

# Walk In The Park

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have often commented on how ridiculous it strikes me when I see soccer players running onto the field of play and cross themselves before engaging in battle. I feel exactly the same way about Muslim athletes bowing down to kiss the turf or the cinder track. And I guess Israeli sportsmen are only immune because they are virtually all secular. But even if they were religious what would they do? Take a mezuzah out and kiss it? Look up to heaven and wag a finger?

As if God has nothing better to do with His time than bother about who wins a soccer match or a track race, when there is so much suffering and so many disasters that need dealing with far more urgently. How does He decide which of the various games for which He is appealed to will win the day? And does it matter in which of the various names He has been given that one appeals to Him? Of course, each religion believes it has a special relationship (yes, I know that WE do, but then that's what they think too). And will the decision be in any way influenced by the record of the appellant, or is the result either random or quite scientifically based on superior fitness, tactics and mental strength?

Of course, such thoughts are completely fatuous because unless one thinks God is Superman it is silly to think in terms of any physical limitations, just it is silly to expect God to intervene every time someone has a spot on his nose. All attempts to explain God in human terms are bound to fail, precisely because God is not human. I have always regarded such superstitious, trivial appealing to God as claptrap and an affront to serious spirituality, which is far too significant to be treated like some fruit machine or lottery.

The other day as I was exercising in Central Park I saw a well groomed and turned out middle-aged man who could have been a banker, a CEO, or an academic run in to join the jogging lane, and as he did so he crossed himself. And that got me thinking. Why did he cross himself? He was not trying to win anything. So he was not like the soccer players or athletes I have been laughing at. So what was he doing?

Then it struck me that crossing or falling to the earth is not necessarily asking God to defeat one's enemies (though in most cases I am sure it is, because most falling to earth forwards happens after victory, whereas after defeat it is more likely to be falling backwards). It occurred to me that the jogger was simply asking for protection, the way we religious fellows often do.

After all, we know how dangerous driving is and how many accidents there are, and so we have a prayer for travellers, Tefilat HaDerech, which asks God to protect us on our journey. (Mind you, it definitely needs updating. Very few of us need to be on the look out for dangerous animals on the way nowadays.) Pedestrians are in almost as much danger, certainly in New York, from

slippery surfaces, road works, crazy cab drivers and delivery boys on cycles belting down streets the wrong way and through traffic lights and onto pavements without a care in the world.

Even jogging has its dangers. You can turn your ankle, overdo it, strain yourself, and at my age do other damage too. And this is without the pelotons of speeding cyclists in Central Park, inline skaters, and boarders, as well as carts and three-wheelers all belting around in desperate search of customers and victims. It is really very dangerous, and therefore perfectly reasonable to ask for Divine protection.

Yet, of course, there is a two-way deal here. Although I'd almost swear that twice recently I would have been run down by motorbikes, had He not advanced time to allow them to just miss me, I cannot expect the Almighty to take care of me when I cross the road without looking in both directions or when I am careless changing lanes. I also cannot totally disregard Divine values and priorities and then call on Him for favours. That is why I really have no patience for footballers who live dissolute lives and then think a quick sign puts it all right. You cannot have your cake and eat it, boys.