

INTO GREAT STILLNESS
Rabbi Marc Margolius, West End Synagogue
Erev Yom Kippur 5776/2015

Fifty years ago today I was a ten year kid old arguing with my dad about going to Yom Kippur services. The World Series was starting that day, and my favorite team, the Los Angeles Dodgers, would play the Minnesota Twins. How could my dad tell me I had to miss the game and instead sit through an endless, boring service?

Of course, my dad ultimately had the winning argument. My idol, Sandy Koufax, had decided not to pitch the opening game of the Series so he could observe the holiest day of the Jewish year. If Sandy Koufax could give up pitching in the first game of the World Series because he was Jewish, how could I insist on watching the game on TV? I had no answer to that, so off to shul I went.

In a just universe, Koufax's sacrifice would have been vindicated. The Dodgers would have won that game behind Don Drysdale, their other star pitcher. But the Twins knocked out Drysdale and clobbered my beloved Dodgers, 8-2. According to legend, when the Dodgers' manager Walter Alton came to the mound to take him out, Drysdale handed him the ball and said: "I bet I know what you're thinking. I bet you're wishing I was Jewish, too."

The moral arc of the universe is long and it bends towards justice. A week later, as I listened on a transistor radio in Hebrew school, Koufax shut out the Twins to win the series for the Dodgers. Up until that Yom Kippur, Sandy Koufax had been my idol. But that day, he became a hero to me and many others, not by playing, but by deciding not to pitch one of the most important games of his life.

Koufax wasn't an observant Jew. His decision usually has been interpreted as a gesture honoring Jewish tradition and peoplehood. He was just being his own, authentic self. Fifty years ago, Koufax's decision barely raised eyebrows. But times have changed. Today, no doubt, it would prompt endless media scrutiny and debate. His choice as a secular Jew might be criticized as irrational, bizarre, even selfish. Today, baseball itself is increasingly anachronistic. We're too busy for a game with no time periods, no clock. We don't have time to waste while someone fidgets in the batter's box or steps off the mound and stares into space. In baseball, sometimes there are long stretches when nothing seems to be happening. Those moments, for some of us, can feel like an eternity.

Some have argued that this aspect of baseball – the long pauses – actually represent the soul of the game. And whether Sandy Koufax intended it or not, his decision 50 years ago -- and his subsequent silence about it -- represents not only the essence of baseball, but **the quintessence of Yom Kippur itself: the necessity for human beings to be, rather than to do; the necessity to be still, rather than to**

speak; the necessity to seek out the authentic and eternal, not the artificial or temporal.

The Torah describes today, Yom Kippur, as Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. Today, we stop normal activity. We don't work. We don't use money. We don't eat or drink. We don't make love. We don't text or check email. We don't Google. We don't create. For 25 hours, we don't do anything, other than is most challenging for us: **we allow ourselves simply to be.**

Bayom ha'sh'vi'i shavat vayinafash, says the Torah, “on the seventh day God stopped creating, and was renewed.” As in baseball, creation itself builds a pause into the action, a moment of breathing which renews the spirit, which literally re-energizes Creation. Without this pause, without this breath, there can be no life.

In his majestic writing about Shabbat, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel argues that we're drawn to material things because we are terrified by time. We imagine we can conquer the clock by living in the world of space and filling our days with “productivity.” But the clock inexorably keeps ticking. Our only hope of touching what lies beyond space and time is our capacity to stop and rest in the pause between the actions.

Our *machzor* says: *v'shofar gadol yitaka*, a great shofar is sounded, *v'kol d'mama yishama*, and a still, small Voice is heard. On Rosh Hashanah, *Yom Teruah*, we hear 100 blasts of the shofar. On Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shabbaton, we quiet ourselves enough to hear the still, small Voice in the faint echoes of those blasts. Today we stop, cultivate inner stillness, and turn inward, journeying into ourselves -- and glimpsing there, if only for a moment, the Face of God.

Some of Judaism's most powerful religious metaphors are internal; they invite us to seek God not atop a mountain or in heaven, but within ourselves. In parshat Nitzavim, the Torah portion we read just a few weeks ago, as Moses prepares to die he preaches that the spiritual search involves turning to what lies within us: *lo vashamayim hi*, “it is not in the heavens” he says; *ki karov eilechah hadavar meod, b'ficha uvilvav'chah*, “it's very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.”

If you want to look for God, Rabbi Art Green also advises¹, search inside. Seek out the “hidden God buried deep within the self, [which] feels more like one who ever longs to be discovered.” The process of finding God, he says, is not much different from the deepest levels of self-discovery: “What we are likely to find is the truth of the mystics: The individual self and the cosmic Self are one.”

¹ *Restoring the Aleph: Judaism for the Contemporary Seeker*

On Yom Kippur, as we shut out the noise of daily life and turn inward, we notice at first that there's a huge racket going on between our ears, a very noisy conversation taking place in our mind. We're always "talking to ourselves," narrating our experience, evaluating and assessing. Rabbi Larry Kushner points out² that these "interior conversations with our 'selves,' mean that we are fragmented, alienated, broken. If we were whole, there could be no conversation because there would be no one else in there to talk to." When we imagine a separate self with which we can converse, we insert a false distance between our essential selves and our self-conception. We keep ourselves from making shalom within ourselves.

It doesn't have to be like this. Sometimes, we lose our self-awareness. Once, a student of the Baal Shem Tov was watching a tightrope walker. He was so absorbed by the circus act that his disciples asked him what he found so interesting. "This man is risking his life," said Rabbi Chayim, "and I can't say why. But I'm sure that while he's walking the rope, he's not thinking of how much he's earning, because if he did, he would surely fall." ³

When we are walking a tightrope, when we are fully immersed in what we are doing, when our awareness is flush with our experience, when we are fully present to a moment, the voice of our inner observer quiets down. Self-consciousness slips away. In these moments, we are "being," not "doing," and each of us recognizes the difference between the two. When we are "being, and not doing," we are "practicing Shabbat." In those moments, says Rabbi Kushner, "we realize that our sense of self is actually an obstacle, making us observers of our own lives. It tricks us into thinking that our self is somehow other than who we are. There is only one of you in there and out here, and it's the same one."

Meditation teachers sometimes compare our minds to water constantly sloshing around in a bowl, water always stirred up by the motion of life and by our futile efforts to control it. They teach that when we practice Shabbat, when we turn off the faucet, rest and surrender control, the waters in the bowl settle down. If we become quiet enough, they are transformed into still waters, *mei menuchot* -- they become a smooth, glassy mirror in which we can see our true selves reflected back at us, without distortion.

So tonight, the instructions are simple: practice Shabbat. Stop and quiet, as best you can, your inner conversation with your self. Let the waters of the mind calm into stillness. Take a good look in the resulting mirror on the surface of the mind. Look for the wholeness, the holiness, within you. *Harpu u-d'u ki anochi elohim*, says the

² "Silencing the Inner Voice(s)" in Meditation: From the Heart of Judaism, p. 38

³ Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters p. 174

Psalmist [46:11]. "Be still -- know -- I -- am God." If we can learn to truly be still, then we might realize that *anochi*, the "I" -- our authentic self -- connects us to the Divine.

When I was a kid sometimes I'd sit by myself in my synagogue's empty sanctuary and reach out to a transcendent God, who was distant yet sometimes accessible. As a young adult, I came to understand God as more immanent and present in this world, as the unifying power flowing through the universe and through us. And as a (hopefully) more mature adult, I have learned to try to experience God also by taking a journey inward, in exploring the deeper recesses of the self and the soul.

During prayer now, I try to pay attention not only on the God above and beyond, but also to the God within me. I try to quiet my hyperactive mind enough to hear God in my inner conversation, in my ongoing efforts to integrate judgment and compassion. I try to experience God in the process of trying to surrender my ego, in seeing myself not as alone in the world, but as a unique aspect of everything that exists. I try to notice the animating Power of God in my pulse, in the rising and falling of my breath. Sometimes, as I do this, I think I begin to understand what Heschel meant by witnessing eternity in a single moment of life.

Baseball has no clock, no time periods, and yet no baseball game lasts forever. Ultimately, the innings run out. The game -- punctuated by pauses, pitching changes, seventh inning stretches, pinch-hitters -- always comes to an end. We face the truth that we are, each of us, finite incarnations of life's infinite, sacred process. The action ceases; the breathing ends; the wave recedes into the ocean from which it arose. But the energy which animated the whole thing still remains -- undeniable, potent, and ever-present. Yom Kippur, this Sabbath of Sabbaths, reminds us to feel that sacred energy, to seek connection, joy, and peace, in the stillness of this day.

The late Dr. Oliver Sacks grew up in an observant home which practiced Shabbat. He had abandoned traditional Jewish practice as a young adult, in part because of his Orthodox family's rejection of him as a gay man. Late in life, as he was coping with his own cancer, he experienced a traditional Shabbat again with his extended family in Israel. In his final published piece, "Sabbath," which appeared over the summer, he reflected that

[t]he peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering *what if*. What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?

The pause created by Shabbat -- and perhaps as well the pause created by his illness -- led Oliver Sacks to reflect on his life, to see more clearly its possibilities, its

limitations, its contradictions. In that pause, as he began to lose the breath of life, he was able to see the whole. Ultimately, that Shabbat contributed to a sense of completion, of celebration, and of peace:

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.

Tonight and today, may each of us be blessed to find rest in this Shabbat Shabbaton, this great time out of time. May we embrace these sacred moments and still the waters within us. May the peace of this day be palpable and bring healing to all who need it.

As the waters within us settle, may we find ourselves and God as best we can in the reflection. May the stillness open our eyes and our hearts. May we see ourselves as we are, and embrace our goodness. May we see ourselves as we might be, and find strength and wisdom to follow our better angels, to choose a path that adds blessing to this world. May we respond to the stillness of this day in the best and highest tradition of our ancestors by whispering aloud, with each breath we're granted, *Hineini*. Here. We. Are.