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Your Final Chapter, Not Your Finest Chapter
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When I first heard the story of Thom Brennaman, I knew that I had to talk about it on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of our year. Thom Brennaman has something to teach everyone of us.

Thom Brennaman was a sportscaster who called Major League Baseball games for 33 years. There are a 162 games in a Major League Baseball season, and at least nine innings per game. Thom Brennaman therefore called at least 48,114 innings of baseball over 30 years, not counting the many games that went into extra innings. He had a special relationship with the Cincinnati Reds, whose games he started calling 14 years ago. His connection with the Reds was generational. His father Marty Brennaman had also called games for the Reds, and the son took over the mantle when his father retired, *m'dor l'dor*.

Brennaman built up his reputation, his good will, the crown of his good name, inning after inning, game after game, for those 30 years.

Then he lost it all in less than eight seconds. Last month, on August 19, Brennaman was announcing the first game of a home doubleheader between the Reds and the Kansas City Royals. While not realizing that his mic was on—a so-called hot mic, where the speaker does not realize it's on, but it's on—he made a homophobic slur. He called a certain city “one of the blank capitals of the world.” Eight words in less than eight seconds. The reaction on social media was immediate and furious. The response of the Reds organization was likewise immediate and decisive. Brennaman was suspended then and there. Another announcer called

the second game of the double header. The Reds organization announced that it has a “zero-tolerance policy” against bias and discrimination. It apologized to the LGBTQ community. It suspended the announcer not only immediately but also indefinitely.

Thirty years, more than 43,740 innings, all come to naught because of eight words spoken in less than eight seconds.

Now we could agree to disagree about whether the suspension of Brennaman for his homophobic slur is appropriate. On the one hand, we stand against hate. People who use hateful slurs must bear the consequences. On the other hand, do we really want a world where somebody can be judged on the basis of their worst moment? Who among us has not made thoughtless and careless remarks? Indeed, the single most common sin in the confessional are sins of speech. Who could survive if we were all publicly shamed for the stupidest thing we ever said? On the third hand, if he used a homophobic slur once, it feels highly unlikely that this was the only time he used it. It was the only time *he got caught* using it. Non-haters don’t use slurs.

We could debate the merits of whether Thom Brennaman’s swift fall from grace was fair, but the truth is, there is no point to that debate, because whether it was right or wrong that he is suspended, it just is.

Here is the point, and this is where Thom Brennaman’s story is a cautionary tale for everyone of us. It takes years to build up our reputation; it takes seconds to tear it down. Andy Stanley makes this point with a wonderful turn of phrase. He says *we are not judged by our finest chapter. We are judged by our final chapter.*

A vivid illustration of that point is found in our matriarch Rebecca. Rebecca had a finest chapter. When Eliezer, Abraham’s servant, was searching for a bride for Isaac, he prayed: God,

show me the woman who is so kind that when I ask her for water, she will also offer water to my camel. God answered his prayer. Rebecca offered the thirsty servant water and then offered water for all his camels. Kindness. But when Rebecca's life story is told, nobody focuses on the fact that when she was young, she was kind to Eliezer's camels.

Why not? Because her finest chapter was superseded by her final chapter. She lies to her blind husband Isaac by masterminding the theft of the blessing that he had intended for Esau but gave unknowingly to Jacob; she sets their two sons Jacob and Esau against one another; she steals from Esau what is rightfully his; she corrupts Jacob by enlisting him in the whole morass; she explodes her own family.

When Rebecca dies, there is no mention of her death or burial. The midrash picks up on the Torah's silence and has Rebecca say, as she is about to die: "My son Jacob is not here. My husband Isaac is not talking to me. Esau and I don't speak. If I am buried, none of my family will come, and the whole world will see what a mess has become of my family." Therefore, she commanded that her burial be at night, so that no one could see.

Our finest chapter is swallowed up by our final chapter. Whether that is right or wrong, it just is. What does that mean for us as we live our lives now?

It means that we want to end strong. If we are judged by our final chapter, not by our finest chapter, we want our final chapter to be our finest chapter, to be us at our very best.

But here's the thing. Nobody knows how long we've got. Nobody knows how many more chapters we've got left. If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it has taught us how near death can be for any of us. It has taught us profound humility before mystery. Profound humility before that which we cannot totally control. It has taught us that no matter how old or young, how weak or strong, how rich or poor, how athletic or not athletic, none of us knows whether the

chapter we are in is just our current chapter or our final chapter. Therefore we should live the chapter we are in right now as if it were our final chapter—the chapter that will be the telling capstone of our whole life, because it might well be.

What would that look like?

In his classic *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey invites the reader to do a thought experiment. Go to a quiet room, a space where you will not be interrupted. Imagine you are going to a funeral service. This is pre-pandemic, when there were indoor funeral services. It has the feel of a funeral. But as you get there, you discover that it is *your* funeral. You are about to hear four speakers talk about you: one from your family, the second from work, the third a long-time friend, the fourth from a community that you care a lot about. What would you want each of those speakers to say?

I would add to this thought experiment: what would you want these four speakers to say about you *based on the chapter you are in today*?

Because there is an important corollary to the Thom Brennaman story. Years of distinguished living can be undone by one very bad moment. But the flip is also true. Years of undistinguished living can be redeemed by a great moment. We have the power, based on how we live today, based on how we live this coming year, to fix what has been broken, to redeem what needed redemption.

NPR had this wonderful show called *Only a Game*, which aired a powerful piece about the relationship between Celtics greats Bob Cousy and Bill Russell. On the court, the two were magic. They won six NBA championships in their seven seasons together. But there was a whole other dimension to their relationship off the court that needed mending, and it would take more than 50 years for that mending to take place.

Their seven years together, from 1957 to 1963, coincided with the heart of the civil rights struggle. Bill Russell was an early version of the athlete activist. He would speak out about civil rights issues. He would call Boston “a racist city.” His home in Boston was broken into and racial slurs were written on the walls. While the civil rights struggle was taking place, and was very personal for Bill Russell, Bob Cousy was oblivious to it all.

There was the infamous evening of October 17, 1961. The Celtics were supposed to play an exhibition game in Lexington, Kentucky. When the team went downstairs to its hotel restaurant to eat dinner, management said: “We cannot serve you people”—you people referring to the black Celtics players, Bill Russell, K.C. Jones, Sam Jones, and Satch Sanders. Those four athletes decided if they were not served dinner in Lexington, they were not going to play the game. The seven white players, including Bob Cousy, ate at the restaurant and played the game. They did not speak up or speak out for their teammates.

Cousy retires in 1963. A great point guard. An NBA Hall of Famer. And a teammate who did not see or share his teammate’s pain. As the years go by, he is more and more disturbed by his failure to be there for Russell and his other black teammates. The exhibition game he played in Lexington in 1961 gnaws on him. “Why did I play? What was I thinking?...Why didn’t I say something?”

Forty years later, forty years after the meal he should not have eaten, and the game he should not have played, Cousy is giving an interview on ESPN. It is 2001. He is talking about Russell as a basketball player, and he suddenly shifts the topic. “I should have been much more sensitive to Russell’s anguish in those days.” He broke down sobbing, and he buried his head in his hands on camera.

Roll the film forward. Bob Cousy is now 87 years old. His wife has died. He lives by himself in his home in Worcester. This storied point guard, fleet and fast and poetry in motion, the first guard to throw no look passes and dribble behind his back, now walks with a cane. He has lots of time to think, and the one thing he keeps coming back to is: “I should have done more.” So he writes a handwritten letter to Bill Russell. He writes:

Russ, I know we’ve never been pen pals, and I’m sorry about that. It was my responsibility to reach out to you and hopefully share the pain that you had during that period—or minimize it...However, I didn’t do that, and I am [so] sorry

The story of Bob Cousy’s *teshuvah*—at 87 writing this letter “I should have done more,” inspired a segment on Only a Game which was first broadcast in 2018 and then rebroadcast last month as one of the very best and best received segments in the history of the show.

Which means that Cousy’s story today is not what he did as a point guard during the dynasty years from 1957 to 1963. That is ancient history.

Nor is his story today how utterly clueless he was in the 1960s, how he did not see his teammates’ pain.

Rather, his story today is how, at the age of 87, he tried to make amends; how he got that he was badly off in his younger years; how he got that he should not have eaten that dinner, should not have played that game; how he got that he should have reached out and cared more. His story today is that “I should have done more,” and he apologized that he did not.

Bob Cousy’s story is the flip of Thom Brennaman’s story. Both stories are about how years of living can get undone in a moment.

There is a cruel aspect to it. There is a cruel aspect that years of good living can be undone by one spectacularly bad moment.

And there is a hopeful and helpful aspect to it. That it is never too late, and we are never too old, to right was wrong, to redeem what needs redeeming, and to write a whole new story for ourselves and our world.

Let's make the chapter we are in right now our finest chapter. *G'mar chatimah tovah.*