Rabbi David Holtz Temple Beth Abraham

Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/5779 Tarrytown, NY

**ADAM GREENBERG AT THE BAT**

**[With thanks to Rabbi Jack Riemer for telling me the original story]**

Last year on Kol Nidre I spoke about Hank Greenberg, the great baseball player for the Detroit Tigers. I told you that 30 years before Sandy Koufax became a hero to Jews by sitting out a World Series game because it fell on Yom Kippur, Hank Greenberg did it first, and at a time and place more likely to have anti-Semitic repercussions. Greenberg himself did not see it as a particularly notable act, but it was a major story in the Detroit press, and his putting his faith above the game was widely praised.

Tonight I want to tell you about another major leaguer, also named Greenberg, who is much

less famous. This Greenberg is Adam Greenberg. If you’ve never heard of him, don’t be surprised. He had a career batting average of .000. He has no great plays to put on a highlight reel. But he is still a hero.

Adam Greenberg grew up in Connecticut. It was his childhood dream to play in the major

leagues. He was a four sport all-star in High School and a star in college, and was drafted by the Chicago Cubs. After playing for a few years in the minor leagues, in July of 2005 the Cubs called him up to the majors.

This was the day that he had worked for. He flew to Florida to join the team for a series

against the Miami Marlins. Of course his family came down from Connecticut to watch him play his first game in the major leagues.

He was not in the starting line-up, and in fact he sat on the bench until the ninth inning, when he came in as a pinch hitter. He says that he stepped to the plate feeling surprisingly calm.

Before he dug into the batter’s box, he stopped to look around. He saw Marlins center fielder

Juan Pierre shading toward left center. He glanced at the infielders, then at the pitcher, a tall,

hard-throwing lefty Greenberg knew nothing about.

A few rows behind the plate, his parents and three of his four siblings watched proudly. “I

see him getting up, and I take a picture,” said his mother, Wendy. “I see the pitcher winding up and I got a picture of that and then I said, ‘I’m just going to watch’.”

Greenberg dug in for the first pitch, slightly bending his knees. It was a 92-mile-an-hour fastball. “You get three-tenths of a second,” Greenberg said. “The first tenth I’m thinking don’t

bail because if it’s a curve I look stupid, and it’s strike one. The second tenth I realized the ball wasn’t breaking. By the third tenth, my only thought was to get out of the way, and the only thing I could do was to turn into the catcher.”

The pitch hit him in the back of the head. “It was a horror,” Wendy Greenberg says. “I was

so close that I heard the sound … next thing I saw was him on the ground.”

Later, the pitcher, Valerio de los Santos, said, “The first thing going through your mind is,

‘This guy’s dead,’ but then I saw that I didn’t break the helmet, so I was like, ‘It’s probably not that big of a deal.’“

In fact the ball didn’t make a scratch on Greenberg’s shiny, new helmet, because it struck his head just below the helmet.

“It scared me to death,” Greenberg said. “My eyes rolled into the back of my head. I grabbed

my head because I thought it was split open and that I would bleed out and die. I never lost

consciousness. I said two words three times: Stay alive, stay alive, stay alive.”

“The Marlins catcher Paul Lo Duca looked down at me and said in a calming voice, ‘Stay

down, you are going to be O.K.’ One of the questions the trainers asked me was, ‘Where were

you two days ago?’ I said, ‘I was in the minors, and I’m not going back.’

However, the beaning left him with more than just a concussion. The doctors said that he

had post-concussion syndrome. Greenberg thought it was something more. “Just bending over to

tie my shoe left me with headaches for hours,” he says. Three weeks later, determined to get back to the big leagues, Greenberg told the Cubs he was ready to return to Double-A West Tennessee to rehab. Doctors agreed. The plan was to rejoin the Cubs at Wrigley in a few days. It didn’t happen.

“I was playing right field and I remember telling the center fielder, ‘If a ground ball is hit to me, I’m in trouble,’ because every time I look down my eyes were literally shifting side to side,” he says. Greenberg says the episode took place in one of his first games back. “Then in the eighth inning, I remember a ball came out there and it just started snaking on me, it started moving. It hit off the heel of my glove and I came into the trainer and I just told him … I just couldn’t do it.”

For weeks, he slept upright. It was frustrating, but the only way to tolerate the excruciating headaches. He visited doctors -- 10 in all. The first nine didn’t have an answer. Finally, a doctor at the Mayo Clinic diagnosed Greenberg with positional vertigo, a condition often caused by a head injury that triggers nausea, dizziness and severe headaches.

By 2006 Adam Greenberg was symptom free, but the entire experience had affected his ability to play. Physically, his head was fine. Mentally, he still wasn’t healed. He says, “Yeah I was affected, especially against some left-handed pitching. It was just a natural thing that I was going through.” Over the next seven years he played in the minor leagues for several different teams, and eventually ended up playing back in his home state of Connecticut playing for the Bridgeport Bluefish. The major leagues seemed further away than ever.

And then, in 2012, a Chicago Cubs fan named Matt Liston started reminding people about Adam Greenberg, and he began a write-in campaign to secure him another chance to play in the majors. It was more than a long-shot, but the national attention from that campaign combined with notice Greenberg had received playing for Israel in its attempt to qualify for the World Baseball Classic, led the president of the Miami Marlins to offer him a one-day contract to appear in an end-of-season game against the Mets. Who knows, maybe the team felt some responsibility for what had happened to him seven years earlier.

Greenberg accepted, and his new teammates, aware of his saga, embraced him. In the

bottom of the sixth inning, Marlins Manager Ozzie Guillen called for Greenberg, wearing No.

10, to pinch-hit and lead off the inning.

The Mets pitcher that night was R.A. Dickey, who won a Cy Young Award that season. He was a knuckleballer who was largely unhittable. Dickey threw him three knuckleballs. Greenberg took the first for a strike, then swung at the next two and missed them both. He struck out on three pitches, but as he walked back to the dugout, the crowd was standing and cheering, and his teammates gathered around hugging him. His major league career was over, but it now included more than just getting hit by a pitch.

At the press conference after the game, this is part of what Adam Greenberg said: “Life sometimes throws you curveballs, and it sometimes throws you fastballs. And you don’t get to choose what kind of a pitch it’s going to throw at you. Life threw me a fastball the first time I batted in the big leagues. It hit me in the back of the head and it knocked me down. But I got up from it, and that is really all that counts. My life is good, because I was able to get up again after life knocked me down. Anything else that happens after that is a bonus, and so I have no complaints, none at all.”

Greenberg realizes that he will be known forever as the guy who got hit in the head with the first pitch he saw in the big leagues. He says he is fine with that if his story can serve as motivation to someone else. However, Greenberg insists people miss the point about what happened to him. “It’s not just about accomplishing your goal,” he said. “It’s about what you do to accomplish your goal. I worked hard to get there. “People say, ‘I’m so sorry you got hit in the head.’ I always answer, ‘Yes, but I made it to the big leagues.’”

The coda to this story is that Greenberg has gone on to be a successful business man, has a family, and is currently running for the State Senate in Connecticut.

I think this is a great story to share with anyone how has ever been knocked down by life, which means pretty much everyone.

It’s a story to share with anyone who struggles with a serious illness, anyone who has lost a job and is struggling to find a new one, or who has failed in business and is starting over again.

It’s a story to share with anyone who has had a relationship fall apart and is seeking love again. It’s a story to share with anyone who has been knocked down and who wonders if they can get

up again.

It is, in fact, one of the important messages of the New Year. Even if last year brought

disappointments, even if we have been knocked down this past year, we have an opportunity to turn the page. Rosh Hashanah does not erase what has happened in our lives; it does not provide a do-over. But it should help us focus not on what has already happened, but rather on what we can make happen going forward. It reminds us that so much of what we accomplish in life is the result of our own choices and efforts. And the very first choice we need to make after being knocked down is to get back up. As Adam Greenberg said, if we can get up after life has knocked us down, the rest is a bonus.

At Rosh Hashanah we pray that we will be granted a year of health and happiness. This year

I want to add something else to that prayer. May God bless us with a year of health and happiness. And if life knocks us down in the coming year, may God give us the strength and the stamina and the courage and the resiliency to get up again. May God give us the ability to continue to pursue our dreams even in the face of adversity. And may we sit together one year from now, secure in the knowledge that we have done our best to make 5779 a truly good year.