

# From Super Bowl To Super Jew

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*Alan Veingrad is the only person in the history of professional team sports to become a fully Torah-observant Jew. And he was not just any player, but a member of the Super Bowl XXVII champion Dallas Cowboys. Today he has traded in his helmet for a yarmulke, his uniform for tzitzis and his clean-shaven, all-American face for a long, graying Jewish beard. Instead of playing to the cheers of 70,000 crazed fans and millions of viewers, he travels around inspiring Jews of all types to take upon themselves a life of Torah and mitzvos. He is truly the stuff of champions...*



It was a hot summer's day in 1986. Alan Veingrad had just put in a full day's grueling practice, and he sauntered into the locker room of the Green Bay Packers, exhausted but in high spirits.

It still seemed like a dream. Just days prior, he had been an undrafted player from an obscure college. Then, suddenly, he was told he had made the team and was now a full-fledged member of the Green Bay Packers, the professional football team based in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Moreover, on the following Sunday, opening day of the NFL season, Veingrad would be starting at offensive tackle. This was a veritable dream come true. He had come from nowhere to make the football team and he was scheduled to start on one of the top teams in American sports.

Veingrad opened his locker and was surprised to find a note inside. It was from the Packer's receptionist informing him that someone named Lou Weinstein wanted to speak with him. There was a phone number scrawled at the bottom.

Veingrad didn't know a soul in this strange city, and the name Lou Weinstein meant nothing to him, but he was game. Maybe it was curiosity, maybe it was naïveté—or perhaps a touch of both, but he soon found himself dialing the phone number.

The elderly Jewish man who answered the phone was clearly thrilled to be talking to the young athlete.

"I've read about you in the Jewish papers," Mr. Weinstein told him. "I also read in the local dailies that you made the team. Congratulations! I'd love to meet you for lunch one day."

Veingrad was taken aback. "Excuse me, sir, but why would you want to take me out for lunch?"

For Alan, the fact that he was a Jew meant very little. It had been 10 years since he had last set foot in a synagogue, and his Jewish ancestry was something he never even thought about. But when a Jewish paper featured the names of five Jews who had made it to the National Football League,

Alan Veingrad's name was on the list. It was the first time the limelight had been focused on him as a Jewish football player and his Jewish religion indirectly became an issue.

"So, will you meet me for lunch?" Weinstein persisted.

What was this man after? Was it tickets to the games? Was it money? Maybe he was looking to strike some sort of business deal with him? Alan had nine dollars in his pocket. But in the face of the gentleman's persistence, he agreed.

Veingrad took down the address of the country club where his new "friend" was a member and several days later the two met over lunch.

Veingrad soon felt at ease and over a hearty meal, Mr. Weinstein told Alan about himself. "I am a local businessman. I own a shoe store, a clothing store, and various properties across the state. I want to know if there is anything I can do to help you and to make you more comfortable in this city."

Mr. Weinstein proceeded to offer him room and board in his own home, as well as a car to make it easier for him to get around the city. Veingrad declined the offer, but did agree to take down the phone numbers of people who could help him find an appropriate apartment and a car rental that offered decent prices and quality.

When the waiter had finished serving dessert, Mr. Weinstein nonchalantly turned to Alan again. "We will be celebrating *Rosh Hashanah* in two weeks. I hope you will agree to join me and my family at our synagogue."

"Lou Weinstein was not a religious Jew," Alan Veingrad – now Shlomo Zalman Veingrad—recalls. "But he was the first person to open my eyes to the exalted heritage we Jews have. He knew what the Torah said about the obligation of every Jew to reach out to another Jew." Shlomo Zalman smiles. "What he did that day was reach out to another Jew, simply because he was a Jew."

Two weeks later, Veingrad found himself heading to synagogue together with the elderly Weinstein, not far from the Packers' original home field, City Stadium.

It had indeed been quite a while since

Veingrad had seen the inside of any type of Jewish sanctuary. He knew the date of the Packer's Monday night game against the Chicago Bears better than he did the date of *Yom Kippur*. But as he listened to the prayers of the High Holy Days, the twinge in his heart was unmistakable, and he sensed that there was something missing in his life.

However, many years passed before he realized what that missing "something" was.

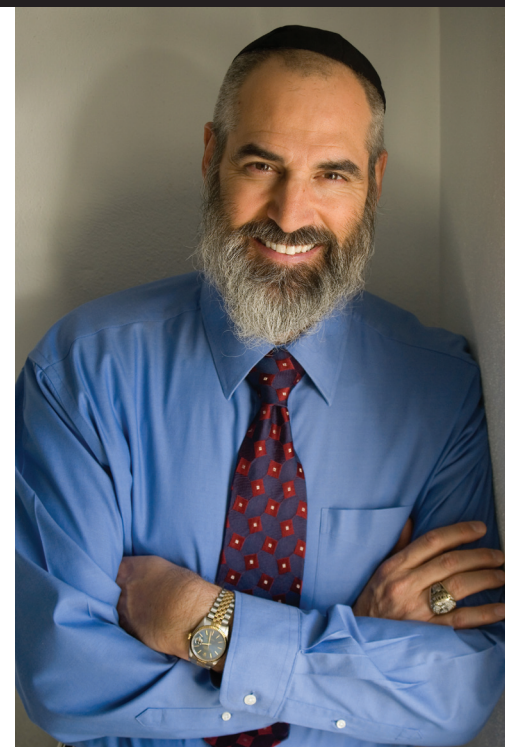
## Interview with an NFL Player

We live in special times. *Baruch Hashem*, there is no shortage of inspiring accounts of *ba'alei teshuva*, formerly unobservant Jews who have chosen to embark on a life of *Torah* and *mitzvos*. Their stories often fall into one of several categories. There are those who have experienced a loss or failure of some sort. Then there are those who have really hit rock bottom, having been addicted to drugs or alcohol or even having done time in prison. Others come from your typical, middle-class background and are going about their ordinary daily lives until something somewhere awakens that dormant Jewish spark and inspires them to begin living life on a more spiritual plane.

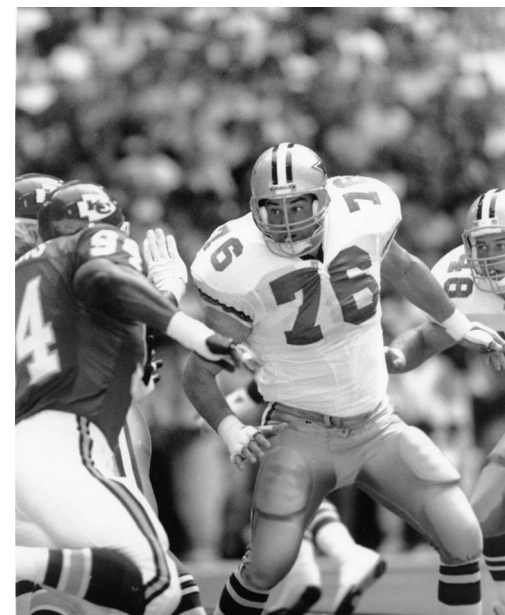
As inspiring as it is to hear those stories, it is something different when the returnee to Torah is not only a professional athlete, but a Super Bowl champion. Other than the election of the President of the United States, there is probably not a more watched event in America (or perhaps even the world) than the Super Bowl. Alan Veingrad was – is—such a champion. He reached the pinnacle of success, at least in the eyes of the secular world. And *Zman* is privileged to share with you the story of his unexpected turnaround, of his courage, faith, and incredible determination.

The man who once wore a football uniform, today wears a black *yarmulke*, sports *tzitzis* over his shirt and has a long beard. He eats only *pas Yisrael*, *cholov Yisrael* and meat from *Chassidische shechitah*.

Not long ago, a national news station featured a clip of Bernie Kosar, an



Shlomo Zalman Veingrad today.



Alan Veingrad playing for the Dallas Cowboys.

outstanding former NFL quarterback, staring at a current photo of his former friend Veingrad. He burst into laughter upon seeing the dramatic transformation that his former offensive lineman had undergone. Kosar wasn't so much making fun of his