

Soccer World Cup

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

They say soccer is a beautiful game, but it is also a symbol of what is wrong with society. Here is a game of skill that can produce artistry and physical prowess that at the same time can show all the corruption, degeneration, and disappointment that human beings consistently exhibit (such as biting opponents). This may sound counterintuitive coming from me, for whom soccer was the single most important subject on my school timetable, involved me in hours of training, physical torture and broken limbs at university, and until recently actually occupied 90 minutes every Saturday night when I was glued to the television watching "Match of the Day" as a life-long supporter of Manchester United.

And you might say I am only jaundiced now because Manchester United have had their worst season in decades. Or that England have exited ignominiously from the World Cup in Brazil. A teabag stays in a cup longer! But then only the most antirational, diehard supporter could possibly have expected anything else. English soccer now depends on foreign players who show more skill than your average English job. Brian Clough got Nottingham Forest to win the European Cup twice with the English style of punt the ball and run after it. But that was in 1979 and 1980, and no one has heard of them since.

Soccer, it is true, is the most popular sport in the world in terms of numbers playing it and numbers watching it. But it is also the one with the worst record for hooliganism, racism, numbers killed on and off the pitch, corruption, and nationalism at its crudest level.

FIFA, the body that "controls" the World Cup, is a self-perpetuating oligarchy for nepotistic millionaires. For years they refused to use technology that might help eradicate dishonest and incompetent referees. It is now clear that it accepts bribes to decide where the World Cup will be held. FIFA makes billions on the World Cup and puts almost nothing back into the game, but plenty into private bank accounts.

So the big question is, why do people put up with it? The answer is simply that soccer is a substitute for warfare. You dress up in your team's or country's colors and you hope that your mercenaries will smash the opposition into the ground, enabling them and you to perform a victorious war dance, humiliating the enemy and displaying all the crude gestures and facial expressions of a Maori raiding party.

It is something built into the human psyche, this need to win. The more that society tries to control our belligerence and baser instincts, the more we seek other outlets for it. Which you might think makes it all worthwhile. But there's something else. Sport represents the very summit of materialism, the pursuit of physicality and sexuality, materialism for its own sake.

Judaism, on the other hand, stands in opposition to the very philosophy of

sport. The Maccabees rebelled against the Greeks precisely over the introduction of the theater and the circus into Jerusalem, and what it represented. The assimilated Jews who preferred Greek values to Jewish ones were the very people who brought the games into Judea. The Olympic Games soon declined from their original philosophical justification. Athletes were paid, glorified, and sometimes killed. Nakedness was a requirement, and although in theory a good symposium was supposed to round off the day, in practice it usually descended into an orgy of one sex or another.

Roman games relegated athletics in favor of gladiators killing vast numbers of humans and animals. Rival gangs of charioteer supporters used to riot in the streets of Rome. Early Christianity, like the Maccabees, gained strength precisely because it offered a moral and social alternative to the degenerate Roman culture.

We are not very different nowadays. The barbaric haircuts of players at the World Cup are reminiscent of Viking marauders out to rape kill and pillage. The unsightly tattoos, more than your average Neanderthal medicine man, are symbolic of a snub to decorum and lack of respect for the human body. Players did and do behave in a deceitful, petulant manner and if they score gesticulate and dash to the cameras like monkeys in heat. And when men known for their dissolute behavior beyond the game start looking to heaven, bowing to the ground, or crossing themselves in the expectation that their deity will favor them, you know that there's something wrong with religion too. I want the team with no primitive haircuts, no tattoos, and no record of foul play to win. But sadly the only team that qualifies on all these counts is Germany!

When I stopped watching Manchester United and England because it only depressed me, I spent the 90 minutes I otherwise would have wasted studying more Torah instead. I can't tell you how much better I felt for it. How superior and more elevated than those who spend their time on such trivial pursuits. Why should one waste time on soccer or indeed any sport?

How, I wondered, did I allow myself to get sucked into this vain waste of time? Then I thought of those hormonally overexcited yeshivah students who use up their surplus energy throwing stones, acid, and bleach at other human beings they disagree with and beat up rabbis and women that find disfavor in their eyes. And I think, what wonderful soccer players they might become. Perhaps if their teachers allowed them to use soccer as a way of releasing their animal instincts they might, and return from the experience far better people and far better Jews.