

You may know that I really like baseball (if you don't, then we probably haven't spent much time together). I've loved baseball for as long as I can remember; one of the things I've always loved about it is that it's an activity in which not making mistakes is so virtually unachievable, that it's not expected. No one who's ever been up to bat for more than a couple of times has had a perfect batting average of 1.000. In fact, if you're a batter, and you make an out seven out of every ten times you come to bat, you're considered to be extremely good at your craft, and you get paid millions of dollars a year to play a game in front of millions of people. Similar standards apply for pitchers, and the very best fielders make several mistakes throughout a season, too. Playing a game without making an out as a batter is quite rare; the longest streak of at bats in a row without making an out is 17 (by Earl Averill, Jr, of the 1962 Los Angeles Angels). Anything more is basically inconceivable. Frequent parts of the game when you're not successful are a given - every batter has a long-term success rate below 50%. Success in baseball is very relative.

When I was a child, I wasn't particularly good at baseball, but I liked it, I had fun playing it, and I tried my best whenever I played. Which, of course, didn't necessarily lead to success. I remember being told once after striking out that everyone does it, and that no one expected me to never do it; instead, I should try to learn what I did wrong when it did happen, and to see if I could do better the next time I returned to the batter's box. I found that message - that my success wouldn't be measured by the specific results of each and every individual thing that I did, and that I'd have multiple chances to try again throughout the season - very comforting. On some level, even at a young age, I recognized that baseball's approach to success and failure illustrates some of the most important realities of life.

Baseball is unfortunately not as popular today as it once was; it's sometimes still referred to as the national pastime, but football has clearly eclipsed it as America's game. The most common theory about why this has happened is that the game is too slow, and that people find it boring. I don't agree - I love the measured pace of the game - but I see

baseball's relative decline in popularity as being more indicative of a different contemporary development, a cultural change I've observed that I think is at the root of a number of things that plague us today. I think what people have trouble with is baseball's different approach to success. I fear that we've become a country that only knows how to value extremes; that a culture has developed in which things that are subtle, incremental, and nuanced, get tossed aside in favor of things that are big, extreme, and splashy. Activities in which success isn't instant, obvious, and absolute - like baseball (and, not coincidentally, like Teshuvah) - are becoming less appreciated and less valued.

I've thought about this quite a bit, and have thought of a number of examples. From the replacement of longform journalism with the attention-grabbing news headlines known as clickbait that we find all over our news feeds, to the instant binge-watching of several seasons of a TV show in a few weeks, we've come to expect our information and entertainment to be immediate and sensational - or else we just move on to the next option. The predilection towards the instant and flashy can also be found in politics - regardless of where your political leanings fall, I think you'd be hard-pressed to not agree that the most popular positions and politicians today are usually those that take an oversimplified, all-or-nothing approach. The overwhelming intensity of the last presidential election, when the two main candidates seemed to be constantly screaming at and being abusive to each other, felt to me like a perfect expression, if not the culmination, of this idea. Another example comes from social media, the advent of which has given everyone who wants it the opportunity to share their ideas about everything with anyone who will listen to them. Media like Facebook and Twitter can be great methods for keeping in touch, and for engaging others in dialogue, but constantly proclaiming whatever you think and having other people affirm it can start to make you think that you're always correct. When that becomes common, serious problems start to arise, because if someone believes that they're always completely right, then those who don't agree with them must always be completely wrong. When even a significant minority of people start to think that way, we stop being

willing and able to talk to anyone who disagrees with us - and, before long, we have a lot of rivals, if not enemies. That's not a particularly healthy - nor a particularly Jewish - way to live.

Unfortunately, I think that this has already become fairly widespread. I'm sure I'm not the only here who feels like America has become incredibly stratified and divided over the last several years. This is something that deeply troubles me. We're divided in so many ways - politically, culturally, racially, religiously, to name a few - and it seems like the feelings and consequences of those divisions have never been more intense. Some of these divides make some logical sense, but I feel like the degree of separation and enmity between those on different sides has become far more intense than I can ever remember.

It's my belief that the roots of this separation are in the kind of extreme, all-or-nothing thinking that I was just talking about - I think it's the consequence of thinking that in everything you do, in both the most and least significant moments of your life, anything less than 100% success is a failure. For a number of different reasons - including, as I mentioned before, social media and the internet - I believe that thinking this way has been so glorified and normalized that it's become commonplace. When the stakes are always so high, everyone with whom we disagree - even about the smallest things - becomes an enemy, and we become accustomed to always treating those folks poorly, and to only interacting amiably with those with whom we agree. Talking to and interacting with those on the other sides of us becomes anywhere from extraordinarily contentious, to virtually impossible, to completely forbidden. When this happens, we forget how to be nice to each other, we stop listening to each other, and we stop being there for each other. We stop living like people who share the world, and instead everyone becomes a rival for everything. Sadly, it's not a long journey from ubiquitous and contentious rivalry, to pervasive oppression and hatred. I believe this has been the path by which acts of persecution, bigotry, and xenophobia have become more common parts of our lives - a development that I'm certain none of us are happy about.

The manifestations of the journey from sensationalism to hatred range from the deadly - as sadly seen in Charlottesville; to the threatening - as seen in the rise of anti-Semitism and white supremacy; to the socially divisive - as is unfortunately and frequently seen in so many routine interactions these days. In our own congregation, I've unfortunately observed people with differing political beliefs who've found it difficult to talk to each other, who've felt persecuted and isolated by others, because of those beliefs. Advocating for different political policies should not lead to ostracization within one's congregation - that belies the sacred purpose of religious community. We are united because of our shared heritage and religious beliefs - we should not be divided because of the stances we take about other issues. This would not apply to anyone who espoused bigotry or hatred - we do not support or welcome those who promote ideologies that are malevolent and dangerous to others, and we must always come together to stand up against despicable cruelty. However, mistreating someone because they disagree with you about one particular issue, or even several particular issues, is different - that's an example of all-or-nothing thinking. Easily making the leap from having a disagreement to having an adversarial relationship, readily erecting walls of separation because you've decided that someone else is completely wrong, is not healthy for you or for your community. It's also fundamentally not Jewish.

Judaism has a lot to say about extremist, all-or-nothing thinking, as it is, at its core, a tradition of moderation and balance. Evidence to support this is everywhere, starting with the fact that Judaism views humanity as being, by definition, finite, whereas God is the only thing that is infinite. While the Torah offers a point of origin for humanity, it does not do so for God - whatever God is, God's existence predates the Jewish start of recorded human history, Genesis 1:1, (which of course we're celebrating today). You might even argue that the reason for providing a specific beginning for humanity is to not suggest any particular moment, but to highlight that, for us, there was one - unlike for God. By starting off our sacred text with that reminder, the Torah outlines the parameters of who and what we can and cannot be. By definition, who we are, and what we can do, is limited and finite.

The Torah moves on to reinforce this point with the story of the Garden of Eden. When God tries to create a dwelling place for us in which everything is taken care of and there's nothing for us to do - no small achievements to be accomplished - humanity is unable to live there. We don't want - we actually can't tolerate - having everything completely fixed or solved or done for us. We all know that Judaism is more interested in what we do than in what we believe - the Torah provides us with 613 often difficult-to-understand commandments with which to occupy our days (not to mention the hundreds and hundreds of hours needed to better understand them), and the imperfect world that we left the Garden of Eden to live in always needs some kind of repair. There are always parts of the natural world that need tending to, and there are always other people who need help. These two parts of Genesis present us as limited and finite creatures, who have a nearly infinite thirst to do, create, and achieve.

With a profile like that, achieving and maintaining balance becomes critical. If I've ever sent you an Email, you've seen in the signature my favorite quotation from all of Jewish tradition, which comes from Pirke Avot 2:21: "חורין בן אתה ולא, לגמור המלאכה עליך לא" ל"בטל" which means "It is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." This statement recognizes that basic human tension suggested by the two Genesis stories, a tension that so many of us live with today: we want to do so much, we're drawn to do so much, that we have difficulty stopping our doing; however if we ever did completely stop, then nothing would happen. This is why we have Shabbat - the only commandment in the story of creation. Shabbat is our weekly reminder to maintain balance in our lives. Balancing the human drive to do, make, and achieve, with a mandated period of ceasing from working and creating, is one of fundamental characteristics of the world that the Torah creates. Neither working and creating all the time, nor taking a break and resting all the time, is the Jewish way. We are intended to live a balanced, moderate life - one that includes both work and rest, along with other activities.

Of course, this is much more easily said than done. As the inheritors of a tradition that prioritizes action ahead of faith, our drive to keep making and creating, to keep doing whatever work we're driven to do, is rather strong. Additionally, since our primary work assignment is Tikkun Olam - to repair the world and make it a better place - the amount of tasks available for us to work on can seem infinite. As I noted earlier, in the world outside of Eden, there are always parts of the natural world that need tending to, and there are always people who need help. There's so much to do, that there's actually no way for one person to be completely successful with this work - it's hard to know what an acceptable batting average is when it comes to feeding the hungry, for example. It's not hard to become discouraged, to get blown off course, and to start making mistakes, when the work seems to be endless. You also have to measure success differently when the number of opportunities you have to do your work are by definition more than you can handle. That's where the essential activity of this time of year, Teshuvah, comes in.

Teshuvah is the Hebrew word used for repentance - literally meaning turning or returning, it's the act of apologizing for the things that we've done wrong in the past, in the hopes of returning to our best selves and doing better in the future. Teshuvah is something that we can do at any time of the year, but we're particularly encouraged to do it from the beginning of the month of Elul up through Yom Kippur, when we stand in judgment before God. Teshuvah is something that we do every year, that we expect to do every year, regardless of how 'well' we've done in our lives. It's a fundamental assumption of Judaism that we're always going to have Teshuvah to do, because we know that even with the very best of intentions, it's both impossible to do all of our work, and to do all of our work correctly (whatever that might mean). Teshuvah is the Jewish expression, applied to life, of the baseball truth that success is relative, and that no one who plays the game can have a perfect batting average.

All-or-nothing culture is driven by the fear and distrust of mistakes. There's certainly nothing wrong with not making mistakes, but our life experiences, as well as our religious

tradition, teach us that it's highly unrealistic to expect to be mistake-free very often. Life is too challenging, too full, and too complex, to realistically expect to be perfect. My life experience has also taught me that while mistakes certainly have consequences, those happen because of the mistakes themselves - life doesn't automatically penalize you just because you did something incorrectly. It's my belief that learning to better come to terms with the mistakes that you make - learning to accept that you're never going to bat 1.000 - makes you a happier and healthier person. The more of us who learn how to live with what we do wrong - the more of us who understand how to do Teshuvah, or something like it - the happier and healthier our society, and our world, will be. May 5778 be a year in which we all better come to terms with our mistakes, when we all internalize that we're never going to bat 1.000, and that there's nothing wrong with that. Ken yehi ratzon - may this be God's will. And let us say together, Amen.