stake out our individual talents to guarantee its future. I don't really care if you are soccer or a baseball fan, I want you to support the home team.

Resolve this coming year to be proud of your Jewish identity, grow in your Jewish knowledge, prioritize your Jewish giving, be politically active on behalf of the State of Israel, stand up and support our people throughout the globe. Do not only cheer for the home team, make sure they are victorious. Once you have done that, then you will be ready to be "a light to the nations" and work as a citizen of the world to make this place a better one for all humanity.

This year of 5775 will be a challenging one for the Jewish people at home and abroad, in Europe and in the Former Soviet Union, in the State of Israel and right here at home. Let us not run away from our mission, from our task. We can win the battle, but only if we work together and support one another. We have existed for millennia and we will continue for millennia to come. We are and forever will be the "never-dying people." Let us hope and pray that it will be a year of peace and security, fulfillment and success, as the story of the Jewish people continues to be written.