

As many of you know by now, I grew up in Houston, Texas. I learned a lot during my time there. For example: I learned the size of your pickup truck is almost as important as the size of your belt buckle. I learned that a 10-gallon cowboy hat can also make an excellent yarmulke. And I learned that armadillos were the original speed bumps.

I also learned much about religion during my time in Texas. This is because Texans have three major beliefs and they are: God, barbecue, and football. I must admit, I am a big fan of all three. When it comes to God, we spent a lot of time last night discussing it, so I think we'll move on at least for today. When it comes to barbecue, the barbecue brisket at the Salt Lick just outside of Austin is some of the finest in the world. Though, now that I think about it, maybe we should wait to have this conversation until after break-fast.

Then there is football. Growing up in Houston, I was a die-hard Houston Oilers Fan. I may have arrived in Houston at the tail end of the Earl Campbell days, but I became hooked nonetheless. My formative years found me rooting for Warren Moon and the run-and-shoot offense. I won't get into the worst playoff collapse ever against the Buffalo Bills in 1992, for the pain is still too fresh, but it was a dark day indeed when the Oilers left to become the Tennessee traitors, I mean, Titans. In case you are wondering, ever since the departure of the Oilers, I have been a free agent rooting for the local favorite. I am now proud to be a Ravens fan as my parking sign indicates, and I am very much looking forward to watching their achievements on the field.

But I was not only a football fan growing up. I also enjoyed and continue to enjoy my Astros, who are on the verge of a .500 record. Given that they were predicted to lose 100 games this season, it is quite an accomplishment. I have been an Astros fan since their playoff run in 1986. Of course because of 86' I can never ever root for the Mets. If only it had gone to a game

7 with Mike Scott waiting to pitch. Oh well. Then there are my Houston Rockets, the only professional team I have rooted for that has won a national championship. It is strange to say the least to come from a football town, with baseball a distant second, for Houston to have its only professional championships come via the NBA, WNBA, and MLS, something Houstonians still wish to rectify.

All that being said, for awhile I was also a fan of American tennis. It was during my halcyon days that I became aware and started to follow of one of the best generations of American men's tennis players. These players included Michael Chang, Todd Martin, Jim Courier, Pete Sampras, and Andre Agassi. Combined they won an astonishing twenty-seven titles at the majors, one gold medal, and played in the finals of numerous opens as well. In many ways these players were the direct inheritors of the tradition handed to them by John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors.

I of course was a big Agassi fan. I enjoyed not just his game, but his style, his clothes, and his personality. I also liked the fact that he didn't look that much bigger than me, which gave me hope that one day I too could become a professional athlete. It was only my lack of a serve, or return game, or baseline game, or my ability to volley that prevented me from ever going pro.

So it was with much anticipation I began to read Agassi's autobiography, Open. Generally speaking I am not drawn to autobiographies. Autobiographies I feel are mostly an effort in ego fulfillment with the individual generally writing about how great they are, as well as taking the occasional pot shot to crush those who stood in their way. I tend to prefer biographies since there is a sense of distance between the author and subject. Also biographies tend to have a

sense of perspective and context autobiographies generally do not. But because of the rave reviews, I felt compelled to read Andre's book.

To start off with, it was not exactly what I expected. It was articulate and insightful which to begin with was fascinating because Andre was a high school dropout. He hated school especially during his days at the Bollettieri Academy in Florida where he was an athlete first and a student second. Andre ultimately made the choice to leave school and instead focus solely on his tennis game. A game which Agassi admits, he hates or at least hated, another admission I was not expecting.

As Agassi states, "People often ask what it's like, this tennis life, and I can never think how to describe it. But that word comes closest. More than anything else, it's a wrenching, thrilling, horrible, astonishing whirl. It even exerts a faint centrifugal force, which I've spent three decades fighting."<sup>1</sup>

Reading Agassi's own words is in many ways like watching a car wreck about to happen. It is loud, scary, and frightening, yet one cannot turn their eyes away. Agassi was about as openly honest a person in writing as I have encountered. In his book he goes into painful detail about his struggles with his success, his failures, and coming to terms with his own abilities. Agassi admits that many of his failures were due to both his constant push for perfectionism, an unachievable goal, and for the comfort losing provided in a way winning never did. He also speaks about his failures as a husband to his famous ex-wife Brooke Shields. Agassi does all this with a sense of someone who finally is starting to get what it means to examine life to its fullest.

Eventually Agassi starts to get it and dedicate himself to his craft and to his life. Overtime it becomes less about style, and all about substance. He admitted to wearing a hair piece, and shaved head, something which his ex encouraged him to do. He began to play for all

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<sup>1</sup> Agassi, Andre, Open, New York, Vintage Books, 2010, pg. 25

the right reasons. Success came in part because Agassi started to play for something other than himself namely his foundation dedicated to educating impoverished youth in inner-city Phoenix. Ultimately Agassi becomes known as one of the greatest tennis players ever. His matches with Sampras were ones both celebrated and for the ages. Agassi retired a beloved figure in American tennis and is now happily married to one of the greatest women players Steffi Graff.

What Agassi did with his book Open is probably something we would all be petrified to do, which is to be completely open and honest both to ourselves and to others. To do this, Agassi tells his story in a way that may make many envious.

This begs the question, if given the opportunity, could we, non-tennis pros, write our own exhaustive, completely honest autobiographies? Could we be forthcoming about all of our faults? Could we put ourselves forth, spiritually naked, ready to fully accept who we are as human beings? These are some of the central questions of Yom Kippur.

Thus in order to write our own spiritual autobiographies if you will, we have to both begin and continue the process of an honest exploration of ourselves. It requires that we scrutinize every piece of ourselves with the hope of understanding. For only with understanding is there the possibility of true change.

To do this we have to be intellectually honest with ourselves. Intellectual honesty is in some ways the easiest, relatively speaking, of the tasks in our endeavor. This means we have to knowingly accept our genuine selves. It does not require an admission to anyone else or even to God. As the Rabbi of Lelov teaches, “One cannot be redeemed until one recognizes the flaws in the soul and tries to mend them ... Whoever permits no recognition of one’s flaws ... permits no redemption. We can be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ed. Elkins, Rabbi Dov Peretz, Yom Kippur Readings, Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 2005, pg. 37.

Each day, at some point in the morning, most of us look in the mirror. Do we even recognize the person looking back at us? Are we willing to accept our reflection? Unless we are, we cannot hope for the possibility of redeeming ourselves, of writing our true story.

But more than that, we also have to accept the work of our hands and the words that emanate from our lips. Rabbi Sheila Weinberg in her commentary on the *al cheit* section of the *Yamim Noraiim* says, “a large portion of the *hata'im*/sins listed refer to a part of the body (mouth, lips, tongue, eyes, throat, neck) for two reasons. First, our bodies need to know the nature of our wrongs. We need to experience the pain of our behavior viscerally before we are willing to change. Our confessions and acknowledgment cannot remain a purely intellectual activity. We must feel, in our guts, the ill we cause ourselves and others, or we will not be motivated to really change. Second, most of the *hata'im* derive from forgetting our connection to the whole. We imagine that we can act as if there were no consequences, as if we were loose limbs and eyes and mouths divorce from a larger body, the body of our fellow human beings, the body of organic life on earth, the body of all life.”<sup>3</sup>

This means we have to accept the very Jewish notion that our actions impact the community surrounding us, from our loved ones to even strangers in our midst. How often have we brushed aside our own selfishness, unkindness, and even rude behavior, justifying it to one degree or another? Well that jerk cut me off. They were mean to me, so I'll be mean back. How many times in an effort to take care only of ourselves have we actually hurt ourselves and others? We learn early on that our choices have consequences, but in writing our own spiritual autobiographies we also have to not only accept those consequences, but own them. This should not be done to berate ourselves or beat ourselves up, but instead in an effort towards

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<sup>3</sup> Ed. Elkins, Rabbi Dov Peretz, [Yom Kippur Readings](#), Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 2005, pg. 47.

understanding. For redemption cannot come without fully comprehending the work of our hands and the words from our lips.

And have we been honest with God? This is perhaps the most difficult of all the tasks in our story. For being honest with God means admitting that we are not fully in control. One of the ways we fool ourselves is with the belief that we are masters of our fate, and that we have dominion over our destinies.

I have spoken about this idea before using the image of how we might dress a certain way believing that if we do not wear the appropriate attire it will somehow influence the performance of our favorite sports team. Whether it is wearing purple on game day, or a Ravens kippah Monday night, yes I wore my Ravens kippah on Monday, the truth is there is little we can do to change the outcome of just about anything that surrounds us. All we can hope to control is ourselves, a task we all struggle with. To end and begin our spiritual autobiographies means we have to accept not everything can be controlled simply because we will it to be so. In this way we will hopefully not be like one of my all time favorite newspaper comic strips. As Bill Watterson put it so humorously in one of his Calvin and Hobbes comics, “(Grant me) the strength to change what I can, the inability to accept what I can't, and the incapacity to tell the difference.”<sup>4</sup>

At the end of his autobiography, Agassi tells of a friendly match between him and his wife. “I serve. She returns, then gives the Stefanie wave, as if swatting a mosquito, meaning she’s done. Time to pick up Jaden. She walks off the court. Not yet, I tell her. What? She stops, looks at me. Then laughs. Ok, she says, backpedaling to the baseline. It makes no sense, but it is who I am, and she understands. We have things to do, wonderful things. She can’t wait

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<sup>4</sup> Watterson, Bill, The Days are Just Packed: A Calvin and Hobbes Collection, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1993

to go get started, and neither can I. But I also can't help it. I want to play just a little while longer."<sup>5</sup>

Only at the end of the story is Agassi finally accepting himself for who he is. Of course this is not the end of his story. He, God-willing, has many many more blessed years ahead with his friends, family, and loved ones. His story is certainly not done.

Which is also true of the stories we are intellectually, physically, and spiritually writing for ourselves. Good books have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Of course lives are not quite so simple. Lives are much messier and complicated. They do not always result in a happy ending that would make Hollywood proud. Oftentimes there are more lingering questions than there are answers. So the best we can hope for in some ways is to simply be honest with ourselves through this journey. I personally believe a great autobiography has not just challenges, conflicts, and surprises, but also contain the words demonstrating that the author has genuinely grown from all of these experiences. So too it should be with our spiritual autobiographies as well. If we are inspired during this penitential season to learn and to grow, to repair and to heal, and to challenge ourselves, then we will all have stories very much worth sharing. For in the end, Yom Kippur, is as the title of Andre Agassi's book suggests, is all about being truly and genuinely open.

A frightening and overwhelming task to say the least. But one very much worth engaging in because only through complete openness can we hope to make the profound transformations in our lives. Now we all have some writing to do.

*Gamar Chatimah Tova*, may you all be written and just as importantly may you write yourselves (in the book of life), for good. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Agassi, Andre, *Open*, pg. 386.