

You know, the Torah can teach us quite a bit about baseball and not only because its first words are “in the big inning”. Both baseball and the history of the Jewish people start with leaving home, while also the ultimate goal for both is “returning home”, to either the 4th base or the land of Israel.

And there’s another common theme to both which I would like to focus on tonite: in baseball we have a designated hitter, or a designated runner, which sends a message that by baseball’s rules one is allowed to shirk full responsibility and get away with doing less than a complete job.

One can “specialize” on the team. But in Judaism we need to forge our own spiritual and religious connections; no 1 “hits” or “runs” for us. So even when our Cantor leads us with the help of our readers, we do not shirk our responsibility to pray and sing ourselves, for Andy does not sing for us but with us – he is not our designated pray-er. Nor should a rabbi be a designated Torah learner. In other words, we, who are present here should not shirk our responsibility and expect our spiritual leaders to inspire us; rather each of us should also seek in ourselves a desire and preparedness to be self-inspired.

The same is with all other Mitzvot; for example, no one should ask tonite another Jew to hear the sound of shofar for him in the morning only because he has something better to do elsewhere at this time; a serious Jew cannot shirk such a responsibility and must fulfill it herself.

To bring home this message let us recall that Hassidic story where a highly naive young rural man who visits a nearby town where he hears a bugle blown to alert the town’s fire brigade of a fire that broke out. “Why these whistles?” he asks someone who answers him that now after the bugle was blown the fire will be put out.

But the young man who did not go to the site of the fire believed that the calls of the bugle alone extinguished the fire. Upon returning to his hamlet he suggested that they too purchase such a bugle, and need not worry any more about future fires. The townsfolk were agreeable; per chance this bugle would be their magic solution to putting fires out. Hard as the young naïf blew his bugle at the sighting of the first fire, the flames had only spread fast wreaking havoc in their path only to put to shame the idea that a mere sounding of a bugle could put out a fire.

The lesson of the story is simple; hearing the shofar in and by itself would be futile in our attempts to put out our inner fires that devastate our self-worth and consume our relationships with loved ones and others.

To extinguish these fires of neglect and dereliction in our behaviours towards ourselves, others and God we need to take action, like sending at once the fire brigade at the sounding of the bugle to the site of

the fire – something that did not happen in our story – and end our choosing to fail ourselves and those whose lives we affect.

Still, the shirking of responsibility goes back to the very first chapters of our Torah and is a pervasive phenomenon in many of the biblical narratives. Just think back to the wonderfully complex narrative of Adam&Eve in the Garden of Delight. According to our tradition , they were created on RH but in no time these two were already hiding, or only thinking that they were hiding from God, because they shirked their responsibility of not eating a fruit that God commanded not to eat.

“Where are ya?” God called out to Adam (a call that we too should hear and answer right now). Though knowing exactly where he and wife were hiding – like us for that matter -- God wanted to give our human ancestors a chance to explain their misbeahavin’. I’ll give you ten guesses how Adam responds. Did he regret his bad. Nope, Adam chooses to blame both his woman for giving him that fruit to eat and God who had formed her.

Rather than owning up to his bad Adam blames others. When God confronts also the woman and asks her to explain her own role in the misdeed the woman points to the serpent for cajoling her. There is a l w a y s someone else to blame...

When some years later God confronts Cain, their first born with: “Where is Abel your brother?” right after Cain killed him, he, like his parents, takes no responsibility for what he had wrought and brazenly answers with a question of his own: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (in a sense suggesting that God should have been Abel’s protector, not he).

OK, friends, we heard enough. I could go on and on with biblical examples of shirking responsibility by blaming others but the point is clear.

Still, there is a reason why the Bible has all these accounts – to teach us that like the people of the Bible we too c h o o s e – rather than being coerced -- to shirk our personal responsibility and find others to blame for our failings.

Where did we shirk our responsibilities? Where did we blame others, or circumstances when we should have held ourselves accountable?

Honestly, do we shirk our Jewish responsibilities by missing out on ample opportunities to learn Torah? Why, it is exactly because we are quite busy on our weekends that we should carve out time on Friday nites or Shabbat mornings, if not on both, for fulfilling the premier Mitzvah – Talmud Torah -- at our synagogue or at home.

But instead, don't we shirk our Jewish responsibilities when we engage in bonding experiences with our families by watching and playing sports, yet opting out of the all-enriching Bonding Experience of Shabbat?

And if you happen to live here in town or at a commuting distance and are attending this service tonite – we a r e v e r y pleased that you do – but you have never affiliated with CBS, or made a monetary gift for the upkeep of this very community, please ask yourself if you are not dropping the ball on this Jewish community.

If this applies to you, just imagine that you had come tonight only to find closed doors and no service at all. Wouldn't you have felt indignant and disappointed at this community that decided to abstain from offering HHD services?

Wouldn't you would wonder "What kind of a synagogue is this that can't even manage to hold HHD services? Or mutter "THEY let me down"?

But to expect synagogues and communal institutions to exist and function just through wishful thinking or from good intentions is shirking the responsibility of joining with others to ensure our communal life.

Only two weeks ago we heard in the synagogue words of the Prophet Isaiah calling the great ancient, if only mystic or mythic

flood "waters of Noah." According to our sages, this is because Noah bore a degree of responsibility for the devastating deluge. But why was it his fault? Wasn't he the righteous man of his time?

Apparently, because Noah may not have tried hard enough to turn around the corrupt lifestyle of his generation, the waters are named after him. Yes, he built his ark, but did he reach out to warn those who never saw his ark to shape up or else? You see, though Noah (and family) were innocent of the depravity that beset his contemporaries he arguably shirked his responsibility

in failing to reach out to them.

Noah's shunned peers are figuratively those who lapsed from active Jewish living, or are new Jews by choice, or those who are still searching for a spiritual identity whom we are failing to contact and invite to our homes on Jewish occasions or to a synagogue gathering. Loving the flyover folks in our midst whom the Torah calls "the alien", or showing deference to the elders, and hospitality to the OTHER is our Jewish responsibility of *הכנסת אורחים* for which there is no "you have already done your fair share" limit point.

In a year that saw a salubrious uptick in volunteerism in our congregation whether in feeding the hungry and aiding the needy, or supporting this synagogue and not only financially, we still need to see where we shirked some of our responsibilities in the realm of sacred giving; resting on our laurels is always a recipe for regression.

Many of us, I trust, have continued to support generously – as we ought – worthy causes in the general community. Nevertheless, last yr. only 43 of CBS member households answered the call sent to our homes of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), formerly UJA, or the United Way of the Jewish people in this country. That's less than a third of our member units rendering a much smaller collective pot than the 41 households that gave to this cause the year before last. Which begs the question: "Who's going to fund the Jews if we Jews don't?" Shouldn't Tzedakah begin at home?

And when it comes to our children, don't we commit an error when we provide too little role modeling in strengthening their Jewish identity through home and family experiences or traditions, if only to match our unmitigated passion for their accomplishments in the sports' arena? But in order to be our children's best coaches we too need to learn how to live and explain Judaism in terms that are at least as convincing as the many other competing claims to our children's identity in our complicated world.

Last but not least, we similarly shirk our responsibility as American Jews when we view Israel as no more than a state mired in an intractable conflict that evokes only words like “checkpoints,” “occupation,” or “settlements”—as though the Arab conflict with the Jewish state were all that Israel is about. We have shirked our responsibility in not transcending over images of war to see primarily the without-a-question miraculous revival of Jewish sovereignty in our ancestral land, and the literal ingathering of exiles from the four corners of the earth, of diverse colors, languages and cultures after 2,000 years of Jewish powerlessness as evidenced tragically only seven decades ago.

This mega historical phenomenon no longer evokes in us awe, nor does the rebirth and flourishing of the Hebrew language that only the state of IL made possible, yet stirring today in us no sense of wonder or interest to know it better. In short, we shirked our responsibility in ignoring the real significance of Israel’s re-creation—a birth of a nation unlike any other.

And in downplaying its emotional, if not religious appeal to us, while blaming all this on a conflict we were too lazy or indifferent to educate ourselves of earnestly, we fail to stand up for it.

We have shirked our responsibility to our brethren in IL by paying scant attention to how they are changing and bettering the world without waiting for an elusive peace, not only through Israel’s leading the world in Noble Prize laureates per capita (or 6th place overall with 0.1 of the world populace). in this new century but in other start up innovations as well, such as the electric car which is a dream come true, to make the world a better place. In often feeling rankled and ashamed due to misleading headlines and slanted reports in the fly-by media we fail to see Israel’s chuzpah, team work and risk taking that have turned her into a world changer and benefactor. Without question, the center of Jewish culture — spiritual, scientific, entrepreneurial, artistic — is today, as it should be, Israel. This was not the case in 1948 or 1967, but it is true now, and we can only expect it to become more true as time goes by. Which means that the future of the Jewish people depends on the survival and prosperity of the Jewish state. And we will be shirking our responsibility to truth and integrity if we did not internalize this reality.

My friends, let us enable the new year to alert us even further to our duty not to shirk our Jewish responsibilities deriving perhaps a powerful inspiration from US Jewish gymnast and an Olympian gold medalist, Aly Raisman. She not only showed pride in her Jewish heritage by asserting: “I am Jewish, that’s why I wanted that floor music of [the Hebrew folk dance of Havah Nagilah”, but went on to pay her own tribute to Israel’s 11 slain sportsmen murdered 2 scores yrs. ago by terrorists in Munich and long before she Aly born. Speaking after her latest win in women’s floor exercise, she said: "The fact it was on the 40th anniversary is special." And to top it all off Aly Raisman promptly accepted an official invitation to visit Israel for the first time.

To take responsibility for our Jewish identity and active living means that we resolve not to designate a runner to bring us home. Returning home means Stepping Up ourselves! It does not mean scanning the bleachers to find and blame others for our own strikeouts. In Judaism, unlike baseball we A L L take our place at bat and we A L L run the bases.

There is so much to do, so much to do better, to do for others, to do for God's creation, and for ourselves.

Yes, we must step up. But the trick is to live the balance exemplified in this revealing Talmudic teaching: "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, B U T n e i t h e r are you free to desist from it.