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The Ping Pong Player and the Professor



An Anthropologist Explores
Fatherhood and Meaning
in an Extraordinary Sport



Richard
Sosis

Endorsements page

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PLAYER AND
THE PROFESSOR**

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For my other tzaddikim, who have tolerated, sometimes begrudgingly but more often appreciatively, the amount of time I've spent with the youngest in our pack. And for my parents, who showed me how to raise tzaddikim.

It is the people not like us who make us grow.

– Jonathan Sacks

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Preface

“Could you please not use your hands when taking the green beans?” I ask, as calmly and politely as I am able, although my frustration at having to endlessly repeat such requests is surely evident. My children, I fear, hear my request as just another optional appeal. My eldest has told me that I may look scary—bearded and comfortably over six feet tall—but the moment I open my mouth it is obvious that I’m a pushover. Apparently, my voice lacks authority.

Authoritative or not, I can’t leave this breach of dining etiquette alone. I point out that the dish of sautéed green beans, a favorite among our family of vegetarians, has a perfectly functional serving fork that should be used.

“Yes, but Eliel was using it,” Naftali quickly retorts without looking up.

“Have we ever let you starve?” I ask rhetorically, or so I assume.

Naftali doesn’t hesitate. “Who said anything about starving? I just want my fair share before they all disappear.” Half a green bean is sticking out of his grinning mouth. Thank goodness he is so cute.

“Should we count the green beans out,” I offer, “like the way we used to share a pack of M&M’s when you were all little?”

“Brilliant idea Daddy,” Rivka, the one who thinks I’m a pushover, adds in a tone that conveys just the right level of sarcasm to elicit smiles rather than stern stares. But the siblings do indeed begin to count the green beans they’ve consumed, a little too precisely for comfort.

I can see we are at risk of heading down the rabbit hole that only parents know how to dig, in spite of ourselves. I often find myself at

the bottom of that hole, with my ego scathed and bruised, whereas my four teenagers always seem to know how to climb out unaffected. Attempting to distract them from obsessive counting, and the inevitable conclusion that the green bean distribution was unequal, I tactfully divert the conversation to safer territory.

“Eliel, how was school today?” Eliel, who is in eighth grade, hasn’t yet been possessed by the snarkiness demon that inevitably invades and transforms angelic children during their teen years. If I wish to avoid digging another hole, I know it is prudent to start this ritualized inquiry about their school day with the youngest in our pack. I speak from experience, possibly too much experience.

“There was an argument in Hebrew class today,” Eliel offers without the usual coaxing.

“A fight?” Aviva asks excitedly.

“No fight. Just an argument over sports.”

“Oh no,” I interrupt. “Not a Yankees-Red Sox argument I hope,” knowing that living outside of Boston our family’s sympathies in this rivalry are in the minority.

“No. In Hebrew class we are doing a unit on sports and Morah Katzenbaum asked how we would define sports.”

“Funny she should ask that,” I interrupt again. “In my *Anthropology of Sport* course I ask the same question on the first ...”

This time it is my turn to be interrupted. “Here we go,” Naftali mischievously smiles. “Prepare for a Professor Daddy lecture.”

Everyone laughs, although mine is a bit forced. Long gone are the days when my kids at least feigned interest in my anthropological wisdom. Parents and professors need thick skins to endure their lives of relentless critique. I could still use a few more layers.

Eliel continues. “In class Joshua said that you know something is a sport because you get exercise while doing it. Morah Katzenbaum

asked him for examples and Joshua said that soccer and basketball were sports. Ping pong—he didn't know the Hebrew word for it—was not."

"Did you correct Joshua?" I ask, knowing that Joshua had hit on a topic closer to home than I had anticipated.

"Of course," Eliel replies calmly, although given Eliel's easygoing and conciliatory nature, it certainly was not obvious to me that he would correct Joshua's misperception. "That's how the argument began. Joshua insisted that sports require movement and since you don't have to move to play ping pong, or so he said, it's not a sport. I told him there was plenty of moving in ping pong and it was definitely a sport. Everyone in class agreed with me."

As the youngest in our family, Eliel doesn't win too many arguments at home, so I was glad to hear that he got the better of this one. And I was particularly delighted that he stood up for *his* sport.

Despite Joshua's ignorance about the physical aspects of playing what he referred to as ping pong, his intuition about how to define sport was not far off from the definition of sport I offer my college students. Sports are organized competitions, although as I'll discuss later, anthropological investigations into sport show that our understanding of competition as having winners and losers is hardly universal. Sports differ from other types of organized competitions, such as games, because in sports the movements of competitors impact the outcome of the competition. This proviso—the manner and impact of movement—helps distinguish games, such as chess and Go Fish, from sports, such as hockey, gymnastics, and archery. Chess and Go Fish require players to move pieces and cards respectively, but the manner in which these movements are performed does not affect who wins or loses. As I tell my students, if someone else could perform the required movements without impacting the competition, such as moving your rook or queen, you are probably looking at a game rather than a sport. There are of course activities that blur and challenge these borders,

ranging from card games like Spit to human warfare. But as I'll note throughout this book, and as anthropologists have long appreciated, human activities don't fit neatly into boxes. Life is messy. Wonderfully messy, in my opinion. Yes, I've slipped into Professor Daddy lecturing mode, an experience my teenage children were, understandably, trying to avoid. In this book I am both Daddy and Professor, but as I'll explain shortly, much more the former than the latter.

Double Identities

It would be another year or two before Eliel's classmates and teachers would become fully acquainted with ping pong the sport, that is, table tennis. But by the time Eliel entered high school, many students, teachers, and even administrators actively followed his exploits in this previously unfamiliar world. When Eliel was away at tournaments, his teachers often permitted his classmates to check the tournament results online during class to see how Eliel was faring. And during important competitions, teachers occasionally canceled class so everyone could watch Eliel compete on the tournament live-feed online.

Table tennis has a double identity. On the one hand, it is an Olympic sport and one of the most popular sports in the world, generally ranking within the top ten on most measures of popularity, and within the top five in number of active players worldwide. Yet, competitive table tennis is virtually unknown in mainstream America and the intense physical demands of the sport are not widely appreciated, as Joshua made all too clear. Indeed, in the United States, table tennis is largely seen as a basement recreation or party game, best enjoyed if accompanied by beer.

Often its double identity is distinguished by using different names to categorize the activity: table tennis for the competitive sport, ping pong for the basement game. While many competitive table tennis players in

the US will correct newcomers, “This is table tennis, not ping pong,” in fact, ping pong is the name of the sport in China, and by all measures the Chinese are the kings and queens of table tennis the sport. But if we accept this distinction, then this book is about table tennis, that is, the sport, not the basement game.

In this book I have a double identity as well. On the one hand, I am an anthropologist, and part of what I do in this book is look at table tennis through an anthropological lens. On the other hand, I am a participant in the world of table tennis. Not only am I a former competitive player during my teen years, but I am the equivalent of a soccer mom, or what you might call a “ping pong pop.” That is, one of my children, Eliel, is a competitive player and I spend too many of my waking hours coordinating his table tennis activities.

Indeed, my double identity has delayed this book for years. As an academic I often juggle multiple projects simultaneously, but I was having trouble working on two books at the same time. One of the books I wanted to write was an ethnography of a table tennis community. Table tennis communities present so many interesting anthropological questions: When players from around the world come together to play, as they do in table tennis clubs throughout the US, how do they create a new table tennis culture together? How are the norms and discourse of these communities established? How do the norms of these communities become internalized? How do new players integrate into these communities? How do these table tennis communities foster personal meaning and identities? What are the stories table tennis players tell each other?

The other book I wanted to write concerned my experiences as a ping pong pop. Much of my life over the past few years has been consumed by my son’s training and tournaments. Many mothers and fathers have similar experiences as they dedicate their time to their children’s activities. But table tennis in this country remains somewhat

hidden, so I wanted to share my experiences, partially to introduce this hidden world to others.

The Talmud relates that a person who regularly gives charity (*tzeda-kah*) merits having wise children. I doubt I've been charitable enough to lend support to such a claim, but my children are certainly more grounded and levelheaded than I am, so I often consult with them for advice. One afternoon I shared my dilemma, my inability to effectively work on two books simultaneously, with my teenage daughter, Rivka. I explained the premise of both books and asked her for advice on which one I should pursue first. She sagely responded that I'd misunderstood the situation and asked the wrong question. It is not a problem to work on two writing projects at once; rather, in her opinion, I was stalling because I didn't actually have two writing projects to work on. She has read and enjoyed a number of ethnographies—one of the underappreciated perks of being the daughter of an anthropologist—and she said an ethnography that fails to include my place in the sport, as player, coach, and dad, would be incomplete and unsatisfactory. Rivka argued that my views and experiences as a ping pong pop were interesting because I often viewed the table tennis community through an anthropological lens. Due to my professional life, I can't help but see it any other way. Likewise, turning my anthropological vision on the table tennis community is surely influenced by my position in the community. I am not simply an "objective observer," as anthropologists once envisioned themselves. I'm a member of the community and my place in the community is impacted by my various roles and identities in life. My daughter concluded, "You only have one book to write so there is no reason for further delay." Sage advice indeed.