

If You're Going to Worship Stars, Find Some That Won't Burn Out Shavuot

By Rabbi Jason Miller

Close your eyes for a moment. Think about your favorite superstar. Maybe it's a singer. Maybe it's an actor or an athlete, an artist or an author. What do they do that make them your favorite? Are they the fastest in their sport? Do they have the best voice on stage? Are they mega-rich? Do their films draw the most money at the box office? Are they always looking great on the covers of popular magazines? Do you find their books mesmerizing? A new British study says that over 22 percent of people are star-obsessed. Let me share a story with you about one of my favorite superstars.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a Saturday Night in mid-October 1988. It was the bottom of the ninth inning of the first game of the World Series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Oakland Athletics. The Dodgers were trailing 4-3 with two outs, and there was a runner on first base. And of course, who was up next? My boyhood idol, my hero, Kirk Gibson. Gibson had long been my favorite baseball player from his days in a Detroit Tigers uniform; and now that he had moved out to Los Angeles to join the Dodgers, I still loved to watch him play. So, up to the plate walked Gibson. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he "limped" to the plate.

You see, even though he was one of the Dodgers' best players, he didn't even start this game because of a badly injured knee. I was so disappointed that I wouldn't get to see my favorite player in action. But now, here he came, up to pinch-hit in the bottom of the ninth inning of the World Series against Oakland's All-Star pitcher.

Gibson got two quick strikes, and I remember feeling embarrassed for him. He could barely stand on his two feet, let alone swing a bat. And then, I looked down for a second, and when I picked my head up to look at the television, I couldn't believe what I saw. Gibby launched a home run into right field and gloriously circled the bases, limping around the diamond as he pumped his fists the entire way. It was the most exciting thing I had witnessed in my young life.

That night, back in 1988, was one of the last times I remember getting really excited for any particular professional athlete, or any superstar for that matter. I soon realized that while we, the fans, were devoted to our superstars, the feeling was not always mutual. It was just a job for them. Professional athletes up and leave town overnight if another team offered a million dollars more. Rock stars refuse to sign autographs for fans. Hollywood actors won't do public service announcements for free. And as for being moral exemplars, role models for society, our superstars leave us wanting.

I had long been a baseball fan. Kirk Gibson might have been my favorite, but I had a long list of players I loved to watch. But then things went downhill in 1994 when the players went on strike. This strike forced the cancellation of the World Series for the first time since 1904 and embittered fans like me for years. The strike was really about one thing – money. Playing for the love of the game is sadly a thing of the past. Many of today's athletes, who are still made into demigods by society, are arrogant, greedy, and negative role models for our children. Let me give you some examples of today's sports superstars.

Without naming names, there is one baseball player in particular, clearly one of the best baseball players of all time; and in 2001, he hit more home runs in a season than any other player. Ever. But that and his \$15 million a year salary do not make him a mensch. Let me share with you what Sports Illustrated columnist Rick Reilly wrote about this player during the season that he set the all-time home run record. "Someday they'll be able to hold his funeral in a fitting room. When he hit his 500th home run, only one person came out of the dugout to greet him at the plate: the batgirl. Sitting in the stands, you could've caught a cold from the freeze he got."

Not the nicest thing to say about someone, but unfortunately, it is true. On all sports teams, the players hang out with each other, but this player doesn't share in that team camaraderie. He sits in the corner of the team's clubhouse with his P.R. man, personal masseuse, weight trainer, three lockers as opposed to everyone else's one, a reclining massage chair, and a big-screen TV that only he can see. He doesn't even eat with the rest of his team; instead, he brings in his own nutritionist. He might be on the same team as these other guys, but no one would make the claim that they are his "teammates." And I'm sure that no matter how good a baseball player he is, he is not the guy you would want to hold up to your children as an example. And you certainly would not want him to be your children's hero or idol. But unfortunately kids do look up to him and many superstar athletes like him, because they are just that – superstars.

Today's superstar athletes let us down. We are in awe of their athletic prowess, yet devastated when they're arrested on drug charges, or found cheating on their wife, or tightfisted when it comes to charity, or in some cases, even accused of murder. In the past year alone, we've read news reports of our most famous professional athletes being involved in the most illicit acts imaginable. Even our most beloved sports heroes eventually let us down. They rise to the top of their sport, winning championship after championship, and then admit to years of unfaithfulness to their wives. We want to look up to them because they are hall-of-famers, all-stars, and champions, but do they share our values?

Late in his life, writer F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy." How true this is. When we look to individuals to be our sports heroes simply because they can run fast, dunk a ball, or hit a home run, we are looking to be disappointed. And this is not only the case in professional sports. How many talented movie stars, music entertainers, politicians, and supermodels can you think of who have turned their superstardom into a catastrophe? We loved them for all the wrong reasons.

Our Torah teaches us that we are not to worship idols, that we may not practice *avodah zarah*. So too, we are instructed not to practice astrology, *avodat kochavim*, worshiping the stars. Perhaps, we could take *avodat kochavim*, metaphorically, to understand that idolizing the "superstar" is a form of *avodah zarah*. It is easy to see why we make heroes out of these individuals. They can do what we only wish we could. They have the God-given ability to sing better than us, to act better than us, to look better than us; they are more talented than the average person. But are these the true heroes of our society? Is it possible that the millions of individuals sitting in front of their televisions voting for the new "American Idol," ready to crown our newest mega-star, are actually creating false idols?

So who are the true heroes then? This holiday is a great opportunity in which to find true heroes. Traditionally, we commemorate the life of Rabbi Akiva during Shavuot. Akiva is one of the most prominent figures of the second generation of Tannaim. We learn in the Talmud that he could infer Jewish law from even the smallest dots written in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva supported the Bar Kochba revolt, and when it failed, he was one of the ten martyrs of the subsequent persecutions. In a midrash, we learn of his pleasure at finally being able to truly fulfill the commandment, found in the Shema, to love God with all of your heart and with all of your strength. These are the words Rabbi Akiva uttered with his final breath. For all of these reasons, he would make a fine hero, a perfect exemplar. But perhaps his most heroic trait is something any one of us could replicate. You see, Rabbi Akiva was a latecomer to Torah study. It was only at the age of forty that he became one of the best-known figures of the rabbinic period and a moral exemplar.

Many of my Seminary colleagues have modeled their lives after Akiva. Coming to Torah study in mid-life, these future rabbis and cantors, known as "Second Career Clergy," recognize that it is never too late to pursue a dream. They are a living testament to Hillel's words, "If not now, when?" Akiva is a hero not because he did anything that is beyond our ability. He set a wonderful example and is to be admired as a hero for helping so many others take on a life of Torah later in life.

The second true hero of Shavuot is Ruth, the daughter of the king of Moab. Ruth is regarded as the model righteous convert. According to a midrash, when her Jewish daughter-in-law Naomi, also a widow, told her that Jewish women do not frequent theaters and circuses, Ruth replied, "Wherever you go, I will

go.” When told that Jewish women only dwell in houses sanctified by mezuzahs, she responded: “Where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people. I will destroy all idolatry within me, and your God shall be my God.” Ruth’s piety, grace, and modesty impressed Boaz, and he eventually married her. Without this union, our people would never have known King David, a descendant of Ruth.

Ruth is a paradigm for potential converts to our faith. Since the beginning of Judaism, we have been open and welcoming to the stranger. Ruth not only was a wonderful, supportive relative and confidant to her daughter-in-law, she was a moral exemplar, living piously her entire life. Friends, these are our true heroes. Akiva. Ruth. We want our kids to look up to them and to follow their example.

By living our lives in the fashion of Akiva and Ruth, we ourselves are heroes. In fact, the first midrash in Leviticus Rabbah asks who precisely are the *giburei koach* – the mighty in strength. Rav Huna answers in the name of Rav Aha, saying: The Torah here speaks of the people Israel, who, when they stood before Mount Sinai, undertook fulfilling before hearkening, having said, *na’aseh v’nishmah* – All that the Lord has spoken will we fulfill, and hearken. The people Israel are the real heroes. We are the real heroes. We have consented to follow God’s mitzvot, to live ethically, to be God’s partner. We don’t need to idolize celebrities with feet of clay.

I will close with the following. It is the philosophy of Charles Schultz, the creator of the “Peanuts” comic strip. Schultz asks us to name such people as the five wealthiest people in the world, the last few winners of the Miss America contest, five people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize, a Best Actor or Actress Academy Award. He asks us to name the last decade worth of Superbowl and World Series champs.

Then, he asks us to name five teachers who aided our journey through school; five friends who have helped us through a difficult time; a few people who have made us feel appreciated and special. He asks us to name a few people we enjoy spending time with, to name five heroes whose stories have inspired us.

The point is that none of us remembers the headliners of yesterday. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are often buried with their owners. The people who make a difference in our lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most talent, the most athletic prowess, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones who care. We are the real heroes.

On this Shavuot, let us embrace the real heroes. We should continue to take an interest in sports and entertainment – continue to cheer on our hometown teams and the players we love to watch. Continue to get excited when your favorite actress wins the Oscar. But remember that when all is said and done, these celebrities are not necessarily our role models. That is not why we love them. On this Shavuot, let us look to Rabbi Akiva. Let us look to Ruth. Let us look to our own friends and to our own family. Let us look in the mirror. We are the heroes. We are the role models. No more *avodat kochavim*. No more worshiping the stars.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.