

Shabbos and Baseball

Category: Devarim, V'eschanan

Two new baseball players are observant Jews. What lesson can we take from their decisions?

The Two Baseball Players

In recent weeks, history was made in the world of sports: For the very first time, an Orthodox Jew was chosen for the MLB draft for the upcoming baseball season. Jacob Steinmetz was chosen by the Arizona Diamondbacks, becoming the first observant Jew to enter any of the “Big Four” of sports in the United States.

Steinmetz grew up in Long Island keeping Shabbos and eating Kosher. He makes sure to walk to the game, even a few miles — but he does play ball on Shabbos.

A day later, another observant Jew was chosen in the draft: Eli Kligman of Las Vegas. The experts I spoke to told me that he is more talented than Steinmetz; he could play with his right hand and with his left. Additionally — and most importantly — Kligman doesn't play on Shabbos at all. When he was interviewed by the New York Times, he told them, “Shabbos is sacred for G-d.” He doesn't play on Shabbos, and there is nothing to talk about.

It is reminiscent of the most famous Jewish ballplayer, Sandy Koufax, who refused to play when the game fell out on Kol Nidrei night in 1965. In merit of that decision, he became world famous and remains a household name among Jews until today.

After Koufax made his announcement, the Chabad Shliach in Minnesota, Rabbi Moshe Feller, decided to visit him in his hotel room with a pair of Tefillin. However, Rabbi Feller was faced with a dilemma:

In this week's Torah portion, in the Shema, we read the commandment to wear Tefillin on our head and on our arm. However, an important detail is left out: Which arm?

To our luck, the Torah writes about Tefillin a different time, in Parshat Bo, and

there, it uses an interesting spelling (ידכה) for “your hand.” Rashi explains that the word can be split into two and interpreted as “יד כהה—weak hand,” indicating that Tefillin are to be worn on the weaker arm, normally the left one (Bo 13:9). What about a lefty, someone who uses his left arm to write and function? He puts Tefillin on his right arm.

When Rabbi Feller visited Koufax, he wasn't sure which type of Tefillin to bring. On one hand, he batted with his right hand, but on the other hand, he pitched with his left. Which hand was dominant? Ultimately, he decided that the pitch was more important, and he brought Tefillin for the right hand.

Koufax was moved by the visit, and he thanked Rabbi Feller for coming. He found it important to mention that he didn't play on Rosh Hashanah either. However, he didn't want to put on Tefillin.

Two weeks later, at the Simchas Torah farbrengen, the Rebbe spoke about Jewish education. He explained that the best way to teach your children is by showing them a living example of how a Jew should live. The Rebbe mentioned Sandy Koufax not playing on Yom Kippur. The Rebbe added that he was brought a pair of Tefillin and he refused to wear them, and that day he lost a game — although he later won the World Series. The Rebbe said that the Tefillin are on his table, and no doubt, he will end up putting them on (Toras Menachem vol. 45 pg. 146). (It would be interesting to find out on which hand Kligman puts on Tefillin).

The idea of a personal example is quite evident with these two players.

The one who plays on Shabbos commented that his parents support him in his decision. The other player, who doesn't play on Shabbos, said that his parents never pushed him to observe Yiddishkeit. Instead, their own commitment and dedication to Torah and Mitzvos inspired him to remain steadfast in his resolve to not play on Shabbos. (His father actually became close to Judaism through Chabad).

Remembering and Safeguarding

In this week's parshah, in addition to reading the Shema, we read the second version of the Ten Commandments. Famously, there are numerous differences between the two versions; the most famous difference is in the commandment

regarding Shabbos: The first version says, “*Zachor*, remember the Shabbos to keep it holy.” The second version says “*Shamor*, safeguard the Shabbos to keep it holy.”

What is the difference between the two?

The meaning of “safeguarding Shabbos” focuses on the negative: to ensure that we don’t, G-d forbid, accidentally transgress Shabbos. “Remembering Shabbos,” on the other hand, focuses on the positive: to actively make Shabbos a different and holy day. Rashi explains one way to “remember” Shabbos: “If something special comes your way, designate it for Shabbos” (Yisro 20:8). All week long, you are mindful about Shabbos. When you see a delicacy, the immediate thought is to save it for Shabbos, and so on. This is all in addition to actively making Shabbos a special day on Shabbos itself.

The Midrash states that *zachor* has four letters, which remind us of the four ways we remember Shabbos: “Through speech, kiddush, carrying and resting” (*Pesikta Chadata*).

What do these four mean?

Speech:

The Talmud tells us that “your speech on Shabbos should not be like your speech during the week” (Shabbos 113b). On Shabbos, we don’t speak about business or even any mundane matters. You don’t plan your vacations and you don’t plan your week — it’s well-known that whatever you plan on Shabbos does not come to fruition.

Kiddush:

The second way we remember Shabbos is through reciting Kiddush on a cup of wine on Shabbos eve and afternoon (Pesachim 106a).

Carrying:

We do not carry anything from one domain to another, or in a public area, unless there is a kosher eiruv.

Resting:

This is the most straightforward form of *oneg Shabbos*. Even though there are all sorts of ways you can work hard on Shabbos without transgressing any commandment, by simply resting and taking it easy we “remember” Shabbos.

What the baseball players do is up to them. But on our end, we need to remember that Shabbos is not only about what is forbidden. It is important to “remember” Shabbos at every moment. Light Shabbos candles, recite Kiddush, host Shabbos dinners with your children and dress for the occasion — and even turn off your smartphone. “Remember the Shabbos day, and make it holy.”