

Vayeshev 5777 Torah and Football  
Rabbi Barry Leff

This week's Torah portion, Vayeshev, starts with Joseph having a dream.

In that regard, it's similar to football season, which also starts with a dream. Most teams only dream of having the kind of season Alabama's having this year.

In Joseph's dream his eleven brothers are gathered around him, bowing down to him.

Football is similar – you've got eleven brothers bowing down to a coach.

In the Torah, of course, it's God who makes dreams come true.

In football, it's Nick Saban who makes dreams come true. Of course, there are those who have compared Nick Saban to God, and certainly at least here in Alabama, football is right up there as a religion.

Judaism is full of arcane rules about how the game of life is played. Football is full of arcane rules about how the sport is played. The rules in both have a great deal of precision. Candle lighting time for Shabbat candles is 18 minutes before sundown. Not just "before sundown." Not 17 minutes and not 19 minutes. Eighteen minutes.

A football field is 53 yards wide. Not 52, not 54, but 53 yards.

Football has an offense and a defense. In Judaism too, we have an offense and a defense. The offense is called Satan, the accuser. The defense, your protection, is all the good stuff you've done in your life. When you do a mitzvah you create an angel which strengthens your defense.

A football game starts with a ceremony: the coin toss, which leads to the kickoff. In Judaism we also have a ceremony that marks the start of the game called life, our kickoff, we call it a bris or simchat bat.

The ceremony closing out the game in Judaism is called a funeral. In football, it's only a funeral for the team that loses. In football, by definition, since it's a zero sum game, there are as many funerals as there are games. Alabama has had a remarkable year – 13 games in and they haven't had a funeral yet!

Football is all about progress. You have to move the ball down the field. You have to accomplish your mission, which is to score points. Judaism also believes in progress. We're here to make the world a better place, to set a good example, to be *or l'goyim*, a light to the nations. One difference between football and Judaism: in football the goal is clear. In Judaism and in life, one of the biggest challenges is figuring out your mission in life.

In football, sometimes when you're trying to make progress you get tackled. We see the same thing in the Torah, our ancestors all had struggles on the way to accomplishing their goals. In this week's Torah portion Joseph is tackled – and thrown into a pit, and sold into slavery. But he makes the most startling comeback in the entire Torah.

Another way one's progress can be thwarted (or you can get ahead, depending on your perspective) is the interception. Jewish football fans debate which is more miraculous: Jacob intercepting Esau's

blessing by impersonating Esau, or Jonathan Allen's 75-yard run after an interception in the September game against Ole Miss.

In both football and Judaism the rules change only slowly; in both cases, there are times when the rule changes have a profound impact. Fans of both football and Judaism debate which is the more radical change: the rule change in 1906 that made the forward pass legal, or the rule change that allowed the ordination of the first female Conservative rabbi in 1985.

One area where football and Judaism agree is on the attitude toward pigskin. You can catch it, you can throw it, you can kick it, but you're forbidden to eat it. Eating the football would be an even bigger violation of the rules than deflating it!

Judaism posits a belief in the resurrection of the dead, *t'chiat hamatim*. We see proof of resurrection of the dead in the Crimson Tide's 2009 season, when they went 14-0 and won the national championship game, just a few short years after a season when they had a record of two wins and seven losses – and that one would have been a losing season even if they received credit for the forfeited games for textbook infractions.

Football and synagogues are both team sports. It doesn't matter how good your quarterback is, if he doesn't have a good team around him, you're not going to win. Same thing with synagogues – it doesn't matter how good your rabbi is, or the president of your shul, if you don't have a good strong team working together you're not going to prosper. There's always more work than any one person can do.

But that doesn't mean individuals don't matter. As Nick Saban said about football:

Now, everybody always says there's no 'I' in team, but there is an 'I' in win, because the individuals make the team what it is, and how they think and what they do is important to the team. So when you act like the individual is not important, well, it is damn important who these people are and what they are.

In Judaism, we believe each and every individual is important. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that each one of us has a unique mission to accomplish in the healing of this world. The right rabbi or the right president of a shul DOES make a difference.

But when it comes to making a difference in football, Jews more often make a difference in the front office than on the field. There are currently more Jewish owners of football teams than there are Jewish players on football teams!

One important way in which Judaism and football differ is that football is a zero-sum game. There are winners and losers, and for every win, there's a loss.

In Judaism and in life, one person's win does not mean another person's loss. We're stronger and we're better off when we all win by working together. The midrash teaches that the reason our ancestors merited receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai is they all joined together with one heart.

Of course, the midrash also teaches that the only reason the people agreed to follow the Torah is because God held a mountain over their heads. Sometimes the coach uses praise, sometimes he uses threats!

Roll Tide!