

God and the Super Bowl
By Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg
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The cover of last week's *Sports Illustrated* posed the question, "Does God care who wins the Super Bowl?" After the victory of Marty and my beloved Ravens, the answer is clearly, "yes."

But all kidding aside, the issue of the public display of religion on sports fields has reared its head of late. Ray Lewis, the infamous, and likely Hall of Famer, of Baltimore's team is equally known for his preacher-style motivational speeches as he is for his excellence as a middle line backer. Declaring the Ravens, the "Team of Destiny," he led his team to miraculous victories over the greatly favored Denver Broncos, New England Patriots and San Francisco 49ers.

Do we really think that God cared who won the Super bowl? I hope not. For God has much bigger things to worry about than an athletic competition, even on the world's largest stage. Indeed, several area clergy, including me, were interviewed by the *Pilot's* sports columnist, Bob Molinaro, about how we would answer the question, and our answers echoed the same sentiment. My friend, Father Dan Klem, from our neighboring Sacred Heart Church said, "God would want the players to play well and fairly, with some decent values, and somehow model Christ-like activity." "If God is going to care about anything relative to the game," he went on to say, "that's what God would care about." In other words, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game.

And this week's Torah portion, *Mishpatim*, says the same thing, in 53 commandments all of which direct us to behave ethically. What is it that God demand of us? To leave the corners of our fields fallow and the gleanings which drop uncollected so that the poor and hungry may gather what they need to survive; never to place a stumbling block before the blind or curse the deaf; and to build a parapet around the roof of any structure we build so that no one might accidentally fall. Simply put, God cares about justice, mercy and humility. Feed the hungry, treat all people with dignity and, go above and beyond the letter of the law, to make sure that no harm befalls any human being.

Yet another colleague, Reverend Hershel Adams, pastor of Chesapeake's Sonlight Church, concurred that God remains on the sidelines in sports. He says, "There are times when God is interested in the details of our lives. But when you have good people on both sides of the ball, I wouldn't say He's picking sides. He went on to joke, "while I'd never suggest that anyone pray for a good result from a football game, if (his beloved) Falcon's were in the Super Bowl, I'd be like, 'Well . . .'" He brings up an interesting point. As Jews, each of us is allowed our own opinion about God: whether God exists as a being, as an ideal or not at all? Each of us decides our beliefs: Does God intervene in the intimate details of your life, causing or curing sickness, decreeing our destiny and determining when our time comes to leave this world, and preventing or stopping Holocausts? Or is God not a micro manager, allowing us and all people the free will to make our own decisions and to choose good or evil, busying Himself with the big picture, the long view of humanity's morality, survival and success?

When Mr. Molinaro asked me my opinion, I answered,

"Dear Bob, My husband, a life long Baltimorean and avid Raven's fan, also receives *Sports Illustrated*, so I have seen the cover to which you refer. And, of course, have followed closely the "preacher style leadership" of Ray Lewis, from his Biblical quotations to his description of the Raven's as the team of Destiny.

So here is what I think: I don't believe that God cares who wins the Super Bowl. However, while others might cringe at professional athletes' open expressions of their faith before games or, after they are victorious, I don't. If an individual athlete feels that his or her faith, or God's providence, has helped them, or will help them, to excel and succeed in their sport, that is their conviction and their right. It is a good thing that they recognize their humanity and that they feel their faith in God helps them to achieve their full potential. Most importantly, God endows each of us with free will. The fact that they train so hard and prepare so diligently for each game, let alone the playoffs and the Super Bowl, is a testament to the capacity of the human spirit to triumph."

In other words, if your faith motivates you to work hard, achieve your potential, make a difference in this world, and inspire others to do the same, I'm down with it. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "Your beliefs become your thoughts, Your thoughts become your words, Your words become your actions, Your actions become your habits, Your habits become your values, Your values become your destiny."

Full disclosure, most of us are aware that Ray Lewis pled guilty to obstruction of justice charges in the murder of two men outside of an Atlanta nightclub in January of 2000. For some of us, this will forever taint him. But others of us believe that he did have a change of heart, mind and spirit, that he was saved by his faith. So, assuming that a person is capable of forgiveness and change, which after all is what our tradition teaches, I'd like to take a brief look at the most often quoted verses Ray Lewis used in his orations and see what they might teach us for our own lives. Both are about faith in the face of adversity, about how belief in God and oneself can help us triumph over life's inevitable challenges. The first, is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 54, verse 17 and it reads:

No weapon forged against you shall succeed,
And every tongue that contents with you, you shall defeat.
Such is the lot of the servants of the Lord.
Such their triumph through Me, declares the Lord.

In other words, any challenge can be overcome through faith, hard work and righteousness. In Jewish tradition, being a "servant of the Lord" does not necessarily mean having faith in a supernatural God, but rather it means being true

to the way God demands -- to do justice, to love goodness and to walk humbly with God. Isaiah 54:17 is a great verse to keep before our eyes for it teaches us that, if we follow the teachings of our tradition, with hard work and good choices, we can and will overcome whatever lies before us.

The second prayer, Lewis reminded us of, is Psalm 91, the words he had imprinted on the Under Armor tee shirt he wore beneath his uniform for the Super Bowl. It is, of course, longer than the verse from Isaiah, but very beautiful and worth hearing again:

O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai—

I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold, my God in whom I trust,
that He will save you from the fowler's trap,
from the destructive plague.

He will cover you with His pinions; you will find refuge under His wings;
His fidelity is an encircling shield.

You need not fear the terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day,
the plague that stalks in the darkness,
or the scourge that ravages at noon.

A thousand may fall at your left side, ten thousand at your right,
but it shall not reach you.

You will see it with your eye, you will witness the punishment of the wicked.
Because you took the Lord—my refuge, the Most High—as your haven,
no harm will befall you, no disease touch your tent.

For He will order His angels to guard you wherever you go.

They will carry you in their hands lest you hurt your foot on a stone.

You will tread on cubs and vipers; you will trample lions and asps.

Because You are devoted to Me I will deliver You;

I will keep you safe, for you know My name.

When you call on Me, I will answer you; I will be with you in distress;

I will rescue you and make you honored;

I will let you live to a ripe old age, and show you My salvation. Amen.

What a comforting, hopeful and powerful vision the prophet puts forth of what a life of faith, of righteous living and of a loving, compassionate God might bring. And what a powerful, encouraging and inspiring message for a true believer.

For most of us, our destiny will not be to become the greatest middle line backer ever to play the game of football or to win the Super Bowl. However, what if your faith, your beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, habits and values lead you to discover a cure for Alzheimer's, AIDS or cancer? Or motivate you to create an alternative energy source that doesn't make us reliant on resources that poison our environment and our food or that funds terrorists bent on the destruction of our way of life and our annihilation? Or spurns you to aspire to the highest court in the land so that your fight against injustice and for the rights of the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our midst, affects every American? As Gandhi and our forbearers understood faith is a powerful and good thing, if used for good. So whatever your

beliefs on this Shabbat, may they lead you to actions that help to heal our world.
Amen