

## Tim Tebow or Not to Bow?

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John Mackey, who played tight end for the Baltimore Colts in the glory years when I was growing up in Baltimore used to say that being in the huddle with Johnny Unitas was like being in the huddle with God.

There are those who believe that God is in the huddle with Tim Tebow.

For those of you who do not follow professional sports, Tim Tebow is the quarterback of the Denver Broncos, who face the New England Patriots in the NFL division playoff tonight, (after shabbos, so you don't even have to tivo it.) He is a devout Christian who is not the most talented player, but who has managed to lead the Denver Broncos to pull off a string of impressive last-second victories, some of which seem to be nothing short of miraculous.

Interest in Tebow and his religiosity and proclamations of faith began when he played football in college, and even earlier. It has risen to a crescendo this past week after he pulled off another come from behind victory against the favored Pittsburgh Steelers last Sunday. He passed for 316 yards, which many saw as a reference to one of his favorite passages about Jesus in the New Testament, John 3:16. I immediately thought not of John 3:16, but that 316 is 613 backwards, the number of commandments in the Torah Jews are required to fulfill! Maybe God was trying to send a message to all those Jews who watch football and don't come to shul by reminding them of the obligation to observe *taryag hamitzvot*.

Many people are uncomfortable with Tebow. They feel he wears his faith on his sleeve. They are concerned about his explicit expressions of evangelical values and feel he is imposing his beliefs on others. They resent his public displays of faith and wonder whether or not he is authentic or is it just a show? They question whether the whole thing is a sign of arrogance or humility, of being sanctimonious or sincere. As a result, in addition to his legions of fans, he has many detractors as well. There are anti-Tebow websites and Facebook pages which belittle or disparage him.

Many, including Jews don't know what to make of it all and are uncomfortable with such an open, public display of one's faith. After a significant play he kneels on the field, to express gratitude to God. His name has become a verb, as people now "Tebow" across the world. I read about group of Jewish kids from Denver doing it at the Wall in Jerusalem. The whole phenomenon has attracted much attention and provoked what I think is a healthy national discussion and debate about faith and its role in our lives, raising a number of interesting questions.

I must confess, I find the Tebow kneel to be a refreshing contrast to the antics of so many players. Sometime in the mid 1980's after touchdowns, players started to spike the ball. Now they dance after just about every play. And while these actions seem to me to be showy, ostentatious celebratory displays of self grandeur, Tebow's kneel stands in stark contrast, as an act of gratitude, and humility, implying recognition that there is a higher power in the universe. As anyone of faith who lives a life of prayer knows, part of the reason to pray is to remind us that it not just about us. Prayer is a statement and self recognition that there is a God in the universe who causes us to be humble.

I must admit I had my doubts about Tebow.

One thing that I found refreshing is his attitude about what he does and how he earns a living. He frequently states that football is just a game. He recognizes that there are more important things in life, that there are people dealing with more significant issues in their lives, and that what happens on the gridiron doesn't deserve all the attention it gets.

The question of authenticity and hypocrisy is one of the most important aspects of the whole conversation. People want to know if the actions of one who is so publically identified as being religious are consistent with his beliefs. All too often we have seen prominent faith leaders fail in this regard. People who are outwardly religious, who say one thing, but then who act very differently from what they profess reflect poorly on all who seek to follow the teachings of their faith.

On this score, Tebow appears to be the real thing. He comes from a family where he was a missionary at the age of 15. He invites and spends times with kids who are orphans, paying for them to come to games, even telling kids he sees a second time, "I'm not sure if you remember me or not, but I remember the last time I saw you."

And then I saw a video of him miked up during a game against the Chicago Bears. After getting knocked down pretty hard by someone from the opposing team, he says to the guy as he is getting up, "good play." He tells another player who knocks him down that he has admired him for so long and how thrilled he is to play against him and to meet him. This after the guy had just pounded him into the ground. And then, most extraordinary of all, after a player on his team drops a perfect pass, that would have been a touchdown, he just puts his arm around the guy and tells him its ok. It will make it that much better when he catches the next pass.

I saw this, and felt, you gotta believe.

The consistency between his faith and his actions, between his belief in God and how he treats others is inspiring. Ultimately, this is religion at its best.

Judaism teaches us that the reason God gave us the Torah is so that we would learn how to treat others. The mitzvot are supposed to guide our actions so that we will be better and kinder people, and more moral, ethical and caring. Our sages taught that one of the purposes of mitzvot is because God cares about what we do and how we live our lives. As Dennis Prager once wrote in regard to kashruth, "5 billion people in the world, and God cares what I have for lunch."

There are those who wonder if God is really interested in sports, in the fate of a football team? Does God care about the outcome of a sports event? I believe God is definitely interested in sports. In fact, in this week's Torah portion, God told Moses to come forth. But Moses came in third instead, and God lost two dollars.

In all seriousness, of course we question if God cares about the outcome of a football game. We correctly wonder what are the implications if each team prayed to God? We cannot help but ask whether or not God is helping Tebow and rooting for his team to win. Is God on Tim Tebow's side, and is this how He is showing it?

I don't think so. I am reminded of the story about the boxer who crossed himself in the ring before a big fight. A parishioner turned to his priest who was sitting next to him at the fight, and asked "Father,

when the boxer crosses himself like that, does it really help?” and the priest answered, “Only if he knows how to box.”

Despite the results of a recent poll, I don't for a minute think that Tebow is doing well because God wants him to succeed, or that Divine intervention is at work here. Our rabbis considered a similar question in a different context. The Torah says that when Moses raised his arms when the people of Israel were battling against the Amalekites they were victorious, but when he dropped his hands, they were not. As a result, two people stood on either side of him to keep his hands propped up so that they would continue to defeat their enemies.

The rabbis were troubled by the implication that Moses' lifting of his hands had some kind of magical power. So the Mechilta says that it wasn't Moses' raising of his hands that led them to victory, but that when the people looked up at Moses they had faith that God was with them. In other words, he motivated them to believe in God and themselves, and this is what caused them to prevail.

The “hail Mary play” in football is a desperation pass thrown up in the air when a bunch of receivers are sent downfield in the hope that one of them will catch the ball. With the rise of Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow the religious reference seems to have taken on new meaning. His story, coming in to lead the team after a 1 – 3 start and all the other angles, puts him in the spotlight. But then the important thing is what you do with the spotlight. He has used it to remind people that football is just a game, that faith can lead to good acts, and to inspire others by being a positive role model.

As Jews we probably shouldn't be so bothered by all this. After all we are told to walk humbly with the Lord our God. We are commanded to be exemplary by our acts, to be a light unto the nations. Maybe he will inspire us to be better Jews, to connect our faith to our actions, and to take pride in our heritage and religion.

In the final analysis, the most important question is not whether or not God is on Tebow's team, or if he is on your team, but whether or not you are on God's team.

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