

Dena Glasgow
Yom Kippur Sermon
Congregation Betenu
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Shana Tova and May You be Written into the Book of Life.

Colin Kaepernick was the first. In 2016, he protested the treatment of black people in our country by kneeling on the football field in front of millions while the national anthem was being played. Overtime, many others followed.

As it turns out, Colin Kaepernick was not the first professional athlete who risked his career to make a statement. In 1934, Hank Greenberg, nicknamed the Jewish Babe Ruth, sat out one game in the pennant because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Most famously, Sandy Koufax, considered one of the greatest pitchers of all times, was scheduled to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series against the Minnesota Twins. But when this game fell on Yom Kippur, Koufax refused to play. He was much criticized for this decision, especially because his replacement was outmatched by the Twins. (Full disclosure — Koufax went on to pitch in Game 2 and then tossed shutouts in Games 5 and 7 to win the championship for the Dodgers.)

Showing solidarity for one's people is not just a sports phenomenon. Just this past week, in reading one of the many tributes to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, I discovered that she too took a risk on behalf of the Jewish people. In 2003, Yom Kippur fell on Monday, Oct 6 which, in accordance with federal law, is when the new term of the Supreme Court opens with oral arguments.

Unhappy with this situation, Justice Ginsberg and Justice Breyer suggested to Chief Justice Rehnquist that the Court delay the opening in deference to Yom Kippur. The Chief was not persuaded by their argument. He pointed out that the court was in session on Good Friday, so why should Yom Kippur be any different?

Justice Ginsberg then came up with a novel argument that did persuade Chief Justice. In her words, "I explained to..[Justice Rehnquist] that lawyers wait their entire career to appear before the Supreme Court. For many of them, it is a once in a lifetime chance ... What if a Jewish lawyer wanted to appear in court? We should not make that lawyer choose between observing his or her faith and appearing before the Court. That persuaded him and we changed the calendar."

I share this today not only because it is Yom Kippur but also because I believe Colin Kaepernick, Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Justice Ginsberg all have what to teach us about how we can be present in the world.

In the push-and-pull of life, what they understood was that we have a choice. We can live our lives where all we care about is ourselves. Or, we can live a life where we think beyond ourselves and our own particular desires and we ask — how can we make this world just a little bit better?

The Jewish way of talking about this is *Tikkun Olam*, fixing the world. We are called upon to do our part to repair our world. In the words of Rabbi Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

And, on the path towards a more perfect world, each of us must find our own way. Each of us has our own rabbit hole out of which we are trying to climb. For some of us, it begins with an honest assessment of where we need help and then finding that help. What barriers do we need to overcome so that we can interact more positively with a parent, a child, a sibling, or a friend? So that we can live just a little more environmentally friendly? So that, more broadly, we can be more generous and compassionate towards others? ‘

It is noteworthy that the ancient rabbis selected a haftarah reading for Yom Kippur that carries the message that fasting is not enough unless it has a moral and ethical foundation. The prophet Isaiah castigates Israel for fasting but not seeing, for starving their bodies yet paying no heed. He states that the fast that God wants is to share one’s bread with the hungry, take the wretched poor into one’s home, clothe the naked and not ignore one’s own kin.

I share a story by Y.L. Peretz, a beloved Yiddish writer. There was a Litvak, a skeptical Lithuanian Jew, who is determined to disprove the assertion of the Hasidic Jews in his town that their rebbe ascends to heaven to plead with God on their behalf during the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* (repentance) between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Sneaking into the rebbe’s home one night and hiding under his bed, the Litvak sees the rabbi arising before dawn, dressing himself in peasant clothes and walking into the woods. There the rabbi chops up a tree with an axe and takes the bundle of wood to the broken-down shack of a sick, old woman. Pretending to be a peasant, he brings the wood inside and proceeds to make a fire in the oven. And as he puts each stick of wood into the oven, he recites a part of the day’s penitential prayers.

After witnessing this anonymous act of kindness, the Litvak becomes a champion of the rabbi, and thereafter, whenever he hears a Hasid in his town mention that during the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* their rabbi goes up to heaven, the Litvak adds quietly, “if not higher.”

Just as in our haftarah, the message in this story is that Yom Kippur is not primarily about fasting but about being open to a recalibration— that we can play a part in making our world just a little bit better. Generations of Jews credit their feeling of Jewish pride to Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax’s decision to not play baseball on Yom Kippur.

Likewise, Colin Kaepernick will have a special place in Black American lives for generations to come. And, today, we remember Ruth Bader Ginsberg who insisted, in the words of the Rabbi who spoke at her funeral that the Constitution deliver on its promise, that “we the people” include all the people.

In this light — Teshuvah — that act of Jewish repentance — is about truth and reconciliation. Only once we have faced our mistakes can we have a shot at reconciling with our past and finding a way forward in making this world just a little better.

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