

For my first sermon words of the year 5783, I am going to talk about baseball, which, as you know, I find endlessly interesting and inspiring. But I am not going to talk about baseball players or baseball teams; not even about the pennant race in which my beloved New York Mets are embroiled. Instead, I am going to speak about the baseball itself, like this one right here. As any true baseball fan will tell you, this is perhaps the most perfect of all human creations. Some of you may have noticed that when I am on Zoom from my office at home, I'm almost always fiddling with a baseball like this. The reason? Because I know that if I find just the right grip for my curveball, I can still make it to the big leagues.

Now this right here is a brand-new, official Major League baseball, a perfect, pure, pristine object. But as it stands right

now, this ball would be completely useless on the field of play. It is **too** perfect, **too** clean, and, especially, it is **too** slick for a pitcher to get a proper grip on, thereby presenting a grave risk to the batter standing 60' 6" away. Since the earliest days of game, players or umpires have had to desecrate this purity before putting a ball in play. In the old days, this was accomplished with a mixture of dirt and tobacco spit applied haphazardly by the pitcher on the mound, who would spit on the ball and rough it up with his hands to give it a little texture. Sometimes, the pitcher would leave some wet saliva on the ball with which to throw a spitball, which was made against the rules in 1920, though it is still occasionally attempted even to this day. This rather disgusting state of affairs was finally mitigated in 1938, when it was decreed that official game balls were to be prepared by umpires who would "rub them up" with mud that was harvested

from one specific, non-disclosed location along the banks of the Delaware River. Responsibility for procuring and distributing this mud has been the prerogative of a small family business all these many years--my idea for this sermon came from a long New York Times profile of this business that appeared near the beginning of the current baseball season.

Now so far in this sermon, you have heard a lot of baseball and very little High Holidays, but the connection is really very simple. As in baseball, where purity, perfection, and a pristine surface are not in the interests of the game, and are, in fact, despoiled by the umpire, so, too, in life itself: purity, perfection, and pristine motivation are not really in life's interest, and are, in fact, despoiled by the great Umpire in the Sky, who is sometimes known as the God of all being and becoming. Life is inevitably

messy; to live is to get one's hands dirty. As Jews with the job of ***tikkun olam*** set before us, the job of repairing and perfecting the world, there is no keeping our hands clean. We've got to dip our hands deeply in the mud, and it never entirely washes off. Every task, every relationship brings with it compromise in both meaning of the word: compromise because we never get all that we really want, and compromise because we are never able to fully realize any ideals we might cherish about our own lofty purity.

Sometimes, especially at this time of year, it is difficult to remember this fact, that the cleanest and purest of us also have dirty hands. We have compromised and been compromised. The lofty language of the High Holiday prayer book and the white vestments of the Torah scrolls seem to insist on an absolute kind

of purity. But if we look closely enough at our Torah scrolls we will see that they, too, are soiled; not with evil, or with sin, or with perfidy, but with life itself, with all of life's beautiful messiness.

For all of the care we take, a thousand hands have touched those scrolls; maybe ten thousand hands, and none of them have been perfectly clean. To be alive at all, to be in the game, is, by very definition, to be less than perfect, less than pure, and to be operating out of less than pristine motivations.

It is crucial that we remember this at the High Holiday season, because we are called by tradition far older than baseball to judge ourselves. The great wisdom of our tradition is that we are called to judge ourselves against the scale of what is possible for each individual one of us, already dirtied and roughed up by the very fact of living in this world. This fact, and I'll call it a fact,

should be a source of relief and happiness to us, just as Rosh Hashanah is, essentially, a day of relief and happiness. We are still in the game, and there is another season ahead of us. And when we look back over last season and forward to the next, we are not judging ourselves against the immortal gods of baseball but only against ourselves. How did I do this year, with my short legs, bad knees, and aching hips? How could I do a little better next year? Not perfect; perfection isn't in the ballpark. Just how could I do a little better with what I've got? These are the only questions that really matter right now. How did I do this year, compared only with my own potential? And how can I do a little better next year?

So let's not allow all these words of high moral purpose in prayerbook condemn us to a year, or to ten days, or even to a

single hour's feeling of failure or unworthiness, because it is not perfection that we are after. Just to keep trying to love one another and ourselves, that is all. The ball that the Umpire puts in play is not pure and pristine. It has already been dirtied and roughed up by life in this world, as have our hands. Let's just try hard to do the best we can. Amen.