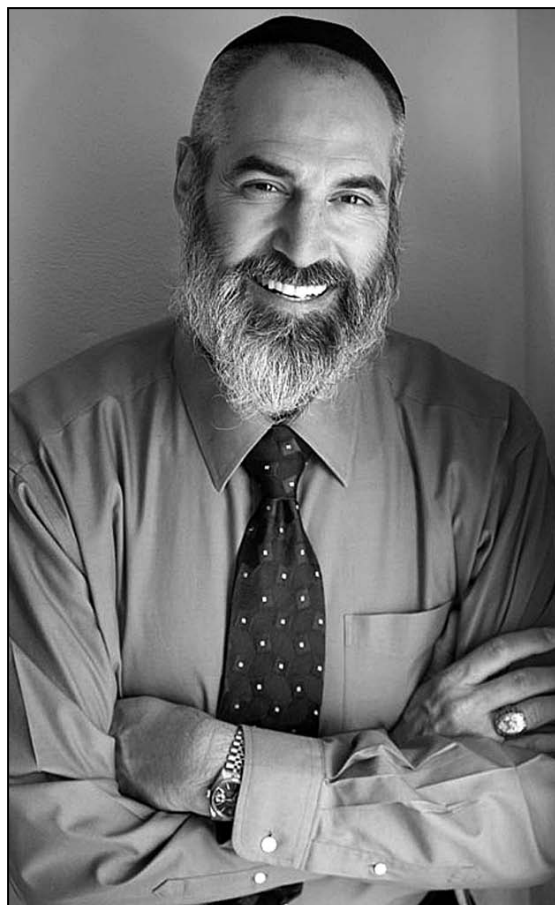




Alan Veingrad during his Packer days and today.



# Win one for the rabbi

## NFL vet goes on the road for Judaism

By Elise Kigner  
Advocate Staff

Alan Veingrad is one of those rare Jews who made it to the Super Bowl by way of the field rather than the stands.

But the offensive lineman found that his faith mattered more to his teammates than it did to him.

Admiring the strong work ethic of successful Jewish business people, players would say to Veingrad: "What is it with your people? What is it with the Jewish people?"

And he would be baffled. "My experience was teammates who had more an interest in me than I had in myself," said Veingrad, who played five seasons with the Green Bay Packers and two with the Dallas Cowboys – including 1992, when the team won the Super Bowl.

Flash forward nearly 20 years and Veingrad is once again on the road – but now with a kippah instead of a helmet and tzitzit instead of padding. Veingrad – who now uses his Hebrew first name, Shlomo – travels the world promoting Judaism. He will speak at chabads in Peabody and Swampscott on May 15.

Veingrad's appeal is not just his football background, but his journey from secular Jew to Orthodox.

"I grew up like your typical American Jewish person. Judaism wasn't a huge part of my life. It wasn't fun and it wasn't exciting," he said.

Born in Brooklyn, Veingrad, 47, grew up in New Jersey and Florida. He was bar mitzvahed at a Conservative shul in Miami, but the ritual meant little to him.

"The bar mitzvah was the exit out of Judaism, not the entrance

*'I believe I played in the NFL to take on the role I have, to be a spokesperson for being Jewish.'*

Alan Veingrad

into Judaism," he said. "After the bar mitzvah I went back twice a year, Rosh Hashanah on one day and Yom Kippur one day, if I went back at all."

It was not until 1995, two years after he retired from football, that Veingrad took a real interest in Judaism. He was living in Florida, where a distant cousin invited him to a Shabbat dinner. The cousin suggested he try out a Torah class given by an Orthodox rabbi at the home of a doctor.

For the first 59 minutes of the one-hour class, Veingrad just couldn't pay attention. His eyes wandered about the room, as he admired the doctor's furniture and decorations. In the last minute of the class, the rabbi looked straight at him.

"If you allow yourself to have a focus on materialism," he said, "you will never have any meaning or purpose in your life."

Veingrad went up to the rabbi, and they spoke about materialism and meaning, and what it all had to do with him. Soon the NFL veteran was attending the rabbi's weekly Torah classes.

Veingrad's family – he and his wife now have three children – joined a Conservative synagogue. There was still one problem: He liked learning Torah, but found services uninspiring.

Looking for an alternative, he met with the new chabad rabbi in Fort Lauderdale. "He was authentic, he was the real deal," Veingrad said.

Not only did he join the local chabad, but he started speaking at chabads around the world.

His message: "to embrace Judaism, to marry Jewish, to be an educated Jew, and to grow a little bit, to grow with your Jewish observance slowly."

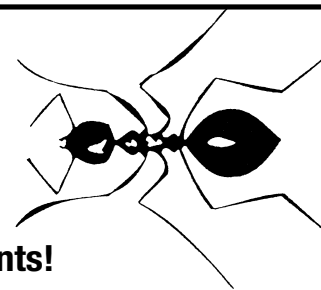
He also offers advice to budding football players: "I tell them that is great, if they have a backup plan. Then I'll say: Are you aware that today they are finding that playing in the NFL has tremendous negative side effects on your brain? Do you know that it takes years off your life? That the physical and mental struggles you go through upon retirement are extremely challenging and painful?"

Veingrad said he would never wish the injuries and pains resulting from his years playing football on anyone, but he does not regret his own path.

"I think I gave up a lot of things to play in the NFL," said Veingrad, who now works in financial services. "Certainly it was rewarding, and it opened up a lot of opportunities for me, and I believe I played in the NFL to take on the role I have, to be a spokesperson for being Jewish, for looking deeper into one's life."

*The North Shore events, which are free, are both on May 15. Veingrad will speak to teens at 1 p.m. at the Chabad of the North Shore in Swampscott and to adults at 7 p.m. at Chabad of Peabody. Visit nsjewish.com or jewish-peabody.com.*

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