

“It’s Such a Nice Feeling”: The Joy of Belonging & the Warmth of Temple Beth-El

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In 1986, the Houston Astros and the New York Mets played each other in the National League championship series.

I was a 7th-grader growing up in Houston, and I was rooting hard for the Astros. Sadly, they lost—and as I’m sure you all know, the Mets went on to beat the Boston Red Sox in the World Series that year. My brother, my cousin and I were heartbroken.

I remember going to games in the Astrodome, and how we’d bring our gloves with us in case a foul ball came our way.

I remember how, each year, my dad signed us up for the “Astros’ Buddies” club, which meant we got some cool Astros swag to show off, like a batting glove and a baseball cap and a poster for our room.

The Astros were a big part of my childhood, in some ways no less than Houston itself. I haven’t lived there in more than 25 years, but whenever I go to visit my family, I feel this intimate, primal connection to the place—like the streets are my streets, and the air is my air, and the people are my people.

Which is why it’s so strange that, since I moved to Great Neck a couple years ago, I have become a truly dedicated fan of the New York Mets.

Seriously. I watch all the games. I’ve been to Citi Field more times in the last 2 years than I can count. And I’ve spent way more money on Mets’ gear than I should, including 2 Mets jerseys and 3 Mets hats. And to be honest, I’ll probably buy more.

I’ve lived in a lot of cities in my time, and I’ve tried to adopt the local teams before, but in the end, I just couldn’t make myself really care. But I became a Mets fan quite easily, in spite of my 1986 Houston-sports-fan trauma.

I used to think that our attachments to sports teams were nativist impulses cultivated from childhood. But now I realize it’s actually about something else. It’s about a sense of belonging.

We root for the home team because they represent a place and a culture and a community of people with whom we feel we belong. It’s not so much a rational identification; it’s a visceral one.

Jerry Seinfeld expressed this really well in a recent interview. He was asked what it is about New York City that has inspired so much of his comedy. He said it’s the atmosphere, the attitude, and most of all, the people.

“They just get me going,” he said. “I love ‘em, they’re funny looking, they’re funny people, they’re just what I like as people... And they like it, and I like it, and I’m with them.

“It’s like when I go to a Met game. We all love the Mets here,” he said. “It’s such a nice feeling.

“New York City to me is a deep-rooted core of things I believe in, which is overcoming, intensity; it’s a very Jewish city; Jews thrive there. When they came from Europe and the Middle East, they loved it, because it’s business, it’s work, it’s complexity, everything that Jews thrive on. ... New York took me and made me,” he said. “I wanted to be this guy; I wanted to be a New Yorker.”¹

Seinfeld's comments resonate with me, because I feel the same way. That's who I want to be, too.

I know...I live on Long Island, not in the city; but as a native Houstonian, it feels like one and the same to me. And I love it.

My friends give me grief over the fact that I'm wearing a Mets hat in all my Facebook posts, but I love the Mets because they represent a community of people and a way of being that I connect to, and I believe in, and I want to be associated with.

Cheering for the Mets and wearing their swag is an expression of my feeling of belonging here. And like Seinfeld said, "It's such a nice feeling."

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Believe it or not, this ties in with our parashah this week, Parashat Sh'lakh L'kha.

Toward the end of the portion, God says the following to Moses:

"Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages. Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of Adonai and observe them..." (Num. 15:38-39)

This, of course, is the mitzvah of tzitzit, and it's why we wear a tallit during prayer. And what is a tallit, really? It's Jewish swag.

Though we tend to think of them in different categories, I think it's fair to say that a tallit and a kippah are to the Jew what a jersey and a cap are to the baseball fan: expressions of identity, commitments, and belonging.

The theologian and sociologist Tara Isabella Burton notes that fandom is similar to religion in that it is "a mechanism for collective identity-making and reinforcement" and "provides plenty of scope for community and ritual."²

Fandom, she says, "is a public commitment to a tribe and a tribal identity."³

Wearing a tallit, no less than wearing a Mets jersey, is, to borrow Seinfeld's phrase, how we say, "I'm with them."

And it's not only how we express our sense of belonging, but wearing the swag also strengthens our feelings of belonging.

Somehow the physical act of going out publicly in our Mets cap, or our tallit, or our IDF dog tags, or a Jewish Star around our neck makes us feel our commitment to the values and the people they represent more deeply and more resolutely.

The Torah tells us to wear a tallit—actually, it gives this mitzvah to us as a gift—because it understands our innate human need to feel that we belong.

And to my mind, it's significant that the Torah gives us this mitzvah in the Book of B'midbar, because it's when we feel like we're "in the wilderness" that we need that sense of belonging most of all.

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Nurturing that feeling of belonging is central to our vision for the future of Temple Beth-El, too.

I hope you all had the chance to read the email update from our Visioning Team the other day. There are so many exciting things happening, including the establishment of two substantial new funds to support cultural arts and adult learning at our congregation, the launch of our new Kehillah Project religious school program, and conversations moving forward with potential partners.

In fact, tomorrow morning we will be hosting Temple Tikvah of New Hyde Park for Torah Study, services, and a Kiddush brunch, and I hope you will all come and welcome them and get to know them.

Temple Tikvah is a warm, friendly, haimisch community like ours. We're committed to the same values, and we have a lot in common.

We know what TBE is all about and, thanks to the work of our Visioning Team, we are able to articulate it clearly. Here's how we put it in our Vivid Vision statement, which you can read on our website:

"Temple Beth-El of Great Neck is a vibrant Reform congregation serving Great Neck and surrounding communities in western Nassau County and eastern Queens.

"People join our congregation because they are seeking meaningful personal connections with clergy, a close-knit, family-like community, and a strong culture of sacred partnership and learning, in which members are deeply involved in creating the life of the synagogue.

"TBE serves those who desire an authentic 21st-century Jewish experience and who share our commitments to inclusion, gender egalitarianism, full and equal participation of all, civic involvement, modern spirituality, social action, and support of the state of Israel."

From what I know about Temple Tikvah, it seems like our identity statement will resonate with them, too. Now, we need to spend some time with each other and see if we belong together.

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In challenging times like these—when we're still reeling from October 7, more than 100 Israeli hostages are still in captivity, and there are antisemitic protests on college campuses and violence committed against Jews trying to go into a synagogue in LA, and our country is bitterly divided, and election season is underway—we need that feeling of belonging more than ever.

We need to be able to look at the people around us and feel like, these are my people, this is my community, "I'm with them."

I hope I speak for everyone here when I say that TBE gives us that feeling. That's why we're here. And that's why we want it to continue to be here.

It feels good to belong, and it feels good to express it.

So, I want to invite you to take some TBE swag tonight and use it proudly.

And maybe try wearing a tallit tomorrow morning, too. See what it feels like.

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It's fitting that this weekend, the Astros are in town to play the Mets. They're actually playing right now. They're both in the midst of incredible winning streaks.

I'm going to the game tomorrow afternoon with some of our Brotherhood guys, and I'm going to be wearing my Mets jersey and my Astros cap. I'm going to take my TBE phone holder, too. Because all of them—Houston, New York, and TBE—are part of my identity in different and very meaningful ways.

So, no matter who wins tomorrow, I can't lose.

When we're in touch with who we are and what we believe in and what we aspire to become, we can't lose.

It's such a nice feeling to look at the people around you and say, "I'm with them."

I want everyone to feel that way about this congregation.

If we do—and if we stand strong together—then we will succeed and thrive, and our future is bright indeed.

¹ "Jerry Seinfeld on the Rules of Comedy—and Life," interview on the "Honestly" podcast, May 28, 2024

² Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, 68

³ *Ibid.*