

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Catching a foul ball can be one of the greatest joys for baseball fans. I've attended well over 100 major league ballgames in my lifetime -- and remember like yesterday the single foul ball I once snagged. Only a handful of the thousands who spend a day or night at the ballpark find themselves in the right place at the right time to take home a prized souvenir. Greg Van Niel had himself a day for the ages on Sunday at Progressive Field, where as his hometown Cleveland Indians were playing, Greg hauled in an odds-defying four foul balls. The Indians season ticket holder, who had never caught a foul ball at Progressive Field before, said of his big day, "Three of them were catches and one was a ball I picked up off the ground. The third one, I think was the hardest one ... I ended up sprawled across a few rows, and I got some cheese on myself. But the other ones were just a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

Records aren't kept on such things, but have you ever heard of catching four foul balls in one game? By the fourth ball, 'Mazel' Van Niel was so amazed he just tossed the ball away to another fan. An app called Ideal Seat -- which tracks foul ball landing info -- estimates that the odds of catching four foul balls in one game is roughly one trillion to one. One trillion to one! A bit of perspective: In a \$250 million Powerball jackpot last year, the odds of winning were estimated at one in 175 million. It sounds like Greg Van Niel had a lifetime's worth of good mazel on Sunday. Do you think he wished he bought a lottery ticket instead?

Many believe that winning a lottery (or catching a foul ball) represents pure chance or amazing luck, but an understanding-Jew accepts the existence of Divine Providence. To the casual observer the choice of winners and losers seems random, though in reality all that happens in the world is directed and controlled by G-d Himself. Albert Einstein once said, "Coincidence is G-d's way of remaining anonymous." While it is often difficult (if not impossible) to know why things happen, a solidly-founded belief in G-d will lead to the inescapable conclusion that there are no accidents. Everything -- even catching four foul balls -- happens for a reason.

Parshas Va'eschanan Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11

Moses continues his final speech to the Children of Israel (the rabbis always talk about the 'Children of Israel' -- where were all the adults?). He tells them how he entreated G-d to allow him to enter the land of Israel, but his request was denied. Moses was allowed, however, to see the Promised Land from the peak of Mount Pisgah.

Moses appeals to the people to keep the Torah and its commandments, telling them to neither add to nor subtract from its mitzvos. They are told to always remember the incredible Revelation they experienced at Mt. Sinai where every man, woman and child heard the presentation of the Ten Commandments. Moses repeats the Ten Commandments, with subtle differences between this version and the one found in the Book of Exodus. Did you ever wonder where the Shema comes from? It is found in this week's Torah portion. The Shema expresses our belief that G-d is One and states our commitment to love and serve Him. It exhorts us to transmit Torah to the next generation, and its laws should be remembered by a 'sign' upon one's hand and forehead (tefillin) and written on the doorposts of one's home (mezuzah).

Finally, Moses encourages the people to trust in G-d and remain faithful to the Torah. Intermarriage is prohibited, and the source that Jewish identity is transmitted through the mother is stated.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Bill Gates doodled. Lyndon Johnson doodled. So did Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ronald Reagan drew pictures of cowboys, horses and hearts crossed with arrows. The word doodle first appeared in the early 17th century to mean a fool or simpleton. The meaning "fool, simpleton" is intended in the song title "Yankee Doodle", originally sung by British colonial troops prior to the American Revolutionary War. The modern meaning emerged in the 1930s either from this meaning or from the verb "to dawdle", which has the meaning of wasting time or being lazy. Most of us doodle at one point or another. But why?

A recent experiment suggests doodling may be more than just a pleasant waste of time and paper. Forty participants listened to a mock answerphone message which was purportedly about an upcoming party. People were asked to listen to the message and write down the names of all the people who could come to the party, while ignoring the people who couldn't come. Though the task was simple -- and boring -- would the participants be able to concentrate long enough to note down

the right names? A 'doodle factor' was introduced into the study: Half the participants were told to fill in the little squares and circles on a piece of paper while writing down the names. The rest just listened to the message, only writing down the names.

Looking at the results of this 2009 study, the beneficial effects of doodling are right there. Non-doodlers wrote down an average of seven of the eight target names. But the doodlers wrote down an average of almost all eight names. It wasn't just their attention that was enhanced; participants were later given a surprise memory test, after being specifically told they didn't have to remember anything. Once again doodlers had sharper focus and performed better, in fact almost 30% better.

If you read any personal development advice, you'll rather quickly come across the idea that it's important to focus on positive aspects of life. By concentrating on what we have that is good, we'll automatically start noticing more of the same. The happiest people do not necessarily have the 'best' things. They simply appreciate the things they have. This timeless idea is expressed in our tradition as follows: "Who is wealthy? The one who is happy with his lot." (Pirkei Avos 4:1). Cultivating an 'attitude of gratitude' can transform our lives for the better. Don't doodle ...er, dawdle. All it takes is the proper focus.

Quote of the Week

I'm convinced that most men don't know what they believe, rather, they only know what they wish to believe. How many people blame G-d for man's atrocities, but wouldn't dream of imprisoning a mother for her son's crime? — Criss Jami (American poet)

Joke of the Week

A biologist, a chemist, and a statistician were out hunting. The biologist shot at a deer and missed by 5 feet to the left. The chemist then took a shot and missed 5 feet to the right Suddenly, the statistician yelled, "We got 'em!"

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To join us on Facebook go to <http://bit.ly/dtIoA4> and click the "Like" button.
To follow us on Twitter go to <http://twitter.com/NHBZ> and click "Follow."
To follow Rabbi Smason go to <http://twitter.com/pepshortand> click "Follow."

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Everything Jewish in St. Louis - including Rabbi Smason's column, community events, news, commentary and features for Jews of all ages - can be found on our community website, www.JewishinStLouis.org This website is a service of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and features columns from St. Louis Rabbis and community members.

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Comments, questions, requests to be added to our email list or better jokes can be sent to pepshort613@gmail.com. Care to know more about Nusach Hari Bnai Zion Congregation? Check us out at www.nhbz.org If you enjoyed Beyond Twelve Gates, please share with a friend. Thanks to Alan Haber for his assistance in distributing BTG.