

# American Pharoah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Lubavitcher Rebbe won the Triple Crown at Belmont last Saturday when American Pharoah romped home in the Belmont Stakes at Belmont, New York, by five lengths, becoming the first horse to win the Triple Crown in 37 years. The owner is one Ahmed Zayat, once known in Cairo as an Egyptian Muslim, but now in the USA he is an Orthodox Jew. He and his family spent Shabbat in a mobile home nearby so as not to have to travel to the event.

He made his fortune in beer, quickly realizing that in the Muslim world it makes sense to market the non-alcoholic kind! He himself is a good Sephardi Jew, not a Chasid. But the jockey of his winning horse was taken to the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe by some enterprising young Chabad Rabbis (as ever, with a nose for publicity), where he dropped in a piece of paper asking for a blessing before the race. That, of course, is why his horse won. I would not recommend doing this if you are a serious gambler, but then most gamblers, like those who put pieces of paper in walls and suchlike, are very superstitious.

In the United Kingdom, where I was born, horse racing was and is “the sport of kings”. The Queen is its most fervent patron and horse breeder. Her horses have won at Ascot 22 times. The fabulously rich royal family of Dubai, the Maktoums, are the dominant force nowadays. Here in America horse racing is the sport of whoever wants to have a go. It is under a lot of pressure, but it still attracts attention and money.

And the unthinkable, a nice Jewish boy, has just won its Triple Crown. Its true in England there were wealthy and successful Jewish breeders (the Rothschilds, the Sassoons and the Tabors come to mind), but not one of them was Sabbath- or kosher-observant. And you had to be or hobnob with the aristocrats to get anywhere. In the USA, any Tom Dick and or Ahmed can make it.

As a child I spent several years living at Greenham Common in Berkshire overlooking the Newbury racecourse. I would sneak down the hill, through the fields, and climb up onto a haystack to watch the races. On television you get no sense of the thunderous pounding of the hooves, the snorting of the horses, the shouting and whipping of the jockeys as the peloton of sweating horse meat, the rolling of white horse eyes swishing past you in a second, and then heading towards the grandstands, where the crowd is roaring and cheering and screaming and stamping their feet until the post-climactic sigh that means the bookies have made a lot of money and the punters have lost again.

In the Britain of my youth, the poor would bet on greyhounds, the middle classes and the rich on horses. But in truth horses attracted all classes. There were stands and boxes where the rich could go and plain open, unprotected mounds for the peasants. The rich would bet in secluded areas,

while the poor stood amongst the shouting gesticulating bookmakers in garish clothes and hats screaming to get attention and pick up the small, the leftovers, and the last-minute hunch bets.

There was an art to deciding the odds, and usually the bookmakers knew they had to cover their bets or they might lose everything. Then off-course betting and now the internet have changed all that. Aficionados studied form, looked at statistics, knew the jockeys, examined the mounts, asked all kinds of shady insiders which horse would get nobbled, which jockey told to rein in his mount or let a favored stablemate win. As with all gambling, it was often gangster-controlled and rigged against the ordinary sucker. But the atmosphere, the excitement, and vain hopes of winning a fortune always won out.

I remember going to Royal Ascot 40 years ago. It was something special (but not so special that I ever wanted to go back). The Queen and members of the Royal Family would be driven in horse-drawn carriages from nearby Windsor Castle, accompanied by red jacketed riders, down the straight to the cheering crowds and the military band, and into the Royal Enclosure. Only the elite could get in there, and you had to be wearing morning suits and toppers or elegant dresses and outrageous hats.

The ordinary wealthy or the middle classes could make use of the Grand Stand enclosure, where companies and families had their private boxes and entertained lavishly. Dress was "cocktail." Or you could stand on the grass mounds to the side.

Ascot dates back to Queen Anne. It was an essential part of the great annual summer Royal social calendar that divides Brits into those who aspire to be close to the monarchy and those who despise it. To me it was more about the setting than the betting. No, I did not win anything.

Beyond Royal Ascot it is a lot less glamorous and horse racing is a tough, expensive hobby, although it has its business side. Unless you have more cash than you need, it is not to be recommended. But then neither is betting in general. Just study the odds. And of course the rabbis of the Talmud had no sympathy for betting and banned gamblers from giving evidence in courts or standing for positions of honesty and responsibility. To the best of my knowledge, no Chasidic rebbes are in the business, unless of course you include the Lubavitcher Rebbe of sainted memory but then he no longer has a say in it.

For all my cynicism, I am delighted that a Shomer Shabbat Jew has won this great prize. There is such a constant flow of news about Jews being attacked, boycotted, and reviled and rejected (often, sadly, because they deserve it), that to see a happy, smiling, victorious religious face is a real tonic. I hope we don't have to wait another 37 years for a repeat. But then we did have to wait 2000 years to come home!

PS—The horse racing business is hardly the preserve of the educated. Those who registered the name of the horse couldn't spell Pharaoh properly!!!!