

A New Year's Blessing – Three Heroes

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

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(Story adapted from Todd C. Frankel's piece in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)

We come together on this holiest day of the year, to ask God for blessings—blessings for ourselves, blessings for those we love. We know our petitions must come hand in hand with repentance—that God first seeks our contrition for the ways in which we have gone astray this past year, and expects a clear commitment to do differently in the year to come. But we take comfort in the reminder that God is endlessly compassionate and therefore, with true chutzpah, we ask for God's blessings even as we utter the very words, "We have sinned."

In Jewish tradition we have a special way of framing those blessings. Each Shabbat, when we ask God to bless our children, we pray (as Aaron and I do over Eli every Friday) that boys might be "like Ephraim and Manasseh" – two brothers who, unlike too many that came before them, were not rivals, instead united in their drive to perform good deeds. We pray that girls might be "like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel" – strong, admirable women who each overcame significant personal hardships to make lasting contributions in the building of a nation. When our children are born, we give them names after loved ones in our families. We do so not merely to keep the names alive, but with the hope and prayer that the traits of character and soul we so deeply admire in our loved ones will endure, as well, bringing a lifetime's worth of blessing to their namesakes. In Judaism, we have a storied tradition of searching for heroes and, when we find them, praying that God will bless us such that we might use our own gifts as heroically as they have.

In that spirit, I'd like to share a story with you this morning – a true story, a story of three heroes: Albert Pujols, an all-star baseball player and human being; Tim Tepas, a retired schoolteacher and devoted father; and Tepas' son Keith, celebrating the special milestone of his 21st birthday. On the surface, it's a simple story – a major league baseball player went above and beyond to tend to a fan who had fallen onto the field during a game, trying to snag a foul ball for his son. And in the interest of full disclosure, I am a lifelong fan of the St. Louis Cardinals, Pujols' team. But the story transcends one incident on a baseball field and, I truly believe, can be a source of blessing for us as we strive to go forward into the new year with renewed resolve.

Father and son had driven down from Buffalo, N.Y., in their Hyundai. They loaded up on Gatorade and music for the 3½-hour trip. They both wore Cardinals T-shirts. Keith wore a red Cardinals cap. He plays on the Cardinals in a softball league for disabled

adults. He sleeps on Cardinals bedsheets at home.

The father liked Pujols — more as a person than a player. Tim recalled reading about Pujols and his 11-year-old daughter, Isabella, who has Down syndrome. She was 3 months old when Pujols met her mom, his future wife, and the athlete would subsequently become a staunch advocate for children with Down Syndrome through his charitable foundation.

Tim is also the father of a child with Down syndrome, and for Keith's 21st birthday, he at first planned to take his son to a minor league game in Buffalo. They have season tickets and Keith can name players who played there years ago. But the Bisons were out of town. So Tim, an impulsive and gregarious 63-year-old with gray hair and a mustache, aimed for something grander. He splurged on tickets for the Pirates game — \$224 for the pair. Section 7, right along the field. He figured it was an important milestone for Keith — and it was an important milestone for Tim, too. He had spent years battling his own doubts, worrying about his son, wondering what would become of him as he grew older.

The doctors warned Tim and his wife there would be delays with Down syndrome — developmental disabilities and distinctive physical features that would set him apart. Keith would lag behind other children his age and it wore on his father — watching other kids walk, other kids talk, wondering when it would be Keith's turn.

"During the first three years," Tim says, "you're like, what's wrong with this kid? When is he going to blossom?" And then he adds: "It's been challenging, I'll be honest with you. I heard that when you have a special needs child, as many as 90 percent of those parents end up divorced." And, in fact, Tim was divorced after one year. His former wife got custody of Keith, but Tim stayed in his son's life. He saw him four days a week, sometimes more. He attended his therapy sessions, his sporting events, his Boy Scout meetings. And he remembers the precise moment when he began to see his son in a new way. Keith was 7. Father and son were running side by side in a county park, tossing a blue-and-yellow foam football back and forth. It felt so ordinary, so simple, this staple of fathers and sons. And he told himself: *OK, Tim, you can stop worrying.*

"I consider him a real blessing in my life," he says now. He can rattle off his son's achievements, apologizing as he goes for sounding boastful. Two years ago, Keith became an Eagle Scout. He graduated high school this summer, his father buying him a custom-fit suit for the occasion. He's good at spelling and miniature golf. He doesn't talk much, preferring to telegraph his speech through simple words or gestures. But his father can glean more than enough from one of his son's gleeful thumbs-up. "It's kind of neat, in a way," his father says. "Because of his innocence, I don't think he's ever going to change much. He'll still hug me when he's 30 or 40 or 50. He's just uninhibited that way."

Keith loves routines and the relationship between father and son has developed its own. In recent years, one routine has centered on playing baseball, starting in the spring and lasting until it's just too cold to keep playing. Three days a week, Tim picks Keith up and

they head to a little league field. Tim pitches from a box of old balls. Keith wields the bat. The father keeps stats, tracking the progress of his son like he is a major league prospect. He notes with precision how many balls Keith hits over the fence, how far they travel. He walks off the distances to be sure. With the number of home runs, Tim can see his son's growth. Keith is not tall, standing just under 5 feet 2, but he has a slugger's swing. He hit two home runs the first year, eight the next, then 26, 53, 97 and, only part-way into their private season this year, he has already hit 94.

Every visit to the ballpark ends with a routine, as well – a private celebration modeled on the Friday night fireworks at Bisons games. They huddle together and rest one hand on top of the other in the middle. Then they shout "1,2,3, fireworks!" and shoot their hands skyward. Only then is the game truly over.

This particular night in Pittsburgh, with the game tied 4-4 in the middle of the seventh inning, Tim considered leaving; they faced a long drive home. He reminded himself to remove the homemade orange-and-white "Happy 21st Keith" sign taped atop the railing. But they stuck around and when a foul ball spun toward the stands, Tim thought: *Hey, this is going to be easy.*

The bouncing ball appeared to be headed straight for him. He stood up, reached out with his left hand, and planted his right hand on the railing. But his view changed as he stood. The ball appeared farther off to his left, difficult to backhand. He extended his right hand but, in the process, flipped over the railing. With his arms offering no protection, his face slammed to the ground, and the ball careened off the railing and into right field.

It was the worst fall many in the stadium had ever seen.

Pujols, playing first base about 40 feet away, reached Tim first, and knelt beside him. "Please lie down, sir," he urged. "Don't try to get up."

Pirates first base coach Perry Hill arrived next and grabbed Tim's feet. Stadium staff ran over. Trainers from both teams and paramedics crowded around him. Pujols still knelt by his head.

Hill glanced over his shoulder at Tim's son whom he had noticed earlier in the game. Now he picked up Pujols' mitt and walked over to Keith, still in the stands. He asked Keith if he'd like to touch Pujols' glove. They talked about the handmade "Happy 21st Keith" sign. Hill tried to position himself to block the son's view and, when he looked back at the field, saw Pujols still there.

They asked Tim to wiggle his fingers and his toes. He did. They asked about tingling, about radiating pain. He felt none. Several minutes ticked by as they strapped Tim to a board and secured his neck with foam blocks. And still Pujols was there, in the thick of it.

"I'm almost wondering if this is a friend of Albert's," said an announcer on the Cardinals

TV broadcast. Mike Shannon, doing the Cardinals radio show, sounded incredulous. "Look at Albert, he's right in there—we know he has a lot of compassion, but we don't need him hurting his back trying to lift the stretcher!"

Pujols let the paramedics wheel Tim out on through the right field fence. Then he stood, hitched up his pants, and walked over to Keith, who now sat on a small ballpark utility vehicle, about to follow his father. Keith sat facing away from the medical drama. He tugged on the bill of his red Cardinals cap as he scanned the diamond. Pujols leaned over and tapped Keith on the shoulder, spoke to him for a while. Pujols smiled. And he made sure Keith got the foul ball his father had wanted him to have.

Tim was released from the hospital after midnight. As he left, the hospital staff teased that he was famous, his fall already appearing on ESPN and YouTube. His neck was sore. His face was bruised. But he had no serious injuries. He only wanted to get home. They drove through the night. The father asked his son whether he had been scared by what happened on the field. The son said simply, "No."

In a few days, a Pujols autographed baseball arrived at the house for Keith, and Tim remembered a letter which, all the while, had sat in the back of his car in a white tote bag. Tim wasn't sure why he had written it. He had written and addressed it to Pujols long before the game. Pujols, a superstar athlete, surely did not need to hear from him. But Tim needed to share his son's story, wanted another father to know what he knows, what he took so long to learn.

The letter, after a short introduction, started with a note: "According to the laws of aerodynamics, the bumblebee can't fly. But the bumblebee doesn't know that. So it flies." It then went on to detail in numbers and statistics Keith's hitting prowess and his off-the-field achievements.

And then the letter ended like this: "He is a blessing in my life and I thank the Lord for giving him to me. Like the bumblebee, he doesn't know that he's not supposed to fly."

Four weeks later, Tim and Keith drove back to Pittsburgh for a series with the Cardinals, attending at the Pirates' invitation. There was no need to bring the letter, he had mailed it after returning home – the best thank you one parent to another could manage.

And this time he let others chase the foul balls.

A story of three heroes – each of whom we would do well to emulate in the coming year. And so a blessing, in the best of Jewish tradition ...

May God make you like Albert Pujols... with great talent, maybe, but with an even greater heart; willing to tend the fallen – of body and spirit alike – with patience and compassion.

May God make you like Tim Tepas... content with your lot, but more than that – feeling gratitude where you once felt resentment; finding blessing where you once felt cursed.

And may God make you like Keith Tepas... and the bumblebee, and all those unaware of their so-called limitations, and therefore unimpeded by them. May God help you soar, deaf to the cries of those who say you can't.

May God make you like all the heroes of *our* faith tradition, and those from *outside* our faith whose heroism our tradition equally values and extols.

May God bless us all throughout the New Year with numerous stories of good and grace, kindness and honor, charity and humility. May they move and uplift us; give us hope, courage and strength; and may they ever inspire us to use our gifts to touch the lives of others as we move, we pray, from strength to strength. Amen.