

Super Choice



With the Super Bowl quickly approaching, Rabbi Ilan Feldman recalls how football brought a few fans to higher spiritual heights.

At least four people came to Minchah/Maariv services at Beth Jacob on Super Bowl Sunday. They were there because of the game.

These were not football fans exploring the Perfect One to preserve Patriot perfection, nor were they attempting to ask the only real Giant to help his earthly namesakes. They were there simply to *daven*. During the Super Bowl.

One of them had no choice; the other three did.

You see, it is a particularly inconvenient truth that in Atlanta during the first week of February, sunset ranges from 6:07 to 6:14 PM, guaranteeing that, as long as the rulers of the NFL continue their practice of starting the Super Bowl at 6:17 PM, attending minyan inevitably means that a football fan will miss kickoff and a good part of the first quarter of regulation play. This solar/football convergence produces a uniquely Orthodox Jewish-American dilemma for anyone caught up in Super Bowl excitement, because, while true football fans allow nothing to get in the way of their obsession, it is hard to rationalize skipping a minyan one

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otherwise regularly attends. But, I dare say, the decision is agonizing: Does one forfeit the excitement of the opening kickoff and the newest Budweiser commercial in favor of duty?

Situations develop from time to time that cause a rabbi to be absent from Minchah/Maariv; for example, a timely hospital visit or an unavoidable meeting or program. But on Super Bowl Sunday, no one dares schedule anything that may conflict with the game. Anyone noting the rabbi's absence from minyan on this particular Sunday would be hard-pressed not to entertain at least a fleeting image of his rabbi with a beer in one hand, peanuts in the other, joining 97 million others watching football while his flock gathers in shul in the belief that joining 60 others to serve the Eternal is more sublime than what is, after all, only a game. One's credibility as a rabbi is at stake.

So I was at minyan because of the Super Bowl, and you can see that I had almost no choice.

But three others did.

These were the three men who had, only minutes before minyan, invited me to join them to watch the Super Bowl. I graciously accepted, but told them I would be late because I was going to Minchah/Maariv, that after that I was going to a Sephardic Brit-eve celebration and that I also wanted to be with "the gang"—at the home of Josh and Jodi Wittenberg for their annual Super Bowl gathering. Then I added, "I'm sure you know this

is the most difficult minyan of the year to attend," and I described the opportunity I saw to exercise supreme self-control by going to shul in spite of the game.

I hung up the phone, wondering why anyone would even consider having me around when they wanted to have fun if I offered conversations like this. I turned on the radio, and forgot about it.

Twenty minutes later I entered shul. I surveyed the crowd, marveling at the six-score regulars who were either not interested in football or who were relying on TiVo.

Then I noticed The Three—the ones who had invited me to watch the game. They were the only non-regulars there who did not have *yahrtzeit* that night. I sensed the exquisite choice they had made. They had built their schedules that Sunday around the Super Bowl, and then had been confronted with the Jewish quandary: habit, immediate gratification and following the crowd versus self-denial, self-discipline and serving the higher self as well as the Most High. They had chosen for the moment to recite Shema Yisrael while almost half the nation watched a stranger launch a football in Glendale, Arizona.

These Three reminded me that to live life fully alive, one need not wait until he somehow becomes a *tzaddik*. One need only realize this: each moment of our lives provides choices—one Minchah, one blessing over food, one gift to charity—and in each choice, we can discover freedom.

*Oh, elsewhere in this favored land
the football lights shine bright;
The band is playing everywhere, and
all over hearts are light;
And everywhere men are laughing,
and everywhere children shout;
But there is real joy in BJ— three men
have opted out.**

*With apologies to Ernest Thayer and "Casey At the Bat." ■