

Growing up in the '80s and '90s in Baltimore, with no football team to cheer for, one of my personal heroes was Baltimore Orioles' shortstop and third baseman Cal Ripken, Jr. Ripken debuted in 1981 and took Major League Baseball by storm in 1982. He won the Rookie of The Year Award in '82 and the Most Valuable Player award in '83, the year the Orioles won the World Series. He also won the MVP in 1991, and was an American League All-Star every season of his career. Ripken officially retired after the 2001 season, and, in 2007, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Ripken changed the way shortstops were viewed in baseball. He is 6 feet 4 inches tall and was a power hitter. Before him, shortstops were shorter guys who were not relied upon to be the best hitters. Ripken set a record for shortstops by hitting at least 20 home runs in 10 consecutive seasons. At the end of his career, he had over 400 home runs, 3000 hits, and a .276 batting average.

However, Ripken is most famous for his consecutive games streak. Begun on May 30, 1982, Cal Ripken, Jr. did not miss a baseball game

for over 16 years, playing in 2,632 straight games. The previous record, held by Yankee great Lou Gehrig, was 2,130, which Ripken broke on September 6, 1995. That was a great day of celebration in Baltimore. It was also my father's birthday, and we watched the game together from our home. We were not as fortunate as others who managed to get tickets.

While there was much anticipation leading up to that day in September of 1995, there was no announcement regarding when Ripken would conclude the streak. It came as a total surprise. On the last home game of the season in 1998, September 20, the Orioles were hosting the New York Yankees, who would go on to win the World Series later that year. The scoreboard showed the starting lineup, with the name "Cal Ripken Jr." in the slot to bat sixth and play third base. However, unbeknownst to fans, the scoreboard was incorrect. Thirty minutes before the Orioles were to take the field, Ripken informed manager Ray Miller that it was time. Ripken wanted to end the streak in front of the fans in Baltimore, at Camden Yards.

When the managers presented the starting lineups to the umpires, the announcers heard the news, and then spread the word to the fans. Ripken received a standing ovation from the fans and the Yankees. Because it was a last-minute decision, and because this was before the omnipresence of social media, many people did not find out about the end of the streak until later that night, or even the next day. This included most of the Jewish community in Baltimore. You see, September 20, 1998, the night Ripken ended his streak 25 years ago, almost to this day, was the first night of Rosh Hashanah, and most of the Jews in Baltimore, I and my family among them, were in synagogue.

Considering that Ripken is not Jewish, I don't think he was pulling a Sandy Koufax. However, it seems fitting that he picked that night for one of the biggest decisions of his life. It was all over the news the next day. Many rabbis, including my own, incorporated this event into their sermons for the first day of Rosh Hashanah: it is a time of turning, a time of endings and beginnings, a time of making life-altering choices.

All of these interpretations of the Jewish New Year mapped onto the biggest news story in Baltimore.

There is one more piece of the story that I would like share, a little nugget of Baltimore sports trivia: who was the man who replaced Cal Ripken in the lineup on September 20, 1998? Ryan Minor.

For years, I have wondered what it must have felt like for Ryan Minor that night, taking the field in front of thousands of people, filling the absence of a person who was reliably in that role for years, a person who performed at the top of his game, raising the bar for excellence while creating lasting relationships with the people in the city in which he lived and worked. Standing upon this Bimah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I am beginning to get a sense of what Minor may have felt.

This is the first Rosh Hashanah that a Sasso has not been on the Bimah of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck since 1976, which, by the way, was before both Cantor Melissa and I were born. The past year has rightly been a celebration of all that Rabbis Dennis and Sandy have accomplished at this synagogue. Their achievements were aided by

generations of Beth-El Zedeck congregants who have contributed their time and resources. The physical infrastructure and spiritual vibrancy of this community is a result of all of your efforts. We truly stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us.

However, standing on someone's shoulders means that we are in a position to see further in the distance, as well as reach higher for what is above. We must do both.

When we turn our eyes to the horizon, we see many challenges ahead of us. After a several-decade lull, the hateful conspiracy theory of Antisemitism in America has reared its ugly head again. We experience it in places that we would expect, like the fringes of society, but we also experience it in new and unexpected places, like from elected officials from both major political parties, from other minorities who live in close proximity to Jews in our largest cities, and from those who frame their dangerous statements as criticism of the Jewish State. Due to the prevalence of social media, we also hear it with much more frequency, and its influence, sometimes promulgated by the biggest media stars on

the planet, is carried far and wide to new audiences, which has led to an increase not just in verbal expression, but also physical attacks on Jews. I will have much more to say regarding my concerns about Antisemitism on Yom Kippur.

Another challenge we face impacts our own community. There are fewer Jews who are interested in institutional Jewish life, and we become most aware of that in synagogue membership and attendance. Across all movements of Liberal Judaism, synagogue life is eroding as Jews vote with their feet. Self-identified “Jews of no religion” are growing at an alarming rate. This challenge can be exacerbated during a transition from one rabbinic leader to another, when members aren’t sure if they want to stick around for whatever comes next.

As someone who is invested in many aspects of Jewish life, I know how transformative and meaningful Jewish institutions can be. Jewish summer camps are immersive experiences that create life-long friendships and solid Jewish identities. Jewish day schools provide an in-depth Jewish education where Judaism infuses every subject and

where children live and breathe Jewish custom and practice. Hillel is where college students find their Jewish community, a Jewish home away from home. Moishe House, and similar places, serve young professionals who want to connect with their Jewish peers. Federation and JCC serve the entire Jewish community through its wide-ranging social services, communal programs, and support for all Jewish institutions, and provide a united voice on Israel and Antisemitism.

A synagogue is none of these places, and to be honest, those organizations are much better than a synagogue at their specific work. We should not try to be them. However, the synagogue generally, and Beth-El Zedeck specifically, exists for an entirely different, vital and essential purpose. Our synagogue is the home base of Judaism, and no other institution in Jewish life has the comprehensive cradle-to-grave commitment to its members.

We are here for you when you are a baby, officiating at your brit milah or baby naming. We are here for you at every age of your childhood, nurturing and educating you in the ways of Jewish life. We

are here for you when you come of age at your Bar or Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation, and we celebrate with you when you graduate high school and continue your studies. We are here for you to bring in the joys that come with finding a life partner and starting a family. We are here to help educate your children and assist you in bringing Judaism into your own home. We are here for you in times of grief and mourning. We are here for you as empty nesters, providing meaning, purpose, and connection when your children have grown up. And we are here for you and your family when you make the journey to your eternal rest.

We impart Jewish meaning into these moments of your life, and we do so much more. We are your center for celebrating Shabbat and holidays, the signposts of the Jewish year. We are the hub of Torah learning, from ancient to modern, with its vast repository of Jewish tradition. Through our commitment to pursuing justice, we serve the needs of the Jewish and greater Indianapolis community. And sometimes, we are just a place to hang out and do cool stuff with other Jews. No other Jewish institution can compete with what we do. As we

begin a new era, let us all be reminded that you need Beth-El Zedeck, and Beth-El Zedeck needs you.

This is where we, standing on those shoulders, must reach even higher. This moment is an opportunity. I do not have a personal program that I want to impose on the community. Instead, I want us to think creatively, to explore the possibilities of a vibrant Judaism full of initiative and imagination that increases our education, deepens our spirituality, and brings us closer as a community. I want us all to envision what Beth-El Zedeck looks like, not just this year, but 5 years, 10 years, and 20 years from now. What do we want Beth-El Zedeck to be, and what do we want to leave for future generations?

I want us to create a Beth-El Zedeck that we truly love. In Jewish tradition, love is not an emotion, but an action. The Torah requires of us to love our fellow like ourselves, to love the stranger because we were strangers, and to love God with all our heart, soul, and might. These are not statements about how we feel inside. Rather, the Torah is telling us

that love is demonstrated through action, by the deeds that exhibit that inner emotion.

We live in a time that some sociologists and psychologists call a “tyranny of choice.” There are so many choices in every area of life that we are becoming paralyzed from choosing, and we do not want to commit to any one thing lest we miss what else might be out there. By not choosing, we lose our sense of commitment and responsibility, a sense of connection to a community, a people, and a tradition that confers upon us responsibilities and counts on us to contribute. The funny thing about humans and responsibility is that we thrive off of it. It brings us belonging and meaning. Like a loving, committed relationship, it requires that we give of ourselves, while simultaneously elevating us to a life of purpose.

As we move forward, I invite us to think of ourselves as stakeholders, and with a personal interest in Beth-El Zedeck, it is our responsibility to invest and to be invested. In Hebrew, if you are a member of something, you are called a חֵבֵר, but, as with most words in

Hebrew, there are numerous connections that get to the essence of what this word really means. חבר also means “friend,” and has the same root as “fellowship” – חבורה, “notebook” – מחברת, and the mathematical process “addition” – חיבור. The common thread of these words is that they speak of parts closely and actively bound together. We are not just members of the synagogue; we are bound up and deeply connected to each other. It is my hope that, as part of an intentional Jewish community, we actively transform each other by living out our values, educating the future, supporting those in times of need, and celebrating in times of joy. I also request that each and every one of you, to use the parlance of our times, become Beth-El Zedeck influencers, both within the congregation, and out in the Indianapolis Jewish and greater communities, to grow our inreach and outreach. Experience how amazing this place is, then tell your friends how amazing this place is.

This is a new moment for our congregation, and people naturally fear change. However, Jewish tradition rarely mentions change. It is more helpful to speak about renewal, in Hebrew, חידוש. From the

earliest times to the present, Jewish tradition has established that all innovations are grounded in the past. In our daily morning prayer, we say *וּבְטוֹבוֹ מְחַדָּשׁ בְּכָל יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית* – that in God’s goodness, God renews the work of creation every single day. The Hebrew word for month is *חֹדֶשׁ*, because of the moon’s continuous renewal. During this High Holy Day season, we will frequently chant the final verse of the book of Lamentations, which is also recited at the end of every Torah service: *חַדָּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם*, “renew our days, as of old.” Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, famously wrote, *הַיֶּשֶׁן יִתְחַדָּשׁ וְהַחֲדָשׁ יִתְקַדָּשׁ*, “The old will be renewed, and the new will be sanctified.” New ideas help us reinterpret older ones, and old ideas provide meaningful contexts for new ones.

A moment in the Torah can shed some light on this moment in the life of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck. Moses led the Israelites for forty years, bringing them out of Egypt with God’s great and wondrous miracles, guiding them through the wilderness to God’s holy mountain for the grand experience of Torah, and transforming a rowdy, raucous

bunch of slaves into a cohesive people. Most importantly, he empowered those who came after him to continue what he began.

At the end of the Torah, Moses said to the Israelites, **יָזִקְךָ וְאַמְצֵי**, “be strong and courageous...for it is indeed Adonai your God who marches with you. God will not fail you or forsake you.” (Deut. 31:6) Twice more in the same chapter (31:7, 23), Moses spoke these same words to Joshua, in their singular form, **יָזִקְךָ וְאַמְצֵי**, “be strong and courageous,” and promised that God would be with him. While Moses’ journey was over, Joshua and the Israelites would continue on to the Promised Land. As the Torah concludes, the Israelites were a work in progress. So too with the era that has just ended for Congregation Beth-El Zedeck. As we continue forward, we must locate God’s presence within us, in our interactions with each other, and in the tapestry of tradition that connects us to our people’s ancient and ongoing story.

Even as we use the past as a foundation upon which to build, there is an impulse to make comparisons between what has come before and what will be. However, a story from the Hasidic tradition cautions

against this. As the Ḥasidic rebbe Rabbi Meshullam Zusha of Hanipol lay on his deathbed, he was surrounded by his disciples. Reb Zusha was crying, and as much as his students tried, they could not comfort him. They asked him, “Master, why do you cry? You were just as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham.” Reb Zusha answered, “When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Court, they won’t ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you as wise as Moses? Why weren’t you as kind as Abraham?’ Rather, they will ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you Zusha?’” There will be challenges and successes, obstacles to overcome and joys to celebrate. In this new moment that approaches, I ask that we fill our own shoes, that we chart our own path, and that, while we find meaning in what came before, we creatively live up to our own potential.

In Pirkei Avot (2:16), the Ethics of the Ancestors, we are taught, “It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” There is much work ahead in our time of renewal. Let us enter the New Year with hope and confidence, and may we all heed the

message that Moses delivered to Joshua and the entire People of Israel in their moment of transition: **יָזֶק וְאַמָּץ**, “be strong and courageous.”

Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom.