The Dolphiner Rebbe: Football and Religion

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(*Photo: New England Patriots / Associated Press*)

In advance of Super Bowl Sunday, here's a gem from 1973 by **Rabbi Solomon Schiff**, who served for a time as a chaplain to the Miami Dolphins: **Judaism and Professional Football.**

Some excerpts:

> My close relationship with the team has convinced me that theology and sports have a close kinship, that the message of religion can have its greatest audience in football, and that a game played well can be the best sermon and can provide a positive influence to vast numbers of people...
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> The Miami Dolphins is the only team in professional football which begins each home game with a public invocation. The invocations are given by clergymen of the various faiths on a rotating basis. Besides the public invocation before each game, there is a Catholic Mass and a non-denominational service. Seeing the men at these services you would never guess that they are the same ones who an hour or so later would be tearing and ripping their enemies apart on the field of combat. At the service they sit in prayerful humility, recognizing that whatever their talents and abilities, they were God-given, and that the game of football must be played with honesty and integrity, and according to the rules...
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> ...Religion has played an important role in creating a fellowship atmosphere, which is part of the championship formula for the Miami

Dolphins. The team feels a genuine sense of identity with a higher being. There is a real understanding that the game is a part of the overall game of life, that the important thing is to play the game well and according to the rules. As I said in part of my invocation at the Dolphins-Buffalo Bills game on December 20, 1970, "May this game serve as an example for the higher game of life, for the success of both is attained by fair play, hard work, and striving for the goal."...

...Most of the players feel the importance of religion in their personal and professional lives. They feel this on a mature level. They don't have the childish concept that "G-d is on our side" or that "HE is a Dolphin fan." Their prayer is not so much for victory but rather that they be given the health to do their best and to prove worthy of their championship abilities.

...Perhaps the best illustration of the great opportunity that professional football has for promoting spiritual values was seen in September 1972. This was evidenced following the Arab terrorist massacre of eleven Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games in Munich. [Dolphins Managing General Partner] Joe Robbie, who attended the games at Munich, was extremely pained at the tragedy... He asked Rev. Edward T. Graham, Pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, who was scheduled to deliver the invocation for the following game, to devote the prayer to the Munich tragedy. The game which was to be played on September 10th, only five days after the massacre, was between the Dolphins and the Minnesota Vikings at the Orange Bowl. The game was to be nationally televised on CBS. Mr. Robbie called Mr. Pete Rozelle, Commissioner of the National Football League, to inform him of this and to insist that CBS carry the prayer and the minute of silence that was to be a part of the memorial service...

...Mr. Robbie was subsequently selected to be the recipient of an Honorary Fellowship by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem at an event marking the establishment of the Physical Education & Physical Fitness Center at the Hebrew University in memory of the eleven Israeli athletes slain at the Munich Olympics.

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