

Spirit and Story

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Confessions of a Moderately Affiliated Soccer Fan

By Robert Rabinowitz

It's been a great season and a wonderful few weeks to be a Liverpool Football Club soccer fan. Following close to 20 years of British dominance and European success, the team subsided into a decade-long drought [during the 1990s], winning only one competition. This season, however, Liverpool F.C. won an unprecedented treble of domestic and European trophies and qualified for the European Super League. Three of these triumphs came in eight hectic days, culminating in a victorious parade around Liverpool watched by a crowd of 500,000, which is more than the city's population.

I suppose it's inevitable, given my work for CLAL, that I should have begun to view my experience this season through the lenses of identity and religion. The parallels are not hard to make. I watched two of the cup finals in Irish pubs on the East Side surrounded by fellow Liverpool fans. Just before one of the matches, the pub's large-screen TVs showed a lengthy commercial advertising a collection of favorite religious hymns. There were many guffaws from the soccer fans at the members of the congregations shown singing joyfully with their arms in the air. (I guffawed, too, until I realized that the images probably represented pretty accurately what I look like in my synagogue on a Friday night.) And yet, as I dashed through the throngs at the end of the matches, I left pubs full mostly of grown men facing the same TV screens, swaying with their arms in the air and singing the Rodgers & Hammerstein hymnlike number "You'll Never Walk Alone," which is Liverpool F.C.'s anthem.

I identify strongly with the emotions that led people to sing to the TV screens. First, it fulfills a desire to connect with home or community through the new opportunities provided by broadcast technology. On the day of Liverpool's victory parade, I felt a little out-of-touch with who I was. After all, the parade traveled no more than 50 yards from the house, synagogue and school in which I grew up. I was missing out on the *aliyat haregel* (foot pilgrimage) of "my people." I thought about the Talmudic passage that evaluates different reasons for missing ancient Israel's ultimate expression of communal solidarity, the Passover sacrifice and feast. I was reassured that being away on a journey is judged an acceptable excuse. The loyalty

one feels for one's team is like loyalty to a people, place or religion. One is convinced about its specialness, even though an objective evaluation of all the available options is besides the point.

My second reason for identifying with the singing fans was simply the depth of the experiences we had shared. In both games that I watched in the pubs, Liverpool had only triumphed after narrowly avoiding defeat. The emotional intensity of watching one's team's fate being fought out on the pitch is like nothing I have ever experienced in a formal prayer service, and the impulse to sing with joy after victory was very powerful. On the other hand, as intense as the experience was, there was something unreal and disconnected about it in that directly after both victories I ran straight to my next appointments.

As I have pondered the exact details of my "Liverpool F.C." identity, I have come to realize that I am what demographers might define as a "moderately affiliated" fan. Writing about the Jewish community, Steve Cohen and Arnie Eisen define the moderately affiliated as "those who belong to a Jewish institution...but are not as involved, learned, or pious as the most highly engaged" segment of American Jews (*The Jew Within*, Indiana University Press, 2000, p.5). Like moderately affiliated Jews, my performance of the normative behaviors of fanhood is somewhat idiosyncratic and certainly sporadic, peaking at particular times of the year (although my wife thinks I am pretty devoted). I have only watched a grand total of five Liverpool matches this season out of a possible 65, but I do have a Liverpool screen saver and mug in my office.

My soccer fan identity also displays the puzzling combination of inalienability and chosenness that Cohen and Eisen highlight. It is my right not to "buy into" the whole package of expected fans' behaviors, and I will acknowledge the superior commitment of others. Nevertheless, I regard my "Liverpool-ness" as inalienable and so I am as genuine in my fanhood as anyone else. I think this accounts for a peculiar discomfort I experienced watching the matches in the pub. On the one hand, I felt like a stranger. I was not wearing a replica shirt, scarf or any of the other traditional paraphernalia; I did not have a strong regional (i.e., working class) accent; and there were certainly no other Orthodox Jews to be seen. And yet, I was actually a native Liverpoolian among predominantly Irish fans. They were more highly engaged, but I was still the real thing. I was almost waiting to have my credentials challenged. And I have witnessed this sort of defensiveness on the part of moderately affiliated Jews thrust into an environment dominated by highly engaged Jews.

As a highly engaged Jew, thinking about myself as moderately affiliated to a form of life in which other people are highly engaged has been very revealing. It has also given me more sympathy with the views of people who fret about the disappearance of Jews and Judaism. After all, one cannot build a thriving soccer scene on the back of someone who only watches the occasional big match and whose "fanhood" is mixed in with large globs of nostalgia that some may argue has nothing to do with the essence of the game itself.

Ultimately, however, I think that the application of the categories "moderately affiliated" and "highly engaged" to Jewish identity has only limited validity. The only way I can explain it is through the concept of idolatry. I think that the concept of idolatry boils down to the claim that no aspect of human existence is of absolute value. All aspects of existence – social institutions, systems of thought – can be turned into idols that blind us to the other

aspects of life that are worthy of value. The concept of idolatry has a special position in Judaism, for it can call into question any and all other aspects of Jewish life and thought. It is this concept, for me, that underpins the claims made by CLAL that Judaism can change profoundly in nature. When the social reality within which we live is transforming, perpetuation of age-old rules and ideas can itself be a form of idolatry that can blind us to new opportunities that are worthy of value.

I do not believe that there is any such powerful source of self-criticism within the fairly fixed and limited repertoire of behaviors and concerns that comprise soccer fanhood. And that is why the categories “moderately affiliated” and “highly engaged” may be of value in measuring it, for they assume a hierarchy of value that is essentially fixed. Bill Shankly, the famed Liverpool manager of the seventies, once said with great irony and humor: “Football is not a matter of life and death. It’s more important than that.” Once we can accept that this sentiment is actually true of Judaism, we may be able to stop trying to reduce it to a fixed set of behaviors and institutions, and begin the more important conversations about the meaning and purpose of our Jewishness.



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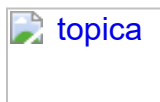


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