When the Field Becomes a Battlefield

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Last night I went to the Canada-Qatar World Cup match at BC Place. A member of the congregation invited me, perhaps for spiritual support.

Canada won 6-0.

I guess my presence helped. I am available for any future games, should anyone wish to have a similar spiritual presence sitting beside them. Canada has won every World Cup game I have ever attended.

The match was incredible. I am not sure I have ever seen Canadian soccer feel like that. The building was alive. Every goal made the place erupt. People

were cheering, chanting, waving flags, high-fiving strangers. It was one of those rare sports moments when everyone in the stadium suddenly feels like they are part of the same story.

And as I looked around the stadium, I saw three flags.

Canada.

Qatar.

And Palestine.

Canada made sense. Canada was playing.

Qatar made sense. Qatar was playing.

But Palestine?

Palestine was not playing. Israel was not playing. The Middle East conflict was not listed on the ticket.

And yet, somehow, there it was.

Even when Israel is not in the game, Israel is still somehow in the game.

Israel is not in this World Cup. But if you listen to the protests in Toronto and Vancouver, if you look at some of the signs, if you watch what has been happening around the tournament, you would think Israel was at the center of it.

A podcast I listened to this week put it perfectly. Do these people know Israel is not competing in the World Cup?

It would be funny if it were not so exhausting.

There was also a report this week that at a match between Iran and New Zealand, an Israeli flag was reportedly removed from a fan while Palestinian flags nearby remained. The fan was apparently told that flags of countries not playing in the match were not allowed. Which raises the obvious question: then why were the Palestinian flags allowed?

Rules at stadiums can be messy. I am not interested in turning this sermon into a legal brief about FIFA flag regulations.

But the pattern matters.

Because the question beneath the question is not really about flags. It is about belonging.

Who is allowed to stand among the nations? Who is allowed to compete and be seen? Who is allowed to exist in public without being turned into a controversy?

This week's Torah portion is Korach, and Korach is also a story about belonging. Korach rises up against Moses and Aaron and says, "You have gone too far. For all the community is holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the congregation of Adonai?"

It is a brilliant political slogan.

Everyone is holy. No one should be above anyone else. Power to the people. (RAISE FIST)

The problem is that Korach is not trying to build a more inclusive community. He is trying to tear down

the leadership of the community so he can claim power for himself. His language is democratic, but his heart is divisive. He uses the language of equality to create chaos.

That is always the danger, and it echoes what we are hearing from activists who see Israel as the great evil in the world while ignoring the evil and inhumanity of the Islamist regimes and terror organizations they align themselves with.

A movement can say the right words and still do the wrong thing. A person can speak in the name of justice and still make the world less just. A protest can claim to defend human dignity while deciding that Jewish dignity does not count, because Jews aren't human.

Korach says, "The whole community is holy."

Wonderful. Again, great bumper sticker. But holiness is not simply a state of being. It is a state of becoming. It requires holy acts and holy intent.

Earlier in Leviticus, the Torah teaches: Kedoshim tihiyu, “You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.”

You shall be holy.

The Torah places on us an expectation, an obligation, a sacred responsibility. We are not born finished. We are born with the capacity to become holy through the choices we make, the dignity we extend, the restraint we practice, the compassion we show, and the way we treat the person standing on the other side of the field.

Peace does not happen because we put people in the same room or the same stadium or even on the same field.

We think proximity will do the work of relationship. But anyone who has ever sat at a family dinner knows that people can be inches apart and still worlds away.

The work of peace is preparation. Teaching people how to be together.

That is what I heard this week from Gavriel Klein Halevi, the son of my friend Yossi Klein Halevi, who helps lead an extraordinary organization in Israel called The Equalizer.

The Equalizer uses soccer and basketball to bring together children from across Israeli society: Jewish,

Arab, Bedouin, Druze, religious, secular, ultra-Orthodox, kids from the center and kids from the periphery, kids from communities that often live side by side but rarely actually meet.

When I spoke with Gavriel this week, he said something that stayed with me.

“We used to think that if you just put kids together with a soccer ball, everything would be okay.”

Then he said, “It is a lot of work.”

That may be the truest sentence in this whole sermon.

Teaching children to see the humanity of the child wearing the other jersey is work.

The Equalizer does not simply throw kids onto a field and hope for the best. They prepare them. They teach them about one another's communities. They train the coaches. The ceremonies are in Hebrew and Arabic. They do joint warmups. They mix the kids together before they compete. They make sure the coaches model friendship and respect.

And then they let the children play.

After the warmup, they go back to their separate teams and they play hard to win for their school, their community, their neighbourhood. This is not some sentimental fantasy of peace where everyone wears the same jersey and pretends difference does not exist.

These are Jewish schools against Arab schools. Secular against religious. Wealthier communities

against poorer communities. Kids carrying the identities, loyalties, pride, and pain of the places they come from.

And they want to win.

Gavriel was clear about that. Competition matters, especially for children who need to learn discipline, resilience, confidence, and pride. The goal is not to remove competition from life. The goal is to teach children how to compete without hatred and violence.

That may be one of the great moral lessons sports can teach. You can play hard without dehumanizing your opponent. You can want to win without wanting the other person erased. You can be fierce and still be fair.

At The Equalizer, they give out what they call green cards. Yellow cards punish misconduct. Red cards throw someone out of the game. Green cards are given for acts of kindness toward someone on the other team.

At the end of the tournament, they give a fairness trophy. Gavriel said they make a big deal out of it. They give it last. They teach the kids that this trophy matters most.

I know that sounds naïve.

But cynicism has had a long turn at the wheel.

Boycott, exclusion, delegitimization, violence, revenge, all of that has been tried. Jews and Palestinians are still suffering. So maybe a little holy naïveté is not the worst thing in the world.

The haftarah for this week makes the point beautifully.

Saul is the new king, still untested, and Samuel is the prophet who anointed him but remains the moral conscience of the nation. In the section from 1 Samuel we will chant tomorrow, Saul wins his first great victory, and some of his supporters want revenge against those who had doubted him.

That is the instinct of the mob.

But Saul refuses. He says, “No one shall be put to death this day.” He will not let victory become vengeance.

Then the Prophet Samuel gathers the people at Gilgal to renew the kingdom, as if to say: now that

you have power, the question is what kind of people you will become with it.

The people could have used victory to deepen division. Instead, Saul, at least in that moment, understands that a nation cannot be built on vengeance alone. There has to be a moment when the fighting stops long enough for people to imagine a shared future.

That is what sports can be at its best: a small, temporary world governed by rules instead of rage. For ninety minutes, two sides agree to the same boundaries, the same whistle, the same clock, the same consequences, the same field. That is a kind of civilization.

One of the podcast hosts made a point that has stayed with me. For decades, Israel has not been

able to compete in its own region because many neighbouring Arab countries would not play Israel. Israel was pushed into European competitions instead of competing in Asia or the Middle East, where geographically it belongs.

And the host said, with both humour and seriousness, that maybe if Israel could play its neighbours on the football field, there might be less need to fight on the battlefield.

Of course, that is too simple.

But simple ideas are not always wrong.

The World Cup reminds us that human beings need outlets for tribal feeling. We are not going to eliminate loyalty, pride, or the deep human need to

belong to a people, a place, a colour, a flag, an anthem, a team.

The question is what we do with those feelings.

At the Canada-Qatar game, I found the Palestinian flags unsettling. Not because Palestinians should be invisible. They should not be invisible. Palestinians are real people with real suffering, real dignity, real grief, real aspirations. I believe that deeply.

But at a match between Canada and Qatar, the Palestinian flag was not there as a bridge. It was there as a provocation, one more reminder that for some people there is no space on earth where Jews and Israel are not put on trial.

A stadium that could have been only about the joy of the game became another place where the conflict entered the room.

But then I think of Gavriel and those children in Israel.

I think of Jewish children and Arab children learning each other's names. Bedouin kids and kids from Sderot standing on the same field after October 7. Coaches who know that the real game is whether these children can grow up with more courage, more restraint, more respect, and more hope than the adults who came before them.

That is the work Korach never understood.

Korach knew how to tear down. Moses knew how hard it is to hold a people together. Saul and Samuel

knew that victory without restraint can destroy a nation from within.

And a soccer field, at its best, can teach what our world desperately needs to remember.

When the game is over, the person on the other side is still a human being.

Canada won 6-0.

It was incredible.

But long after the score is forgotten, I will remember those three flags. I will remember the joy in the stadium and the sadness of seeing the conflict smuggled into it. And I will remember that somewhere in Israel, even now, children who have inherited too much fear are learning how to play

hard, compete honestly, and leave the field without hatred.

That is not peace.

But it is practice.

And practice, as every world class athlete will tell you, is how you become great. Our tradition would add: practice is how anything holy begins.