

## Does God Have a Favorite in the Belmont Stakes?

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It is not uncommon for individual athletes and teams to pray prior to sporting events to ask for a victory. There are baseball players who thank God after they hit a home run and football and soccer players who do so after scoring a touchdown or making a goal.

Many people are uncomfortable with these practices and think they are frivolous or silly. They criticize it as a misuse of religion and misappropriation of faith. I agree with those who say it demeans and belittles God by relegating the Almighty to a bookie who concerns Himself with the outcome of sporting events.

I am reminded of the joke that God was upset with Moses because he told him to come forth (fourth). But Moses came fifth instead, and God lost \$2.00.

If people attribute a win in a sporting event to God, and believe it is because God is “on their side,” they do in fact diminish God. Praying to God to vanquish an opponent is not the kind of thing that any serious religion would sanction or condone. God is a compassionate God who cares for all, including and maybe especially for those who lose. Additionally, I like to think God is more concerned with greater, loftier more noble matters than sports events, things like social justice.

When we pray we should focus not so much on what we ask of God, but rather what it is that God asks of us. Prayer is a way to align ourselves with our faith’s teachings.

Nevertheless, despite all this and the potential for abuse, I am not offended by what could be called, “locker room religion.” In fact, I see some redeeming virtues in it. Perhaps it is a reflection of how I approach prayer, and what I believe it can do for the person who is praying.

Recognizing that prayer brings us in contact with what God demands of us, Jewish sources also assert that prayer can put us in touch with our inner self. As a result, when we pray we should ask for strength in a particular situation in the hope that inner strength can be summoned. I sometimes describe prayer as helping us convert potential energy into kinetic energy. So if that is what is in the mind and heart of an athlete or team that prays, as we say, *gay gezunt*, let them live and be well.

Another fundamental function of prayer is that when we pray we realize that we are not alone, but that there are powers greater than us. I would much rather have an athlete attribute his or her abilities to a greater being and greater power than to themselves and their own prowess. The underlying principle is that prayer can teach humility. Humility is an important and praiseworthy quality, one that is important for athletes and all of us.

It is exemplified by our greatest leader, Moses in this week’s Torah portion.

After Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses and grumble that God spoke to them as well, the Torah defends him by telling us that Moses was exceedingly humble, more so than any other man on the face of the earth. The notion that a leader would be considered humble and that it would be considered a virtue, was a novel concept in the ancient world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that leaders were

meant to be idolized, feared, revered and worshipped, not respected for their humility. Moses understood his role as the leader was to serve the people, not the other way around.

Rabbi Sacks writes, “. . . humility is not self-abasement. C. S. Lewis put it best: Humility, he said, is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less. True humility means silencing the “I.” For genuinely humble people, it is God, and other people and principle that matter, not me.” In other words, it means to take God seriously, and to take yourself less seriously.

In all honesty, I do not know what goes on in the mind of the athletes who pray to God either before an event asking for help, or who pray afterwards expressing gratitude. I may be naïve, but I cannot help but feel that anytime a highly paid professional sports player offers an expression of prayer, I look at it as an expression of humility, and wish that all of us would live life with the same sense of gratitude.

A number of years ago the Washington Redskins football team started their season with a string of losses – it is hard to remember which year that was, as it could have been any of a number of years. *The Washington Post* approached local clergy and asked them to compose prayers on behalf of the hapless team. I was asked to do so and thought about whether or not it was appropriate to do. After some consideration, I decided it couldn't hurt. So I wrote a prayer that appeared on the front page of the Style section that was somewhat tongue in cheek, and a chance to express the thoughts I have conveyed today. I never believed that my prayer would have any kind of magical power to reverse the fortune of the team, (although I do believe that was the week their string of defeats was broken.)

While I do not believe that prayer can change the outcome of sporting events and do not pray for victories, and I am not sure who God is pulling for to win today's Belmont Stakes, but I know I have a favorite horse in today's race. American Pharoah, owned by Ahmed Zayat, will attempt to become the first horse since 1978 to win the Triple Crown. I would love for it to win, not just because it is the sentimental favorite.

The owner, Zayat, grew up in a wealthy suburb of Cairo where his father was Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's doctor. I do not know a lot about the guy, but I do know that he graduated from Yeshiva University. I also read that the Mexican jockey, Victor Espinoza, who will be riding the horse and who is not Jewish, visited the Lubavitcher rebbe's grave on Thursday in Cambria Heights, New York, in the borough of Queens, where he presumably prayed and asked for good luck. That is because apparently Zayat is an observant Jew who donates generously to Jewish causes. Since there are no hotels in Baltimore near Pimlico racetrack where the Preakness was run, he stayed in a trailer that he set up within walking distance of the track. So while it may not be right to pray for the horse to win, and the horse certainly isn't Jewish, a win in the race later today would be a triple crown victory, and that could be good for the Jews.

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*This sermon was delivered on Saturday morning, June 6, 2015. The race was held at 5:30 p.m. on the same day. American Pharoah went on to win the race and became the first Triple Crown winner since 1978.*