

A Rabbi Bows to Tebow

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman of Stamford, Conn., unleashed a crescendo of complaint when he opined that popular Bronco quarterback Tim Tebow might engender violence against Muslims, gays and illegal immigrants by reciting quiet, Christian prayers on the sidelines of NFL games.

“If Tebow wins the Super Bowl against all odds,” the rabbi wrote, “it will buoy his faithful, and emboldened faithful can do insane things, like burning mosques, bashing gays and indiscriminately banishing immigrants.

Hammerman offered no proof or anecdotal evidence to support his thesis. While both he and the New York Jewish Week, which ran the piece, later apologized (the latter noting that the article “was more inciting than insightful”) and asked for forgiveness from the Tebow family and Broncos fans, a just disgust remains in the hearts and minds of those who appreciate the contribution of the football star.

As a rabbi whose interest in football comes from my son and interest in prayer comes from my faith, the issue is deeply personal. I, for one, am bewildered that a Jewish reverend—an Abrahamic descendant—can stand against prayer to the Creator, in any form, in any fashion.

Perhaps the most fundamental belief of Judaism is that God relates to man—all days and always—and that man is both empowered and enjoined to talk to God. It is a Jewish mission to promote an awareness of God in the world.

Jewish tradition teaches that Abraham, the very first Jew, had a tent with four doors to invite travelers coming from all directions. When visitors would finish their meals and thank him, Abraham would direct them, instead, to bless the One who gave him the means and mission to provide for them. He promoted the concept of God throughout the world and, in

reward, fathered the Jewish people.

As Genesis recounts, Abraham had a nemesis, the city of Sodom. It was a place where the physical reigned and desire was revered. It was a pagan land whose god was self.

Football is the sport of the male. It allows men to be mighty. It captures their hopes and fears, their dreams of grandeur and visions of failure. It allows them to be brilliant analysts who are never wrong, so long as they keep their memories short, an ability with which they are gifted. It also allows men to spend time together and bond around the value of physical prowess.

But agility and skill are dubious virtues.

When the wide receiver catches the ball, dashes into the end zone, beats his chest and prances like a wild-eyed orangutan, he is not acting like the most civilized of men, the most developed in our culture. Ideologically, it is a modern day expression of the age-old pagan worship of self.

When, in that very physical, testosterone charged climate, a quarterback thanks God for his victory, would that not be a Jewish celebration? One to which a rabbi should take a bow, if not a knee?

I am inspired that millions of Americans are touched by Tebow. It means the Judea-Christian foundation of our country, even when covered with layers of cynical, valueless smog, still maintains a trust in God and commitment to country.

The rabbi's job is to be a modern day Abraham. It is to promote God as he can, to introduce created to Creator, to live by example and teach when opportunity allows. It is the rabbi who must remind us that the way of God is to give before you take, and, in fact, to pray before you play.

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