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Letter to the Editor [with Response]

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TO THE EDITOR:

While I frequently admire Rabbi Mayer Schiller's erudition and engaging style, I was dismayed by a passage in his recent essay ("Torah u-Madda and the Jewish Observer Critique: Towards a Clarification of Issues," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995-1996): 58-90. There are several points Rabbi Schiller makes in this essay with which I find myself in disagreement. One, however, bothered me enough to write this letter, knowing full well that, as the author, Rabbi Schiller would have the last word and might deal with me severely.

Rabbi Schiller wrote, "What, in their [Torah only-advocates] opinion, is God's response to . . . Stan Musial? . . . Recently, I sat with a prominent mitnagdic Rosh Yeshiva who waxed rhapsodic over Ebbets Field, Happy Felton's Knothole Gang, 'Campy' and 'Pee Wee' and yet, felt obligated to declare those wondrous memories of his youth 'shtusim'" (p. 81).

I am not disputing the value of recreation or diversion. I do not take issue with the pursuit of health and vigor. I see no problem with participatory sports in a proper setting. I do, however, see a significant conflict between Jewish values and admiration, adulation, and worship of sports and sporting heroes. The need to express some protestation of an emergent philosophy of "Torah and Sports Pursuit" is compelling.

Here in Chicago, I am told that *talmidim* were walking around in dazed depression for days after the Bulls lost the world championship last year. A colleague once remarked to me that Michael Jordan's "retirement" generated more interest in his *talmidim* than the concurrent (*lehavdil!*) death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The intense emotional experiences of *simḥah* and *aveilus* are too precious to be spent on sports!

(As an aside, let me wonder

aloud how many of our day school students who may be *beki'im nifla'im* in the names and statistics of sports superstars can identify today's *gedolei ha-poskim* and *ba'alei 'avodah*, and are intimate with their achievements?)

I cannot see any inherent value in the admiration of the physical prowess of sports stars or captivation with their personal exploits, be they boorish *menuvalim* or future senators. Was not this glorification part of the value system we so violently rejected in righting the Hellenists during the period of the second *bais ha-mikdash*? By appropriating sports as a Torah u-Madda value, Rabbi Schiller may be scoring a point for the other team. Just because recollections of "fannism" in one's youth trigger "warm and fuzzy" nostalgic flashbacks to a happy and carefree stage in life, let us not elevate some dubious, perhaps harmful *devar ba-reshus* to a religious value in '*avodas Hashem*."

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RABBI SCHILLER RESPONDS:

Rabbi Bechhofer's letter helps me zero in on several questions which were perhaps not adequately clarified due to the wide ranging nature of my original article.

The fundamental question of the *Torah u-Madda/Torah 'im Derekh Erez* debate is what are we to make of existence? Are those aspects of being which strike us as good to be viewed as traps laid by the Creator to lead us away from Torah and *mizvot* or are they, due to their Divine Authorship, appropriate means to approach Him? I doubt Rabbi Bechhofer would view the natural world as a snare or deny its status as "God's handiwork". His doubts begin when the "glory of God" is created by Him once removed, that is, by man. It is

here that many become uncomfortable. My question is, why?

Of course, on a personal level, all, except the most ascetic Kotzkers and Navardikers among us, desire symmetrical forms and matching colors in our furniture, homes and clothing. Clearly this is not linked to the explicitly sacred, but is merely a reflection of our trust in the goodness of our inner aesthetic sensitivity. This positive reaction to beauty seems to inhere in our creaturely status and unless we find a religious imperative to the contrary, it need not be feared.

Rabbi Bechhofer's cavalier dismissal of those "warm and fuzzy" nostalgic flashbacks to a happy and carefree stage of life", which he views as a "dubious, perhaps harmful *devar ba-resbus*", was particularly saddening. Once more we are confronted with a denial of the beauty and bounty of God's creation. Forget about Ebbets Field for a moment. What about Prospect Park lake or zoo, or Sheepshead Bay? Are our memories of these enchanted places, often visited in the company of loving parents or grandparents or the innocent friends of youth, to be dismissed as "dubious" or "harmful"? And if the beauty and love of a picnic lunch in Prospect Park with "grandma" be cherished as an example of God's love for us, then why not the infield at Ebbets Field, glimpsed for the first time hand-in-hand with "dad"?

Of course, Rabbi Bechhofer is right when he warns against an embrace of contemporary popular culture, interwoven as it is (especially since the sixties' collapse of civilized norms in the West) with assorted forms of decadence, heresy and sin. Remember, though, that the standards of Rodman and Pippen are not those of the Notre Dame of Frank Leahy or

the West Point of Earl Blake. Evil does not inhere in sports, but in a dying civilization's final agonies.

Unfortunately, and here I agree with Rabbi Bechhofer, many of the Orthodox thinkers who are open to the world do not possess a clear sense of the myriad contradictions that exist between the philosophical underpinnings of modernism (e.g., relativism, reductionism, pluralism, egalitarianism, etc.) and Torah faith. Among the masses, this confusion manifests itself in a failure to see the absolute antithesis between the ethos of contemporary popular culture and Orthodoxy.

Yet, a realization of this war between the contemporary world and God need not lead us to reject anti-asceticism which is a prominent and legitimate path in Hashem's service. We need only think of the condemnation of the nazir for his abstention from wine (*Ta'anit* 11a) and of all those who refrain from tasting assorted foods (*Yerushalmi, Kiddushin* 4) to recall the venerable lineage of this *derekb*.

In the modern era, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch viewed seeing the majesty of the Alps as a religious obligation. Surely Rav Hirsch, a warrior against heresy and source of faith for thousands of Jews over the decades, is a legitimate model of *'avodat Hashem*. There are in the end many ways within Torah to approach our Creator.

Rabbi Bechhofer, whose work in many contexts I have admired, need not fear that I will "deal with" him "severely". Nor need he be concerned that a new philosophy of "Torah and sports" is being created. The great gifts of Hashem's Revelation and creation are not new. As always, though, we must embrace them with humility, gratitude and *kabalat 'ol*.