

# HOME RUNS AND TORAH DO NOT MEET

*by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.*

My apologies to those who are not familiar with baseball; hopefully the message will be clear even to those who do not share that childhood experience with me.

Legend has it (I've not seen it confirmed anywhere) that baseball great Ty Cobb once commented that Babe Ruth (the home run king of his time) didn't play real baseball. That is, by hitting the ball out of the park he was missing the point of baseball; the careful placing of hits so as to move the players forward.

When I heard the above I wondered why it is that a ball hit out of the park is considered a home run. After all, hitting the ball out of the playing area to the right or left is considered a foul ball, while hitting it past the outfield fence is a home run. Strange. I cannot imagine the same thing in another sport. Imagine throwing the football into the stands past the end zone and having that be called a touchdown? Hitting the ball hundreds of feet past the hole and getting a low score in golf? Slamming the ball past one's opponent in tennis without hitting the court and getting a point for it? It really is a rather strange rule; a fluke of baseball.

Upon reflection though, I realized that there is a great depth to this fluke and one which bears a great deal of analysis. Man was created to toil (Job/Iyov 5:7). That means that the 'game' of life involves steady and persistent effort to perform Mitzvos; to study Torah; to perfect one's character; to earn a livelihood (Avos 2:2). In a word, there is no substitute for Ameilus (toil) in the pursuit of a Torah life. That's the name of the game. We are even taught that the severe reprimand/warning (the Tochacha) written in the Torah is essentially hinged on whether or not we toil in our service of G-d (those wishing to see for themselves should see Rashi on Vayikra 26:3 and 26:14).

This does not imply that such toil is meant to be depressive. Quite to the contrary; if someone does not toil with joy then they have missed the plot. But clearly we are speaking about toil. And toil is one well-placed hit after another. Toil is not home runs.

Yet we are living, it seems, in the home run era. I have met with many people who are trying to find a way to become a millionaire. They are not looking to take small steps; they are looking for the big win. When setting forth their service of G-d I have seen many people take on all sorts of commitments that they cannot uphold in their efforts to score the big win in their divine service. I meet with students of Torah who are relying on their genius and not on their diligence and I see yet another home run desperado. I certainly don't know how to turn this around, but I know that without

turning it around in an individual's life there will not be genuine growth.

Home runs are a fluke of baseball; but they have become a fluke of modern times. There are few signs of laziness as clear as the passion for a home run. Careful, thoughtful play-by-play is the name of the game called life. A paradigm shift is clearly required if we are to be happy with our lives. Erasing the passion for the 'big win' must be accompanied by a joyful acceptance of the terms of our lives and a celebration of every moment that we are blessed to be in the game.

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