

A man comes to his Rabbi shortly before Kol Nidre, wringing his hands with anxiety: “Rabbi” he exclaims, “I have a horrible dilemma. The opening game of the World Series is being played on Kol Nidrei, it’s the Red Sox and the Cubs, it would kill me to miss the game. What am I supposed to do?” The Rabbi laughs, shakes his head and responds calmly: “Joe, it is not such a big deal, you can record it and watch it later.” Joe says: “Wow, you would allow me to tape Kol Nidrei?”

We take our sports seriously. When we send teams to the Olympics, we expect gold. We might settle for Silver or Bronze in certain events, but for the most part we want the top prize. There is very little honor given to the loser of the Super Bowl, Stanley Cup, NBA championship, or the World Series.

Our everyday discourse is deeply steeped in the metaphor and language of sports. In business situations, you are likely to run into phrases like, ‘hitting a three-pointer, going for the fences, it’s a slam dunk, or a Bush league idea (not the President); or you might say about a co-worker, ‘he’s a team player, she has a lot on the ball, or he’s got two strikes against him.’ Many women (mostly women, although it certainly could also apply to men) in some workplaces find themselves at a disadvantage in project meetings in which their male colleagues’ language is sprinkled liberally with references to sports idioms. There’s even a web devoted to translating such phrases called [sportsidioms.com](http://sportsidioms.com) with hundreds of examples.

I am certainly not as much of a sports nut as many people, but having been raised with a former sports-reporter as a father, I do love my Twins, Vikings, Timberwolves, and Gophers. I recall a story about Louis Finkelstein, the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, as an undergraduate at the seminary, walking down Broadway with the great Solomon Schechter. Dr. Schechter bought a paper, and turned right to the sports section. He asked the future Dr. Finkelstein, “Do you play baseball?” The answer was “no.” Dr. Schechter told him, “you’ll never be successful as an American rabbi if you don’t play baseball.”

For most Jews the question of whether sports is a positive or a negative influence on society from a Jewish point of view is the wrong question to ask. Rather, the better question is how does one recall Jewish principles while engaging in sports or athletic competitions?

For the most part, Jews do not have a reputation for engaging in sports - after all, we’re the people of the book, not the people of the ball. There are a few notable exceptions -- for example, what is the first sport mentioned in the Torah? Give up? It’s baseball! In the first verse of Genesis, when did God create the world? “In the Big Inning!” What’s the big inning? The seventh inning stretch, of course!

Also in Genesis, we have Jacob wrestling with the angel, and in Samuel we have the famous story of David playing an archery game with Jonathan in order to signal whether Jonathan’s father, King Saul, was intending to kill David.

In early Rabbinic times, the world was dominated by Greek culture, which glorified the body in ways unacceptable to the Jews -- most notably the requirement of nudity during the original olympic games, and the negative attitude towards circumcision. The story of the Maccabbees represented a decisive rejection of Greek culture. The Rabbinic model viewed sports competition as *bittul Torah*, time taken away from the study of Torah.

The Rabbis built that sentiment into the prayer recited after leaving a study hall, as well as a prayer recited after the completion of a section of Talmud or Mishnah, in which we contrast our

commitment to study with others' wasting their time going to theaters and circuses -- athletic competitions.

Judaism does believe, however, that our bodies are given to us temporarily during this lifetime to house our souls, and like any property loaned to us, we are obligated to keep it in good condition. Physical fitness, therefore, is a positive mitzvah. Professional sports stars who credit their talent to God are acknowledging that they are merely making the best use of a tool that God gave them. Sports not only promote physical fitness and healthy bodies, which by the way also enhances the power of our minds; but also can promote discipline, certainly a positive attribute in a mitzvah oriented religion; cooperation - learning how to work with others, take care of others, rely on others; and healthy socialization.

Our question, again, is not sports or no sports, but rather how to engage in competitive sports in an authentically Jewish way. In the words of Rabbi Elliot Dorff, author of Matters of Life and Death, the purpose for engaging in athletics should not be self-aggrandizement but rather the physical and mental health, the camaraderie, and the good clean fun that comes from sports.

Here, therefore, are four Jewish principles to keep in mind when participating in or watching sports:

1) Play to win, or root for your team to win, but do not make the mistake of believing that it is your divine destiny to win. It is theological arrogance to claim that God is on your side in a sports competition. It is demeaning to say that God is a Yankees fan, but hates the Cubs and the Red Sox, no matter how true it may seem. Therefore, don't fall into the trap of demonizing your opponents. A game, no matter how important, will not tip the balance of good and evil in the world.

Alan Horowitz, the Detroit Maccabi president, said about the recent Maccabi games, in which 5000 Jewish teens from around the world competed in a variety of events, "Competition is really a secondary factor in selecting individuals to participate in the games. The primary factor is to give each individual a quality Jewish experience and allow them to interact with other Jewish youngsters."

2) It is not a mitzvah to hurt yourself or others. It is a mitzvah to seek to protect yourself and others. Treat your body with respect. Wear proper protective gear. Learn how to play correctly and safely. Certainly, some sports involve more physical contact than others. However, in every sport there are accepted limits and rules. It is not OK Jewishly to break the rules, even if the officials are looking the other way. For example: the Maccabi games rule book for in-line hockey said that the competition is supposed to be no contact. The coach of the Detroit team who said, "I believe a little bump on the boards or a little stick work is part of the game" I think should have been suspended. There is no excuse for deliberately ignoring the rules and playing dirty, even just a little.

3) Leave room for your Judaism. Schedule time off for Shabbat and other Jewish activities, learning, and celebrations. Yes, I know this is tough in West Michigan. I know that many teams compete on Shabbat. I know that no matter how important I believe Shabbat to be, it would be futile for me to tell most of you not to participate in or watch sports on Shabbat. So I won't tell you not to -- I'll suggest instead that you consider participating in one or maybe two sports instead of three or four, so that Shabbat can be there for most of the year; that you make use of your TIVO, your VCR, or your recordable DVD and record events instead of watching them on

Shabbat; that if you are a season ticket holder, give away **a few** of the Shabbat games and have Shabbat instead.

4) Finally, don't neglect your responsibilities towards your family - *Shalom bayit*, a harmonious household, is as important as following baseball, football, hockey, and basketball 4 seasons a year. Limit your sports mania -- keep it in perspective. To put it in a Rosh Hashanah context, it is unlikely one would say to God on judgment day, "I wish I had spent more time watching the Pistons," but many a person might say, "I wish I had spent more time with my family."

When it comes to sports, we might **say**, "it's not whether you win or lose, but how you play that counts," but more often what we **believe** is closer to a billboard Nike Chairman Phil Knight put up at the 2000 Sidney Olympics -- "You Don't Win Silver. You Lose Gold."

From a Jewish point of view, Phil Knight is wrong. It is possible to win without collecting the gold. Consider the following true story, told by my colleague Rabbi Paysach Krohn.

Chush is a school in Brooklyn that caters to learning-disabled children. At a Chush fund-raising dinner, one father delivered an unforgettable speech. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out, "Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything that God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish, and stilled by his piercing query.

"I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that God seeks is in the way people react to this child." He then told the following story about his son Shaya.

One Sunday afternoon, Shaya and his father came to the yeshiva as his classmates were playing baseball. The game was in progress and as Shaya and his father made their way towards the ball field, Shaya said, "Do you think you could get me into the game?"

Shaya's father knew his son was not at all athletic, and that most boys would not want him on their team. But he understood that playing would give his son a comfortable sense of belonging. Therefore, he approached one of the boys in the field and asked, "Do you think my Shaya could get into the game?"

The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none and since the game was already in the eighth inning with his team behind three runs, he replied, "I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

In the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and the bases loaded Shaya was on deck. Would the team actually let Shaya bat and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was told to take a bat and try to get a hit. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible, for he didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so he should at least be able to make contact.

The first pitch came in and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of his teammates came up to Shaya and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shaya.

As the next pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game.

Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far and wide beyond the first baseman's reach. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first! Shaya, run to first!" Never in his life had Shaya run to first.

He scampered down the baseline wide eyed and startled. By the time he rounded first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown Shaya out, but he understood the pitcher's intentions, so he threw the ball high and far over the second baseman's head, as everyone yelled, "Shaya, run to second! Shaya, run to second."

Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran towards him, turned him towards the direction of third base and shouted, "Shaya, run to third!"

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home! Shaya, run home!"

Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit the "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," said the father who now had tears rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of perfection. They showed that it is not only those who are talented that should be recognized, but also those who have less talent. They too are human beings, they too have feelings and emotions, and they too want to feel important."

This is competition played in the most authentically Jewish way -- putting compassion above victory, and understanding that a perfect game does not always mean shutting out the other team. May God grant you a taste of perfection and a year of health and happiness - and may we see the day that the Red Sox and Cubs will play in the World Series - and both win!