

Are You Not Entertained?!?

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BH

First, a confession: I do not understand football. To me, it looks like this:

1. There is a committee meeting.
2. They line up.
3. They hit each other.
4. They fall down.
5. Repeat steps 1-4.
6. Occasionally kick the ball.

Strangely, I am an avid reader of Sports Illustrated Magazine, which I think has some of the best journalistic writing out there today. Over the past year or so, the magazine has had an ever-increasing number of detailed articles about the damage football injuries cause to the brain: early-onset dementia, Lou Gherig's Disease beginning when players are in their 30's, mood disorders and suicides. All of these are linked to the brain injuries players sustain playing football.

It seems to me that brain injuries are the equivalent of the Torah's descriptions of leprosy: a continually degenerating disease that gradually snuffs the life out of a person with no hope of a cure. Leprosy is a march toward death they could see, but not understand, with a slow onset with no clear temporal link between cause and effect. These injuries seem like first cousins to Alzheimer's, which also robs a person of their very self.

So, what would the Talmud say about this topic? First, the sages embraced work—most of the sages worked regular jobs. In the ancient world, this involved physical effort so they would have been physically fit. The sages valued physical health as a gift from God. But I doubt they would have let their children play football, knowing what we know now about its long-term impacts. They believed cognitive gifts were God's greatest gifts to us:

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in man, the Holy One, blessed be He, his father and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye; his mother supplies the semen of the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye; and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart from the world approaches the Holy One, blessed be He, takes away his share and leaves the shares of his father and his mother with them.

(B. Niddah 31a)

If they knew that an activity was proven to take that Godly portion from us early, I think they would not sanction it.

Discussion Questions:

1. I know this might cut too close to the bone, but, as a parent, would you allow your child to play football, having the data at hand about brain trauma that earlier generations did not? Why or why not?
2. Is there any way that football could be changed so that the sages would approve of it, i.e., in ways that it would not damage the brain? Is there a way to play it in moderation?
3. Are there other sports that cause brain damage? Can anything be done to change those sports?
4. Perhaps the most uncomfortable question of all: do you want to be entertained, knowing that the people providing the entertainment are probably damaging their brains to do so?

As always, looking forward to your insights!