

Yankee Stadium—Farewell To a Body But Not a Soul
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Everyone has a first crush in their adolescence, and I was no exception.

Mine was...BASEBALL. My grandpa Sam of blessed memory was a ballplayer who used to pitch batting practice for the old New York Giants, and I, too, caught the baseball bug from an early age. I played little league at every level, took in as many Orioles games as possible, on TV, on the radio, and at the old Memorial Stadium. I memorized stats, played different simulation games, played pitch and catch on Shabbat and Yom Tov with my friend and now colleague, Josh Cahan, you name it—if it had to do with baseball, I loved it. That passion has continued to this day when I still keep up with my hopeless devotion to the Orioles and to my much more successful fantasy baseball team. ☺

But amongst my many memories of all things baseball, one memory sticks out. I remember meeting up with my grandpa one night when my family was visiting New York for the two of us to have dinner at the now defunct Shmulke Bernstein's on the Lower East Side and then go to a game together with him for the first, and only, time, for my first-ever trip to Yankee Stadium to watch the Yankees play. Now, in the interests of full disclosure, I've never been a Yankee fan. In fact, back when the Orioles were competitive (yes, there really was a time

when we could say that) I really couldn't stand the Yankees because they were as close to a true rival as the Orioles had. But even though I cheered for the visiting team that night more than 25 years ago, the experience of watching a game at Yankee Stadium left an indelible impact, because even then in my adolescence I could already begin to appreciate all of the incredible baseball history lived there. The stadium's mystique deepened still further in my mind when, over the years, I had the opportunity to go back for many more games, especially when I was a rabbinical student in New York. I witnessed the emergence of yet another Yankee mini-dynasty in the late 1990's and early 2000's. And I sadly had the opportunity to see another "side" of Yankee Stadium, too, when Jen and I also joined with 60,000 other people for the cathartic "Prayer for America" service on September 23, 2001 where the victims of 9/11 were memorialized by words from the leaders of many faith communities and the haunting songs of Bette Midler and Placido Domingo, among others.

And now, finally, in 2008, we have reached the end of an era. On September 21, the last game was played in the 85-year history of Yankee Stadium, as next year the Yankees will move into a new Yankee Stadium across the street. I'm not sure how many people had a chance to watch that final game against the Orioles and all of its pre-game and postgame ceremonies, but it was a truly remarkable evening. Rather than trying to describe what this baseball fan saw

from afar on TV, I'm going to respectfully defer to the beautifully written words of two baseball writers, to try to capture the essence of the farewell. In his September 22 article, *The Long Farewell*, Joe Sheehan of Baseball Prospectus, who grew up a Yankee fan, described the event as "a family gathering".... "They threw open the gates yesterday at 1 PM, but I couldn't bring myself to go that early.... While the day was a celebration of this place I love so dearly, it was also a farewell, and I was in no hurry to make that parting. There was no great anticipation yesterday afternoon, just mixed emotions, the thrill of imminent history and the sadness of how the night would inevitably end."

"The pregame roll call of Yankee greats who played in the Stadium was an invitation to remember the better part of a century of baseball. I would speculate that the favorite Yankee of all 54,000 or so in the park last night ended up on the Diamondvision board during it, and many of those men took the field during the ceremony. Some of those who could not be there were represented by their families, and we embraced Cora Rizzuto, Michael Munson, Julia Ruth Stevens and the rest as if they were our heroes themselves. Kay Murcer (the widow of Bobby Murcer who died two months ago of brain cancer at age 62) and her children were treated to long, lusty cheers".

Reflecting on the post-game ceremony, Sheehan commented, "No one wanted to leave. The Yankees obliged the crowd by walking out, en masse, to the

*mound, gathering around Jeter as he spoke of pride and class, of continuity and humility. The players then took a lap around the park to wave to the fans. It was reminiscent of the scene after the 1996 World Series, horses and all, and as with so many things on this evening, both touching and a reminder that this was all ending a bit too soon. As Sinatra closed his sixth encore (of “New York, New York”, for **Yankee Stadium novices** 😊) and launched into his seventh, I stood in Tier Reserve 36, taking some pictures, looking all around the ballpark, seeing the players digging up dirt from their positions, but mostly going inside my head for a moment. I grew up in Yankee Stadium. I’ve sat in every level and in most sections, and there’s no place in the park that doesn’t bring back some memory.... There was so much of me in this place that leaving it seemed wrong, like it would leave me incomplete. That’s what baseball is, and that’s what it does—it gets inside you and becomes a part of you and creates an attachment to a team and a building that’s so intense it makes you leave some of your identity with them”.*

As I read these touching comments, it occurred to me that Mr. Sheehan’s feelings for his beloved departing Stadium could just as easily refer to our anticipation of the passing of a loved one in our lives. We are reluctant to say goodbye to someone we love—we are not in a hurry for that farewell to occur, and we certainly don’t want to let go too soon of that intense bond. We stroll down memory lane of days past, of specific moments, of happy times, and ponder his or

her impact on our lives. And then—when our beloved disappears, we feel incomplete—as we move on with life, some of our beloved remains in us, but a piece of us goes with our beloved, never to be replaced.

Dealing with the departure or passing on of something or someone we love is never easy, but it is reality. ESPN writer Wright Thompson, in his reflections on the evening, said, *“The woman who threw out that first pitch perhaps summed up the mood best. Julia Ruth Stevens is 92 years old, and a broken hip several years ago keeps her in a wheelchair a lot of the time. But she walked out to the field and bounced one to Jorge Posada, connecting with one throw the breadth of Yankee history. To her, Babe Ruth wasn’t a fictional character or the genesis of an adjective. To her, he was dad, and even now, she misses him. Seeing this ballpark torn down is personal to her but, after nine decades, she understands a thing or two about mortality. Nothing lasts forever. “I guess like all things,” she says, “it has come to its final days, as we all do.”*

It’s true that Yankee Stadium is not a human being. But Yankee Stadium has lived and breathed, if an inorganic object can be thought of as living and breathing, for 85 rich years. That Yankee Stadium could be personified seems especially appropriate in light of the comment of Bernie Williams, the graceful former star Yankee centerfielder who said about the Stadium, “Chairs don’t talk to you. It’s the people. That’s what makes this place magical”. More than four

generations of famous players, the millions and millions of fans, and the celebrities who performed or appeared there gave the Stadium a unique character, its own “soul”, as it were. And fittingly it is Ms. Ruth Stevens, the Babe’s daughter, who helps remind us that edifices, even incomparable ones, the house “built” by her legendary father, eventually disappear. Strong structures of bricks and mortar are no less mortal than the flesh and bones of the human body.

Regretfully we must accept that death is, in fact, an inevitable part of life. Judaism has always been realistic in its honest assessment of death, as in the *Tanakh (our Bible)* when Joseph says to his brothers, “Behold, I am now about to die” or David says to his son, “Behold I am now about to go in the way of all the earth”. Death is as simple, as painful, and as undeniable as that. We even prepare for our death symbolically on this very day of Yom Kippur if we follow the tradition of donning the kittel, the plain white linen garment which represents purity and freedom but also symbolizes the burial shroud that we will wear at the end of our lives. It is humbling to remind ourselves at least this once a year that our days are numbered. As we sadly know all too well, the people we care about will not always be here with us in this world, nor we with them, so we ought to use this day as a jumpstart to make the most of the time we have.

And as for those we love who have already passed on, how do we perpetuate our sense of connectedness with them? Mr. Thompson and the Yankee captain,

Derek Jeter provide us with helpful insight on this issue. Commenting on the postgame activities, Thompson said, *“Derek Jeter walked to the center of the field with a microphone.... He urged those standing in the old ballpark around him not to forget. A building was being torn down, not the events that had happened there. The love, and the joy, all of that didn’t exist in concrete, but, rather, deep inside a person. “The great thing about memories,” [Jeter] says, “is you’re able to pass them along from generation to generation”.*

Yes, people die, but nothing erases the lifetime of memories they created, nor the legacy they left behind, both of which serve as ongoing connections between us and them. Our bodies, not nearly as durable as concrete buildings, eventually disappear just like the buildings do. But in our tradition death is not the end, as Rabbi Milton Steinberg, of blessed memory, the former chief rabbi of England who wrote *Basic Judaism* and *As a Driven Leaf*, teaches us:

Man transcends death in many altogether naturalistic fashions. He may be immortal biologically, through his children, in thought through the survival of his memory; in influence, by virtue of the continuance of his personality as a force among those who come after him, and, ideally, through his identification with the timeless things of the spirit. When Judaism speaks of immortality it has in mind all these. But its primary meaning is that man contains something independent of the

flesh and surviving it; his consciousness and moral capacity; his essential personality; a soul.

What makes us unique as individuals—our *neshama*, or soul—the Ner Tamid, or eternal light, in each of us, continues to exist even after our body has ceased to function. The souls of our beloved live on through characteristics and values left behind to be perpetuated in the world. And they live on in memories, and in feelings and emotions like love and joy stemming from those memories that are not limited by physical space nor limited to one particular time. As Mr. Thompson related, “*A building was being torn down, not the events that had happened there*”.

Just as the soul of Yankee Stadium will no doubt still burn fiercely deep inside Joe Sheehan and Wright Thompson and me and so many other millions of people even after its body is no more, so will the souls of our dearly departed continue to shed their brilliant light upon each one of us. But there will be renewal, too—just as a new Yankee Stadium will open up across the street from the site of the old, new lives spring up after others have ended. And with renewal comes responsibility. We are charged with linking the past and the present to the future by communicating our proud history to our children and grandchildren. By sharing with them the unique essence, the NESHAMAMA, of what, and who, came before—complete with the stories, the values, the memories, and the smiles—we

help our descendants come to understand what has been lost and help ensure that our actions and the actions of our children will carry on in this world those ideals that defined those who are no longer with us. As we prepare to recite our *Yizkor* memorial service and recall our beloved, it is on this task that we focus ourselves today. Please rise as we begin our service together on page 2 of our *Yizkor* booklets.