

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Vayaeshev

HAPPY KHANUKKAH!!!!!!!!!!

God is a sports fan. We all know that there is baseball in the Torah, right? After all, it was in the “Big Inning” that God created everything. Moses was a great quarterback, as he passed through the line of defense that every nation posed against him. We also learn that Joseph must have been a great tennis player. He was distinguished enough to “serve” in Pharaoh’s court. So, in this region where University of Kentucky Basketball takes precedence over everything else, we really do need to appreciate the power that religion does have in unifying the masses. Oh, no, “masses” another religious thing that happens with sports. A “mass” of people show up together to pray to the God who loves sports. What is most beautiful about this evolution is that unlike denominational houses of worship, the crowd that comes to pray at home games is religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse. In fact, at these events, there are fewer larger more diverse crowds that gather to pray anywhere in the world.

Ok, that was a little tongue in cheek, but, only a little. I really fear that we have created Gods out of young men who are wonderfully talented, but still mere mortals. And, it is true that for many, watching the games or following a favorite sports team carries greater emotional energy and poses a greater challenge to faith than many find in any house of worship. Our faith and our countenances rise and fall on the backs of success or failure of favorite teams and players.

Meet Joseph. We know from Torah that he plays tennis. We also know that he is more loved by his father than any other child. He walks through his youth as a star point guard or star quarterback might swagger through a community. He dreams that his brothers and parents will bow to him and worship him no differently than fans do at the feet of an all-star. And, at the risk of one more bad ‘sports’ analogy, no differently than a player shoots to stardom, begins to wane and then returns to stardom (i.e. “comeback player of the year”), Joseph’s stardom rises and falls. There are players who gain prominence on their God given talent that mixes with the miracle of youth and creates magnificence on the field. Too many of these stars are flashes in the pan. The ones that make it take the time, while they are youthful stars, to learn and master a new set of skills that they can then relay on as their youthful bodies begin to age. Talent then becomes a matter of wisdom and experience, and not accident of biology. Joseph’s star fell into the pits (literally) as his brothers first plotted to kill him and then sold him into slavery. His star rose again, as he learned to be loyal in the house of his master. His ego abated, he learned to be humble and had the experience necessary to warrant his master’s trust in charge over his entire home. As his star once again shone brightly, he fell to prison as he was wrongfully accused of making sexual advances on his master’s wife. Once in prison, his star rose again as he became the jailer’s favorite inmate: after bouncing up and down through the minor leagues, he had a shot. The jailer’s favoritism eventually led to Joseph’s chance in the major leagues as he became chief of Pharaoh’s court, in charge of all of Egypt. In the same way that people bowed before Pharaoh who believed himself to be God, they bowed before Joseph as though he was God’s human voice. According to the text, he rose to this power by interpreting Pharaoh’s dream, saving Egypt from destruction.

Now, I appreciate talent. I think people who do exceptional jobs deserve the rewards for their efforts. But I feel that sometimes, in worshipping the stars, we abdicate our own obligation to pay attention to the world and its issues, and our own right to celebrate our own talents. I find it difficult that we measure the value of people on their star power and not their substance. We pay teachers next to nothing, but the people whom they teach we pay fortunes. We make athletes into role models because of their physical gifts even when their character is, at best questionable. And where they are really superstars, too often we completely ignore their character. Perhaps Joseph's story is but the first such example of how this happens. Joseph was an opportunist who made good, he became a superstar. There is some Biblical insinuation that he grew as a person, but we don't find the Bible telling us anything that speaks directly to his growth. More importantly, there is an abundance of evidence that once he charismatically comes into people's lives, they abdicate their responsibility of self care to him. He takes over the house of his master, the prison, and then all Egypt. All of his family and all Egypt bow to him. In giving him this status, he becomes a de facto role model for will who hold him in awe. Joseph, the charismatic star, will make some decisions that will determine the fate of two nations, and commentators will follow this story forward always questioning whether or not he really had the tools to warrant the authority he had been given. "Star power" does not mean that one has staying power or leadership skills, and we need to do a better job discerning with whom we place our trust and who we let create and mold our systems of values. After all, his story will not last, as we will soon see a new Pharaoh who knows not Joseph. Bottom line – we need to pay attention ... to whom we chose to pay attention. If our heads are in the right place, the role models that we follow will keep us there. Shabbat Shalom.