

The entire Bay Area was riveted by the Giants in the World Series this week. On Wed. night, I gathered with Tichon, our middle and high school students, to watch the final game before our first class. We very reluctantly went to class, and returned to the game on our break. It was the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>. I was asked to make a rabbinic decision: Could we watch the end of the game or did we all have to go back to class? When the kids cheered at my response, you'd have thought that I was Bumgarner!

Even back on October 16, when we celebrated Simhat Torah, our hearts were in the game. Some said that perhaps the Giants won that game because we danced with the Torah: a form of prayer in and of itself.

Looking up into the stands during the final game, I saw many people in a prayer-like stance, like one might see in a church: hands clasped near their heart or mouth, hoping expectantly, praying. There are many connections between prayer and baseball.

And this week, we turn to the story of Avraham, and there is a connection between prayer and baseball. In the Talmud, we are told that Avraham created one of our most important prayers: the morning Amidah, the standing prayer. Avraham argues with God to save the righteous few in Sodom and G'morrah, and the Torah tells us, "Avraham rose early in the morning." The rabbis tell us say that he rose early to pray, to pour his heart out, as God rescued the righteous few and destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Amidah, our central prayer par excellence, is a simple yet elegant structure that is woven into our communal spiritual life. Morning, afternoon and evening, we say it. On Shabbat we say this prayer four times, on Yom Kippur five times. The prayer is 2000 years old and it can only be prayed in its entirety with minimum of ten adults. And yes, there is a deep connection between the Amidah and baseball.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, the great Jewish theologian, thinker and all-around mensch, tells us prayer is “like baseball.” In his book, entitled Knowing God, Rabbi Dorff says: many of us think we should be able to pray meaningfully, as naturally as we breathe. We come into the synagogue, crack open the siddur, but we can't pray. And, frankly we are disappointed or annoyed. Why is it so hard to pray?

Some baseball players are gifted. We assume their skills come easily. But it would be crazy to assume that everyone is like this. Even those with natural ability have to practice. And for those who don't have it? They have to practice a lot. It demands time and effort. Prayer, like baseball, is a skill. For most of us, it doesn't just naturally spring up from our souls. Most of us need practice, just like baseball.

Even the greatest players achieve their goals in varying degrees. Likewise, those of us who have prayed daily for years sometimes strike out in prayer.

Maybe we can't concentrate or we aren't in the mood to pray on that particular day.

Sometimes prayer is like a walk in baseball; you are not deeply touched by it, but hey, wasn't it nice to have tried to pray at all? At least it was a nice break from a hectic week. Even if your mind wandered a bit, you still had some time to reflect, to meditate. There's potential in that moment: prayer didn't touch you that day, but you see how it could. Today's prayer was ok, even if it was a just a walk through the prayer book.

Sometimes you get a base hit. Your eye catches on a particular phrase and it jumps off the page as if you have never encountered it before. You think to yourself, "How could have I read this so many times before and never had this particular flash of insight? It seems like it is speaking directly to me, to what is going on in my life right now." Maybe it's just the reminder you needed or it added beauty to your day, or sparked deeper awareness of what it means to be a human being. You get a base hit by getting the ball into any part of the park; a base hit in prayer means something worked.

And when you hit a double or a triple in prayer? This is when you are touched multiple times in the prayer experience ~ you are glad you prayed that day. It carries you into the next day and maybe even into the whole next week.

And then there is the home run: a spiritual moment that changes you, something you will carry with you your entire life.

Many of us say that prayer is boring. It doesn't do anything for us. But do we give it much of a chance? We come here with high expectations. But the odds of making a home run are stacked against us if we are unpracticed with what happens here. We wouldn't expect to go to a game and have a completely fulfilling experience if we didn't have some familiarity with the structure of baseball. A home run in prayer requires practice, trials and errors and in the end, skill. And some luck too. Conditions have to be right: and the alignment of body, mind and soul is critical to the task.

And yet, even if we are here a lot, we also know that we can't get a peak spiritual high every time we pray, just like we can't hit a home run every game.

Players don't just play for the homeruns, the peak moments. They know that the entire game has ups and downs and that the home runs come sometimes. If we expect a home run every time we pray, we won't pray very often.

And a home run can't happen in solitude. Without the structure and the community of the game, the experience can't happen in baseball. And when we assemble to pray, the collective presence makes it possible for each one of us to enter into prayer. Prayer is not going to remake us into ideal human beings. But it can remind us of what we should strive for. It cannot move us every time,

but it can affect us in some way over time. It is valuable even if it is not always or totally successful.

The unifying force of baseball is at its best in the World Series. Of course it doesn't hurt that we've won the World Series three times over the past five years. We are in the game – there is no doubt.

My friend Jack Colker loved to tell me why he was Jewish. He would always tell me: "Because it's my team." He was telling me that he was a part of a unifying force. Jack knew that we are all unified by Judaism. This Beit Knesset is our stadium – our gathering place for practice, honing skill, a chance at a spiritual home run. We strive, we share joy and sorrow together. We pray for healing, we strengthen each other. With practice and with each other, we can pray meaningfully. We've been doing it for thousands of years, yes, even longer than the World Series has been around. I have a feeling we are going to do it for at least a few thousand more. Shabbat Shalom.