

Given that this week we read the Torah portion about the Israelites receiving the 10 Commandments, I thought this story was particularly appropriate.

This is from an article in today's New York Times by Samuel Freedman.

After practice one late-summer day in 1986, Alan Veingrad (at the age of 23) strode into the Green Bay Packers' locker room, feeling both spent and satisfied. An undrafted player from an obscure college, he had made the team and then some. On the next Sunday, opening day of the National Football League season, he would be starting at offensive tackle.

In his locker, Mr. Veingrad found the usual stuff, his street clothes and sweatsuit and playbook. On a small bench, though, lay a note from the Packers' receptionist. It carried a name that Mr. Veingrad did not recognize, Lou Weinstein, and a local phone number.

Alone in a new town, too naïve to be wary, Mr. Veingrad called. This Lou Weinstein, it turned out, ran a shoe store in Green Bay, Wis. He had just read an article in the paper about a Jewish player on the Packers, and he wanted to meet and welcome that rarity.

A few days later, Mr. Veingrad joined Mr. Weinstein for lunch at the businessman's golf club. There Mr. Weinstein invited the player to accompany his family to Rosh Hashanah services at a synagogue near the site of the Packers' original home field, at City Stadium.

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He did go to Rosh Hashana services that year with Mr. Weinstein and being there began a process which led Alan Veingrad, or Shlomo as he is now known to the Chabad House near the University of Southern California campus in Los Angeles just five nights before the 2010 Super Bowl.

A flier at Chabad House announced "Super Bowl to Super Jew." And that truly was the story of Shlomo Veingrad. He now wears a black kippah and tzitzit along with the Super Bowl ring he won in 1992 with the Dallas Cowboys and the Rolex watch that Emmitt Smith, the team's star running back gave him.

He is today a modern American Jew in many ways, observant, a ba'al Teshuva, one who returns to the practice of Judaism but at the same time is a thoroughly modern American. He understands his time in the football as a result of his strong desire to succeed. Even though he was tall enough, six foot, 5 inches, he wasn't a big enough player in high school to win a scholarship to a major college. He knew he could play the game but was so thin, his only option was a scholarship from a Division II school, East Texas State. Even after proving himself in college, he was cut by his first two N.F.L. teams.

But a year after that, he began playing with the Packers. He undertook a rigorous program of weight training and a relentless study of football technique. He ended up playing for Green Bay for four years and Dallas for two.

"He was a storybook player," recalled Rich Moran, a Packers teammate, "the undrafted guy who proves he can play."

"I believe I played in the N.F.L. and have that ring so I can share my story with other Jews," Mr. Veingrad, now 46, said shortly before the U.S.C. talk. During it, he

told the capacity crowd, “The Torah is a playbook for how someone can live their life.”

We Jews hear that kind of talk all the time from Christian players, they thank God for all their successes in sports. They use their experiences to proselytize, trying to encourage all who hear them to take on the Christian faith. But we rarely hear that kind of talk from a Jew.

We Jews routinely follow sports and root for teams that we feel a connection with. But it’s rare for us to be able to root for a Jew who is really good at a sport. And even rarer for that player to talk about Judaism as a religion that he or she follows.

That’s why it’s important for us to see Shlomo Veingrad as a new kind of role model for us and for our children. We can be good at sports and we can see our Torah laws, which we will read about tomorrow, as a center piece of our lives. We can encourage our children to follow these laws and, like Shlomo Veingrad, to be proud, openly and vocally proud to talk about what it means to be a Jew. What it means to embody the essence of being an American and, at the same time, the essence of being a Jew.

As one of the men who came to hear Shlomo said, “I came all the way from Orange County to get this.” This was an official NFL football which Veingrad signed with his name, his uniform number, and his message: “Jewish Pride!”

Shabbat Shalom.