

Hannah Heller

Dvar Torah – Yom Kippur 2009 – September 28, 2009

A feeling of **excitement and renewed energy** comes over many American homes this time of year. It's **not** because of a new **academic year, cooler weather, or holiday season**. It is the beginning of **football season**. The National Football League (**NFL**) plays a prominent role in a fan's schedule as it occupies **priority space** on TV and radio. I myself **do not understand the game of football**, although my son Elliot has patiently **tried to explain it to me** in so many different ways. What I do understand about it, though, is that for **those who find meaning in it, the game moves quickly** and it becomes a great **source of energy, discussion and direction to one's day**.

As we are in the midst of the **holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur**, you might ask, **what does the NFL hold over us?** Isn't this day supposed to be **devoted to praying and asking for forgiveness?** As I think about it, I have come to realize how much **we can learn from what happens in a football game**. I hope you football experts **won't laugh at my ignorance, but rather will give me credit for finding meaning in a game that I don't fully understand**. Last year, when I asked Elliot what was going on in the game, he told me to **watch the guy with the ball**. My reaction was that I can't follow who has the ball because **they're all over it and the guys are on top of each other**. How many times do we **strive for a goal, and we lose our focus, drop the ball, and so much gets in our way?** The **ball is constantly moving in a game and dropping the ball, or having a fumble, costs one's team greatly**. How much has it cost us when we **drop the ball when it comes to caring about others and, caring for ourselves** so that we can be **healthy enough to tend to the needs of others?** While it may look easy from a distance, one

has to go through a lot of **challenges and obstacles to score a touchdown or even a field goal**. While it may appear that **doing Mitzvot** is easy, sometimes things are more **complicated** than we expect them to be and we need to make the **extra effort to deal with the challenges that get in our way**.

I marvel at **how easily the football players jump up and run again after they either fall down or are tackled**. Granted, the **ground may be softer** than average grass or cement and the **uniforms may have a lot of padding**. Still, how does one move so quickly, **rise up so soon after being knocked down and run** as though nothing has happened?

If you were to **ask a successful football player, or a successful leader** in any field, **how they accomplished what they did in their lives**, they will often **refer to a parent, mentor or role model**. They **REMEMBER the inspiration** they received and they in turn **make the effort to help and inspire others**.

A very **important part of the Yom Kippur service, Yizkor**, will soon begin. In the **Yizkor** service, we **remember those who are no longer alive**. While their **physical presence is no more**, they are **no less a part of our lives** as their **memories influence our identities and our actions**. When I was a little girl and my parents were alive, we all **quickly left the synagogue** after the sermon when the **Yizkor** service was about to begin. In my **youthful innocence**, I thought the adults who remained in shul were having **secret conversations about their deceased loved ones**. As I became an adult and **eventually became a Yizkor participant**, I was initially surprised at how **short** the service was. I wondered what the **excitement** was all about. I also felt **sad for the Jews who come to shul only for this short service**. How **depressing** it must be to think of **Judaism as just a time to mourn**

for loved ones, especially in the middle of a fast day, even if it is the holiest day of the year. Those who leave at the end of Yizkor and don't return until the next Yom Kippur miss out on the opportunity for great joy as the Sukkot holiday where it is *Zman Simchatenu*, a time of rejoicing, comes just four days after Yom Kippur.

After a few paragraphs of prayers together, congregants say **individual prayers for their deceased relatives, pledging to give Tzedakah (charity) in their names.** I was **surprised** to learn that the **deceased**, as well as the living, **need a day of atonement.** Yet, since **they cannot be here to pray for themselves, we pray and give Tzedakah in their merit.** They are **not considered perfect angels just because they're not here anymore.** We remember them for **exactly who they were, with all their faults as well as their attributes. Performing good deeds and giving charity in their memory is also a way of perpetuating the very values for which many of our deceased stood.** The custom in medieval Germany of **reading a list of martyrs** has been expanded to the **published lists of the deceased and the memorial tablets** that appear in many shuls. Since **Kaddish is not recited as part of Yizkor, one doesn't need to be in a minyan to say Yizkor. Yizkor can be said at home** if one can't get to shul. In my opinion, **memories of the deceased are not isolated to these few minutes of prayer in the synagogue. Their memories serve as an inspiration to us all as we continue the challenges of our lives.**

In addition to Yom Kippur, Yizkor is said on **Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot,** when we are commanded to appear in the Holy Temple before G-d and not to come empty-handed. By pledging to give **Tzedakah**, we come to G-d with a **gift that can make a difference in the lives of others.**

The word “**Yizkor**” comes from the word “**Zachor,**” meaning remember. When we think about the **dashes on tombstones** that represent the time between one’s birth and one’s death, we can ask ourselves **how we want to be remembered** when our time on this earth ends. At the **end of one’s life**, one of the biggest **challenges** is unfortunately **one’s memory** (especially if one dies of an illness such as Alzheimer’s). As the **healthy living, it is up to us to hold onto those memories and help the terminally ill to enjoy whatever time is left.** If we **contribute to the world in memory of our loved ones, we hold onto their memories and they continue to hold a presence in this world as well as in the next world.**

As we have begun the **fall season** and the **weather is changing,** note that while G-d implements **changes in nature,** our **relationship with our Creator remains the same – G-d is with us in all seasons** and in all the **events of nature** as we go through our lives. The **changes in nature** also remind us that **we cannot always control** what happens – **weather and disturbances of nature play a key role in whether or not events in our lives can happen as scheduled.** As the **weather gets cold,** the **memories of our loved ones can provide great warmth to sustain us through the upcoming seasons.**

Rabbi Yissochar Frand, in his book, **Listen To Your Messages,** devotes an entire chapter to the subject of **Teshuvah,** repentance. He relates the important role of the **Kohen Gadol,** the **High Priest** and the **duties which he performed on Yom Kippur.** He notes that this person is called **Kohen Gadol,** meaning the **Great Kohen.** He is **not a Kohen Rishon (first Kohen).** In order to be effective in representing the nation for atonement, the **Kohen Gadol needed to look beyond himself,** to see the **community as coming first.** As a leader, he **sees beyond his own needs** to the needs of others. If a person is **community minded,** he or she enjoys the **benefits** of

being part of a **community and community members helping one another**. This year, make the **effort to compliment someone** on something good **they've done**, **what they're wearing** or **who they are**. **Don't just bring a chair for yourself – bring for someone else as well**. The more you **reach out to help others**, the **greater person** you become.

As we get further into the fall, we will read the **Torah portion** about our forefather, **Avraham Avinu**. Note the **effort that he makes to intercede** on behalf of **Sodom, as he bargains with G-d to save the community in the merit of a few righteous** people who may reside there. Although the community of Sodom could not be saved, Abraham demonstrated that **no matter how low you sink, no matter how hard you fall, you can always rise up again. It's never too late to repent** and to change the way **we relate to G-d, to each other and to ourselves**.

Just as the **football players fall down and rise up again**, we too can look **towards a better future as we rise up to work towards our goals**. One **football player** on a team **doesn't win the game by himself**. The players **work together as a team**. They **stay motivated** by all the **cheering and the hype** from the **fans**. I'd like to think that although I don't follow the game, the **Ravens flag on my car helps to make a difference**. It certainly **makes a difference for me**, as I can **easily find my car in a crowded parking lot**. With all the **support of the media and the fans, a team can be highly motivated to succeed**.

In conclusion, **I wish the Baltimore Ravens a successful season and hope that we will be privileged to see them win the Super Bowl**.

More importantly, though, **I wish for all of us the best of health, happiness and success as we pray together for a great year and continue to build on our community.**

Good Yom Tov, Shana Tova, and Gmar V'Chateema Tova.