

## Religious Lessons from Baseball -- Rabbi Joe Klein

There are four necessary components of any religious enterprise: creed, code, ceremony and community.

**Creed:** What we believe beyond the apparent reality of our lives.

**Code:** Proscribed behavior in affirmation of the creed.

**Ceremony:** A set of rituals that provide expression of and identity with the community.

**Community:** Connecting individuals through the above: creed, code and ceremony.

How is baseball a religious enterprise?

### **Creed**

Religious creed prompts us to focus on not only what transcends the immediate here-and-now, but how to live within the immediate here-and-now. Baseball also transcends the finite existential reality measured by time and space. Beyond “time”: Baseball is not played against a clock, reminding us that our lives should not be bound by “time”. Time keeping is artificial, the game continues to be played until it’s over. Since baseball time is measured only in outs, all you have to do is keep hitting, keep the rally alive, and you have defeated time. You remain young forever.

Beyond “space”: From home plate, space radiates outward and is defined right and left by proper boundaries that define where we can play the game and where we can’t. But the field theoretically extends infinitely. The outfield fences are only artificial limits prescribed by topography and the desires of ballpark owners. In actuality, the field has a beginning, is bounded on each side, but goes on forever. So each player’s goal is to “stay alive”, stay and play fair within the lines, “in the game”, until one comes home.

### **Code of Conduct**

Religions have codes of conduct, that which is properly expected of us, both within the community and without. Baseball also has clear codes of conduct. We are to play as best and as hard as we can, but always respecting the rules, being civil to both the judges who manage the life of the game as well as the opposing players, and never seeking to harm or hurt an opponent.

In baseball players expect to fail at times, knowing that mistakes and errors will be recorded, will be included in the final record of the game. But it is the totality of one’s game that counts in the final score. No one is expected to be perfect in the field, and certainly not when at bat: succeeding even one-third of the time is extraordinarily praiseworthy. Knowing that we cannot play perfectly, and even when we seem to be losing, we are still expected to play with mental and physical alertness, attentive to the field of play, and ready to react with a quick mind, a steady eye with physical agility and accuracy.

### **Ceremony**

Baseball is suffused with ceremony. Baseball has its own high holy days (Opening Day, All-Star Game, World Series) and its shrines: nationally Cooperstown, but also locally revered "cathedrals", ancient ones like Wrigley Field and Fenway Park, and more modern tabernacles where we place icons of the sainted players of the past.

Each game begins with a formal exchange of lineups, the ceremonial first pitch, and later the 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch. We stand and sing the sacred hymns. Ritual foods are served by clerical attendants, brought to us with formal pageantry. There are proper and proscribed rituals for calling strikes and outs and ‘safes’, and each team has its own ritual of sacred, even secret signs to the players, from the coaches to the batters and runners, and from the catcher to the pitcher. And the records of play are coded in sacred language and symbols, known and used by only the most serious and educated participants.

## *Community*

Which reminds us that the educated participants, beyond the play in the field, are at least as important as the players. Though baseball is all about the team, a 'community' is required for the well-being of both the players and fans. Both must take personal responsibility for active participation. On the field, each position must perform well individually while at the same time each is dependent on the performance of all positions. But without the encouragement and maintenance, physical and financial support of the community, the field of play cannot be sustained. Those unable to play on the field are equally emotionally and psychologically involved in the game, and though one "sits on the sidelines", all are fully engaged and rewarded and sustained with spiritual joy, uplift and exultation.

Additionally, the community has a historic tradition that zealously traces its ancestry, remembering and honoring its past, with relics from its saints enshrined at its national cathedral as well as in local tabernacles when worshippers come to pay homage to the patriarchs of their past. Are not these the hallmarks of "religion"? And though baseball is not technically a religion (despite what some might say) it does teach us how we should properly live our lives, which is what religion is supposed to do.

- Like Life, in baseball we expect disappointment and frustration, downfall and defeat. But there is always tomorrow, and always next season, and always the chance of sudden success.
- Like Life, baseball is a world of order, where actions always have consequences.
- Like Life, there is a soothing rhythm to the play of the game, pitch by pitch, inning by inning.
- Like Life we expect the rhythm to be interrupted by brief, breathtaking moments of both chaos and memorable greatness.
- Like Life one never knows when one or the other will happen.
- Like Life it can be ugly one instant and beautiful the next.
- Like Life when one or the other happens, we know the rhythm of play will return.

In the summer of 1973 the New York Mets trailed the Chicago Cubs by 9 ½ games in the National League East. Manager Yogi Berra said at the time "It ain't over till it's over." The Mets won the division title on the final day of the season.

What are Life and Living all about? 'It ain't over til it's over.'