

Lessons from a Super Super Bowl  
February 9, 2008

If we had just relied on the experts, and if they had been right, this coming Tuesday President Bush would be welcoming the members of the New England Patriots to the White House to celebrate their victory in last Sunday's Super Bowl. But as so often happens in sports and in real life, things do not quite turn out the way everyone assumes they will. Instead the New York Giants were the ones with the ticker tape parade in Manhattan and the team that is going to meet the President.

Reflecting on last Sunday's Super Bowl game between the New York Giants and New England Patriots, we can derive a number of interesting insights about life, lessons which are especially applicable for our seniors who are graduating tomorrow, as well as the rest of us.

Even those who are not sports fans know that the New York Giants, who were the Wild Card underdog team in the playoffs, who started the year 0 – 2, whose quarterback, Eli Manning threw almost as many interceptions during the year, as touchdown passes, and whose coach's job was in jeopardy in the beginning of the season, defied all expectations by beating the undefeated, 18 – 0 New England Patriots.

Prior to the actual game, one almost had the feeling that it was not necessary for the game to be played: the outcome was inevitable and a foregone conclusion. According to all of the experts, the New England Patriots were invincible. Twelve of the 13 prognosticators on the Pre-Game show all predicted with utmost confidence that New England would win in a romp.

So the first of several lessons to be learned from this exciting Super Bowl is -- don't rely on or be intimidated by the experts. In fact I would even go so far as to say don't believe the predictions of experts -- especially when they are talking about the future.

This advice is actually true not only in sports, but in all facets of life.

Just a couple of weeks ago, after the Iowa caucuses and on the day of the New Hampshire primary, the political commentators declared with absolute certainty and confidence that Hillary Clinton would overwhelmingly lose the New Hampshire primary. Her candidacy was dead according to the cable news networks, and she was about to be swept aside in the tide going for Barak Obama. But the voters defied the pollsters and felt differently, giving Hilary a

victory in the nation's first primary. Conversely, in South Carolina, a week later, Senator Obama was supposed to barely win, but wound up winning there in a landslide.

Throughout this current election cycle and series of primaries, those who earn a hefty living analyzing data and telling us what is going to happen have been consistently wrong. An article in Thursday's New York Times had the courage to admit, "The contours of the presidential race now look nothing like those generally predicted on cable news, on the Internet and in print in the year before the casting of the first votes."

A corollary about not blindly accepting the opinion of experts would be that they should have a little humility about their ability to tell us what is going to happen. After all, as we know, Judaism asserts that the future is not predetermined. We each have the ability to determine our fate, for free will is an essential part of life. Too many factors are at play in life to know what will actually occur. As one of my favorite Yiddish sayings puts it, "Mensch tracht, und Gut lacht: Man plans, and God laughs."

In other words, nothing is certain, and there is no such thing as a foregone conclusion. Last Sunday, with about 2 minutes left in the game, the New England Patriots were on their way to a perfect, unblemished season and about to achieve what everyone knew was supposed to happen. But as the great philosopher Yogi Berra once said, "It's not over until it's over." In other words, always stay in the game. Never give up. Always give it your all. Defeat is never inevitable.

So if one is not to believe the experts, then who should you believe?

Learn to believe in yourself. Trust your ability to overcome adversity and obstacles. Never count yourself out, and do not doubt your capacity to achieve your goals.

Eli Manning had been dismissed as an ineffective team leader and under-accomplished quarterback, especially in comparison to his much more successful older brother. He was criticized for not being flashy enough, and being too quiet and self-effacing. After the game he said, "I never doubted myself, never lost confidence in myself as a quarterback. You're going to go through a lot when you're not playing well and losing games....But I'm comfortable in my own skin and I am the way I am...If you stay committed to (what you do), good things will happen. "

Perseverance and confidence are the hand-maidens of success.

There was at least one other aspect of Sunday's game that I felt was also inspiring and worth mentioning. When Eli Manning escaped the pursuit of the Patriot defensive linemen tugging on his shirt, and somehow managed to get away from the defenders to complete the amazing pass to David Tyree which he miraculously caught on his helmet, the TV coverage showed the reaction of his older brother. The better known award-winning quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts, Peyton Manning was jumping up and down then and a few plays later when Eli threw the winning touchdown pass to Plaxico Burress. He exhibited tremendous exuberance and excitement for his younger brother. You would have thought he was the one who had just thrown the winning touchdown. It was heartwarming to see, because as is all too often the case in life, families are not supportive of each other. Too often, sibling rivalries, jealousies, or squabbles over competitiveness or money and business can tear a family apart. I remember once hearing someone say that a rupture and major dispute between two prominent business leaders was really about who got the bicycle when they were younger. The heartwarming and genuine joy of the older brother shows how beautiful it is when you can let the success of others be as dear to you as your own.

The Torah tells us, "vahavta lereycha kamocho: love your neighbor as yourself". The midrash explains that this means that you should love another human being the same way that you love yourself. As the Alter Rebbe of Slobodka wrote, "The commandment is to love others as you love yourself. Just as you love yourself instinctively, without looking for reasons, so you should love others without reasons."

One of the reasons I follow sports and find it so fascinating is because so often it serves as a metaphor for life.

To our students who graduate tomorrow from the Jewish Day School, keep in mind the words of Hillel. Azehu chacham? Who is wise? HaLomed mekol adam: The one who learns from all.

Learn from everyone and from all of life. Always strive to incorporate the lessons from life and those around you so that you can better yourself.

I also especially want our seniors to know that your parents, and indeed the Jewish community have invested a great deal in each of you. We look to you to carry the torch, to lead your communities, to be advocates for Judaism, for Torah, for Israel, for God. Be willing to take a stand and to be leaders wherever you go. One day soon you shall take your place as teachers, educators, as members of Jewish organizations, as board members. We hope you will take what you have

learned and apply them so that you will contribute actively to the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people.

Today's torah portion describing the building of the Tabernacle tells us that the cherubim faced each other, and were attached to the Ark. The commentaries tell us that this is how God's Divine Presence was manifested in the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. The cherubim face each other to remind us that God's presence is perceived when we encounter our fellow human beings, and that the interaction should be based and rooted in Torah. With this in mind, we pray you will go forth and serve the Almighty and our people.

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