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American Idol Worship – Does G-d Care Who Wins the Super Bowl?

2013 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

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I was recently asked whether it is permitted to pray for one's team to win the Super Bowl.

(Full disclosure: I grew up in New England. I don't follow football, but my personal preference would have been to see the Patriots playing. But with the "Brady Bunch" out of the game, and no New York team to root against, I really have no preference at all.)

One could argue that G-d has better things to worry about than who scores more touchdowns in a game that won't make the world a better place or bring peace to the Middle East, or end "global warming". Is it appropriate for players like Tim Tebow to make grand gestures of prayer to a Master of the World Who has His Hands full dealing with things that are much more important, like whether people who are out of work will find a way to make their mortgage payments?

I would submit that G-d is very interested in who wins the Super Bowl. And the World Series. And my mother-in-law's mah-jongg game.

On Rosh Hashanah the entire world stands in judgment as G-d determines the health and wealth of every individual. How successful we will be depends upon that Divine decision.

I pray to G-d for success whenever I perform a Bris. Teachers and plumbers and electricians should pray for guidance in their respective careers. So why shouldn't quarterbacks, pitchers, and batters pray for touchdown passes, no-hitters, and grand slams?

Since G-d oversees the financial well-being of every human, it appears to me He would be quite interested in determining the incomes of athletes, team owners, beer concessions, advertisers, and t-shirt sellers. All these business people with so much on the line would certainly be justified in praying for a Super Bowl that goes their way.

There is, however, a totally different factor that disturbs me.

Why is this so important? Should it really make that much of a difference to us which multimillionaire becomes a bigger multimillionaire than the other?

In one of the many games in which my beloved Red Sox fell to the hated Yankees, a friend of mine was bragging about how “we beat you.” “We”? “You”? I didn’t realize the two of us had suited up for the big game!

It is amazing how people come to identify with their sports teams to such an extent that it leads to insults and fights. A friend of mine drives around New York with a vanity license plate that identifies him as a fan of a team that New Yorkers love to hate. He has been subjected to obscene gestures, vandalism, and even pullovers by New York cops.

And how about the woman in New Hampshire who ran someone over because he was a Yankee fan? Or Bryan Stow, who was beaten into a coma on opening day at Dodger Stadium because he had the audacity to root for the San Francisco Giants?

And who exactly are these heroes who generate so much pride when we see them win? Mark McGuire? I took my son to Shea Stadium to see him smash two home runs, and then went to someone’s house (we don’t own a TV) to watch him break Roger Maris’s record. I could have saved time and money by watching a syringe of steroids! (By the way, is it any wonder that no one made it to the Baseball Hall of Fame this year? If it were up to me, they would induct Steroids into the Hall of Fame. After all, who has hit more homeruns and pitched more shutout baseball than Steroids?!)

Lance Armstrong? I used to admire him. He was a role model who could teach us all about hard work. And resilience. And overcoming adversity. Or so we thought. Oh, he’s a role model all right. Of lying. And cheating. And feigning righteous indignation while destroying the lives and reputations of those who tried to tell the truth.

Tiger Woods? Plaxico Burress? Mike Tyson? O.J. Simpson?

This Shabbos we will read the Ten Commandments. We may not, says G-d, “*have any other gods before [Him]*.” (Exodus, 20:3) Not only are we prohibited from worshipping idols, we’re not even permitted to own them. G-d tells us why: “*Because I...am a jealous G-d.*” (ibid, v. 5)

What is G-d jealous of? It’s not as if statues and trinkets are any competition to Him. What is He worried about?

Idol worship is called “*Avodah Zarah* – strange service.” There is a *mitzvah* to emulate G-d; to walk in His ways. We can’t emulate Him when we set up virtual shrines to strangers who are far from G-dly.

Avodah Zarah comes in many forms. Some people still bow down to the sun, the moon, and the stars. But there are other *Avodah Zarahs*. For some, it’s a career so all-encompassing that its pursuit shuts out all connection to family and integrity. For others, it’s being glued to the almighty television or Internet. And

for still others, it's being so enamored of a bunch of athletes in one's favorite uniform that they forget all propriety and decency.

Are you a sports fan? Merriam-Webster tells us that fan is short for fanatic. And being a fanatic about anything is a form of *Avodah Zarah* that G-d jealously tells us to avoid.

There's nothing wrong with preferring a particular team. And there is nothing wrong with rooting for that team to win. But once our preference for that team pulls us away from family, and sobriety, and decency, it becomes an idol we must shun.

So, I hope my Red Sox will do better next season than was the case with last season's Bobby Valentine's Day massacre. But, if they don't, I won't lose any sleep over it.

To sum up and answer the question I asked in the title of this article: Does G-d care who wins the Super Bowl? The answer is yes, He cares very much.

The real question is -- why should we?

Have a great Shabbos.

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