

Foreman fights with his fists, mind

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The men of the Talmud had a name for themselves. These men, the wise men, the sages of Jewish law, would battle constantly with each other. Ethics. Behavior. Family. All points were open to debate and the men of the Talmud sweated and argued and struggled to find the truth in every nuance and tone, knowing all the while that the fight, the oral record that would become the blood and muscle of an entire people, was as important as the result.

They were soldiers of history. They called themselves ba'alei treisin, an Aramaic word that translates roughly to "shield bearers," or, more appropriately, "warriors." Their mission was heroic: They fought with each other for the sake of everyone else.

Now, those who train to become rabbis submerge themselves in the Talmud, and it is not enough to just read the arguments over things such as dietary restrictions and marriage and prayer. To become a rabbi, one must become a part of the battle. One must walk with the warriors. "In some ways," said Jonathan Morgenstern, rabbi at Young Israel of Scarsdale, "you get so deep into it that it becomes you."

Look at Yuri Foreman. Foreman is an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn who is in the middle of a six-year rabbinical studies program. He is also the super-welterweight champion of the world. Tonight, shortly after the sun goes down and the Sabbath is over, he will leave a Manhattan hotel and take a limo up to Yankee Stadium, where he will fight Miguel Cotto, showcasing a boxing style that is less brutal and more technical, less brash and more precise.

Foreman is 28-0 in his career, but only eight of those victories have come via knockout. Most have been epic, drawn-out affairs featuring jabs and parries and feints. For him, quick-hits are a rarity; he is a conceptualist, a boxer who fights around the edges so as to be certain that he is exposing the entirety of his opponent's strategy. While fans may want clarity and action and blood from their boxers, Foreman deals in shades and traces and hints. He massages a fight, running a foe through his fingers instead of squashing him with his thumb.

In other words, he fights like a rabbi.

"People so often turn to religion looking for answers -- the black and white answers to things they want to know," said Morgenstern. "More often, they find there are more questions than answers."

Morgenstern laughed. "In Talmud, it's very rare that you have a knockout of an opinion. It's almost always more than that. One side makes his case, then another makes his. And it goes on."

For Foreman, the parallel did not always exist. In Belarus, where he was born and began boxing lessons at age 7, and in Israel, where he moved at age 9 and continued to learn even though it meant training in Arab gyms, religion was not an equal priority. It was only after his mother passed away and he moved to the United States, that he met his wife, Leyla Leidecker, and stumbled into a class led by Rabbi DovBer Pinson in Gowanus.

Pinson happened to use a boxing allegory during his lecture, and Foreman struck up a conversation with him afterward that began a defining relationship for both men.

Pinson became Foreman's mentor, his spiritual guide. As he studies to be a rabbi, Foreman spends many of his days sitting across from Pinson, reading and debating the points of law in the Talmud.

"The traditional system of studying is one-on-one, someone on the other side of the table from you," said Gedalyah Berger, rabbi at the Fleetwood Synagogue in Mount Vernon. "You give and take, go back and forth. I'd imagine that's something he's very used to doing."

Foreman is not ashamed of his boxing style. It's his personality, his way. For centuries, Jews have addressed the goaf, or body, and the n'shama, or soul, "and there has always been a recognition that one has to take care of both," said Aaron Panken, who is a vice president at Hebrew Union College in New York.

That juxtaposition is, essentially, Foreman's existence. Today he will do as he always does -- resting, praying, respecting the Sabbath. He has been asked to fight on Friday nights before and has always said no, offering proper deference to Judaism's holiest day.

But then the sun will go down and Foreman will head up to the Bronx, to a cacophony of fans wearing the same Star of David around their necks that he will wear on his silk trunks.

He will enter the ring to the quivering notes of a shofar blast, the ram's horn that symbolizes his people's clarion call, and then he will fight against Cotto in the only way he knows how.

He is a warrior, one of the ba'alei treisin. It just so happens that sometimes he wears gloves.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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