

## Shabbat Sukkot 5769 Superstition

So it happened again. Some of the congregation was with me at Kol Nidrei as I revealed my wager with God to help the Red Sox defeat the Angels. The following Thursday night, after the second day of Sukkot, as it looked like the end was coming, I had to make another deal with the Big Baseball Fan in the Sky.

I was snacking on some chips during the Red Sox's improbable comeback from a 7-0 deficit in the seventh inning. Then the Red Sox made it 7-4 on Big Poppy's three-run-homer. As the bottom of the eighth kicked off with J.D. Drew's two-run homerun, I made a *neder*, a vow. If the Sox would score one more run and tie it, I would stop eating the chips. I said a few little prayers for the Sox and then sure enough Kotsay hit a double that glanced off Upton's glove and then Coco Crisp fought off many tough pitches before singling to right and scoring Kotsay. Just like that, the Red Sox tied it.

The game was running late and I needed to eat to stay awake. I reached for the chips again, but then I remembered my vow. How far should I take my magical thinking? What about my vow? As we read in the book of Ecclesiastes, *Kohelet*, on the Shabbat of Sukkot, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it."

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The truth is that I am not alone. Sports fans during a game are often engaged in prayer or, even more frequently, some kind of superstitious practice. A 2007 Associated Press poll found that 20% of American sports fans admit that they do things in hopes of either improving the fortunes of their favorite teams or averting a curse on them. Baseballs fans and players have developed elaborate rituals to help their teams.

This can be serious business. Phil Taylor writes in *Sports Illustrated* "When Matthew Cerrone tempted fate by posting the Mets' magic number [to reach the playoffs] on MetsBlog.com in mid-September [when they were 3 and half games in the lead], some of the site's visitors were so enraged, you would have thought that it was Cerrone himself who had come out of the bullpen and blown all those leads. One wrote: 'If we lost tonight...., we'll know this is a jinx and YOU WILL HAVE A HOLY DUTY AS A METS FAN TO TAKE IT DOWN!'"

These notions of vows, jinxes, superstitions and folk customs are found not only in sports, but in almost all cultures and religions. In Christianity, there is the phrase "Knock on wood," which refers to the wood of the cross. In Judaism, we have the evil eye, the *ayin hara* – we are supposed to avoid at all costs. The *ayin hara*, or *ein hara* or Yiddishized to "*keneharah*" is a term that many Jews of previous generations utilized frequently. My grandmother, a tried and true American, transformed it to "canary." After I told her I was going to ace my math test, she yelled, "SHHHH, you're going to give yourself a canary."

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I have been thinking of these folk practices that appear in various moments and traditions. Jinxing something is really about being overconfident – or even being filled with hubris. The one who warns about the evil eye is really reminding themselves or others not to be overconfident. They also reveal their own fear and anxiety.

This festival of Sukkot connects well to these two themes. First, Sukkot serves as a reminder not to get carried away with ourselves. The ancient Israelites went through a remarkable transformation from slaves to desert nomads and finally to farmers of the land of Israel. In Egypt, they depended on others for their food and survival and that dependence only intensified as they relied on God during their forty years of wandering.

Once they settled the land, these farmers became increasingly successful and wealth was accumulated and passed down to future generations. Understandably, the most successful felt that they earned their success through their efforts. This is not dissimilar from feelings many of us hold today – we are successful because of our diligence and our own hands, perhaps family and others helps, but we did it ourselves. America appreciates this notion of individual achievement.

Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, thought of this feeling as hubris, especially present on Sukkot when our ancestors were enjoying the richness of their harvest. He wrote:

*Lest you should say in your hearts, "My power and the might of my right hand has gotten me this wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:17), it is the practice to go out and dwell in booths in recognition of those who have no inheritance in the wilderness and no house to dwell in. For this reason did the Holy One fix the observance of the Sukkot festival at the time of the ingathering of the corn and wine, that people should not be guilty of pride in their well-stocked homes, saying "The might of our hands have gotten us this wealth."*

The second key to understanding these superstitious practices is to understand one's emotional state. As a teenage baseball fan, when my team was in trouble, I made my fingers into a Jewish star and recited a series of Jewish phrases that I had heard others recite.

My prayer and the Jewish star were attempts to calm me amidst the stress and the excitement of watching this nerve-wracking game that can keep us on the edge of our seats until 1 in the mornings – as it did many times in the final weeks of this season.

This also fits in well with the other side of Sukkot. While Sukkot is known as *zman simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing, it also ushers in a period of uncertainty. The harvest was a time of thanksgiving and gratitude and (hopefully) abundance, but there was also a keen awareness that the future was unknown.

In ancient Israel the weather heightened this experience of uncertainty. It does not rain in Israel from Pesah until Sukkot – for six full months. Now, at Sukkot, the rainy season is about to begin -- hopefully. If it would rain, prosperity could continue,

but if it did not, then the people would starve. Their entire existence was dependent on rain.

One of the explanations of the other main Sukkot ritual – the *lulav* and *etrog*, the four species which consist of branches of palm, myrtle and willow with a citron fruit – is that they are associated with ancient practices surrounding rain. Waving these branches is a reminder that God is all around us and of our need for water. Each day of Sukkot we recite *hoshanot*, asking for God’s help, usually while marching around the synagogue.

The Talmud weaves together Jewish prayer, folkways, superstition and action in the narrative about Honi, the circle-drawer:

*Once there was a terrible drought in the land of Israel. It was already the month of Adar, which usually marks the end of the rainy season and the beginning of spring, but no rains had fallen all winter long.*

*So the people sent for Honi the Circle-Marker.*

*He prayed, but still no rains came. Then he drew a circle in the dust and stood in the middle of it. Raising his hands to heaven, he vowed, “God, I will not move from this circle until You send rain!”*

*Immediately a few drops fell, hissing as they struck the hot white stones.*

*But the people complained to Honi, “This is but a poor excuse for rain, only enough to release you from your vow.”*

*So Honi turned back to heaven and cried, “Not for this trifling drizzle did I ask, but for enough rain to fill wells, cisterns, and ditches!”*

*Then the heavens opened up and poured down rain in buckets, each drop big enough to fill a soup ladle. The wells and the cisterns overflowed, and the wadis flooded the dessert. The people of Jerusalem ran for safety to the Temple Mount.*

Honi is a model of theurgy – of prayer that moves God to action. But whether or not Honi, or God for that matter, really has that power to engage in rain-making, what is clear is the impact Honi had on the people. His actions, his piety, his words and his *hutzpah* demonstrated how deeply Honi understood what was taking place and how the people were suffering. His act of drawing a circle was of great comfort to the people whether or not it rained.

Of course, I do not think that our prayers work like magic and I believe our tradition is also sensitive to this. A good example is found in this holiday. On Sukkot, we wave the *lulav* while reciting the Hallel – psalms of praise. What is interesting is that we wave the *lulav* when we say “*Ana Adonai Hoshiah Na* – please God save us.” But we do not wave it when we say “*Ana Adonai Hatzlihah Na* – please God grant us success.” It seems like the tradition knew that the key part of the ritual is sharing our fear, our anxiety, and asking to be saved, a prayer which comforts us even though on some deep level we are not sure that our prayers will be answered. When we ask for success, we are somehow asking for more, and it would be presumptuous to use the *lulav* and *etrog* when asking for extras.

Superstitious practices can comfort us in many moments – while sometimes they can be taken too far; when done in moderation they can help one through stressful moments – be they in sports or in real life.

This year, Sukkot is coming at a time of fear and anxiety. The economic crises we now find ourselves in are overwhelming. While today, in America, we are not dependent on rainfall as much for survival, but the world financial markets are fundamental to this entire planet and in many ways, to all humanity.

That brings me to a final theme of Sukkot – while it is a harvest festival, a time of joy, it comes with humility and spiritual practices to calm us before the winter. It is also a holiday that looks forward to a redeemed world. According to tradition, in the future Sukkot will usher in a time of universal peace. If you add up all the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple on Sukkot, it adds up to 70 – which represent the 70 nations of the world. A future Sukkot will herald a time of peace as all people will gather under the Messianic Sukkat Shalom, a sukkah of peace.

Oh, and just so you know, I did not eat any more chips and the Red Sox scored the winning run in the bottom of the ninth of that game.

May all our practices bring ourselves and the world tranquility and peace.

Amen.