

Referees Matter After All!

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The resolution of the football referee strike gives me a feeling of hope. It was only after the regular referees were gone and the replacements turned out to be...how shall I put this kindly? Perhaps they had not had their eye exams lately and they needed stronger glasses.

Those “little guys”, the ones “no one buys a ticket to see” turned out to be incredibly important to the players, to the fans, to the broadcasters and, perhaps most tellingly of all, to the bettors in Las Vegas. If there’s one thing we can learn from Las Vegas, it’s that it is, in some ways, the most impartial arbiters of the world. For them, if the games weren’t fairly called, they weren’t truly games.

Of course, the NFL had simply rediscovered a truth our sages knew long ago: good, decent, brave judges really, truly matter.

The Yerushalmi explains it using this text:

“These are the things you are to do: speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates (Zachariah 8:16).” The Hebrew is actually open to interpretation. It says, “*Emet umishpat shalom*” which could mean “truth and judgment of peace” or “execute the judgment of truth and peace.”

It’s a funny phrase and sages explain it this way:

If there is truth, there is no judgment of peace. If there is peace, there is no judgment of truth. What is truth containing a judgment of peace? This is compromise.

If somebody judged correctly, absolved the innocent and condemned the guilty, the verse counts it as if he practiced kindness both towards the innocent and towards the guilty.

Kindness towards the innocent, because he returned his money to him. And kindness towards the guilty, for he removed the proceeds of robbery from his hands.

(Y. Sanhedrin 1:1, 2b1)

This piece of Talmud is deep: it takes courage and clarity and intelligence and conscience to be a good judge. And each of us, at times, is a judge. Parents and teachers are frequently referees. We have to referee coworkers and friends and even ourselves.

Discussion Questions:

So, here are our discussion questions:

1. What do you think made the NFL understand the importance of really good judges? Why didn’t they understand it up until then?
2. How do you act as a referee in your life and work? Have you ever felt unappreciated? Has there ever been a time when you needed a good referee and you couldn’t find one? What happened? Please tell your story.
3. Did the settlement with the referees represent a compromise of judgment and peace? Does the settlement have any larger implications relating to labor disputes? Will this case help organized labor in future disputes in other arenas?
4. Compromise is a good thing, not a defeat. Can you think of any areas in your life where this is true?

May you be righteous judges and do righteous judgment of peace this year! As always, looking forward to your answers!