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# From NFL player to observant Jew

**Jacob Kamaras**  
THE JEWISH STATE

Considered too slow to play college football, Alan "Shlomo" Veingrad altered his destiny by stepping in front of the line before running a 40-yard dash in a tryout for East Texas State University.

Though his time of 4.9 seconds in the new "39-yard dash," up from his 40-yard time of 5.3 seconds, earned him a scholarship and ultimately a seven-year National Football League career as an offensive lineman that included a Super Bowl Championship with the Dallas Cowboys, Veingrad said his move shouldn't teach that deceit is a proper way to achieve your goals.

Veingrad, who admitted his trick to coach Ernest Hawkins, said at Chabad of Manalapan Jan. 24 that from that point on, his persistence took the purer form of hard work like running until he threw up. The same attitude, he said, extended to his post-football pursuit of a life dedicated to Torah values and the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

"When I found out the Torah gave me the same opportunity (as football) to be the best person I could be, I said 'sign me up,'" Veingrad said.

Speaking in Manalapan marked a return to Central Jersey for Veingrad, who was born in Brooklyn but moved to Englishtown at age 3. Using his journey from NFL player to observant Jew as a motivational tool is now Veingrad's primary occupation, following real estate, outsourcing, and sports marketing ventures after his football career.

Veingrad's religious transformation began at a Shabbat dinner with cousin Dr. Jonathan Rubin in Miami. Initially confused about concepts like washing before eating challah — "What am I, a wide receiver?" he joked — Veingrad said he immersed himself in homemade Shabbat food and couldn't turn down Rubin's offer to learn in a Torah class, given that he consulted Rubin for seven years of free injury advice as a football player.

The class, with Rabbi Moshe Gruenstein, marked the start of a different seven-year journey for Veingrad. Gruenstein said at the end of his lecture that you can't have a meaningful life if your main focus is materialism, and showed Veingrad commentaries on how the Torah's message is relevant today. Suddenly, the history of the

Credit: Jacob Kamaras



**Joshua Cohen of Marlboro, age 10, receives a signed football from former National Football League player Alan "Shlomo" Veingrad at Chabad of Manalapan. To Joshua's right is his father, Russell.**

Jewish people wasn't the "long, boring story" Veingrad thought it was when he was younger.

Veingrad said he went on to internalize what he heard from rabbis, attend Friday night dinners, and spend Saturday nights lamenting how his friends could only talk about their next car, house, or vacation. Eventually, he said he heeded the words legendary basketball coach Pat Riley to "take a stand or you will be knocked over," and decided to observe Shabbat, wear tzitzit, and send his children to yeshiva.

"If I would've known how much that was going to cost me, I would've played another year in the NFL," Veingrad said.

With his long beard, Veingrad looks more like a Chabad shaliach (emissary) than a former NFL player. When he played high school football in Miami, Veingrad also didn't have the look for football, but for different reasons. At 6-foot-5 and 185 pounds, his frame wasn't suited for the sport, let alone the position of offensive line, which usually lends itself to bulkier players. There was also the issue of that 5.3-second 40 yard dash, since "you run north of a 5.0, and you don't play college football," Veingrad said.

In an attempt to save the day, Veingrad said his mother reached into her purse, erased the 40-yard dash time on his college football resume with whiteout, asked him what time he wanted to run, and penned in a 4.9. Only East Texas State (now called Texas A&M University-Commerce) responded to Veingrad's resume, and when he earned a scholarship there, he said his mother sent him off with cowboy boots because "6-foot-5 won't be big enough, so put on those cowboy boots and look 6-foot-7."

By spending time around offensive linemen, lifting heavy weights, and eating biscuits and gravy, Veingrad said he was able to bench press 400 pounds by the time he was a sophomore and run a real 4.9 in the 40-yard dash despite putting on weight. When he told Coach Hawkins his goals were to be team captain and make the all-conference and all-American teams, Hawkins told him to "sit back down" and make the NFL a priority.

"I put out of my mind that I can't play in the NFL," Veingrad said.

When they came to scout Veingrad, the New York Giants said they loved him because he moved well for his size, but that he wasn't wide enough to play offensive line for them. Veingrad was cut by several other NFL teams but didn't give up on his dream, and eventually got a minimum free agent contract with the Green Bay Packers.

On his locker, Veingrad discovered a note with the phone number of Lou Weinstein. At a lunch, Weinstein offered to lend Veingrad his car and let him live in his home, and when Veingrad refused Weinstein pointed him to a car dealer and a realtor — both Jews. Weinstein, who also invited Veingrad for a meal on Rosh Hashanah, understood that it's the obligation of every Jew in this world to reach out to a fellow Jew, Veingrad said.

After five seasons with the Packers, Veingrad's agent Steve Weinberg approached him about a contract offer from the Dallas Cowboys. At first, Veingrad said he was happy with the Packers, but Weinberg convinced him that moving to Dallas would be smart because the city's Jewish community was larger than that of Green Bay, Wisc. After all, Veingrad, then 29, dated just one eligible Jewish female during his time with the Packers.

Veingrad won a Super Bowl with the Cowboys after the 1992 season, and retired after deciding his enthusiasm for the game was subsiding and that he didn't want to put his health at risk anymore. Yet, when Judaism overtook sports as his passion, Veingrad said his father, Leo, could only reminisce about the football days, doing things like putting Veingrad's football card on the table for waiters to see at restaurants.

"They're on eBay, by the way, for three bucks," Veingrad said of his cards.

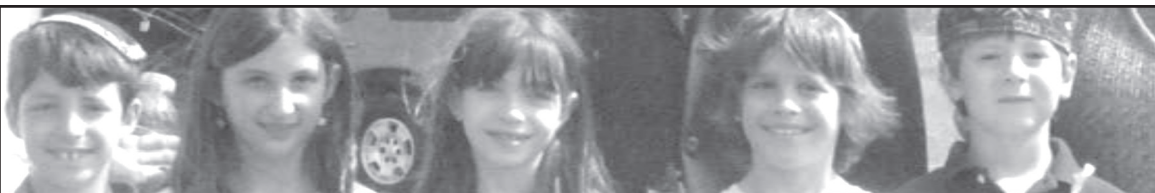
Though Leo was initially reluctant to attend synagogue, Veingrad said he brought him closer to Judaism with tricks like scheduling a father-son meal on Rosh Hashanah, making Leo come to shul for the meal. Leo went on to donate money to Veingrad's shul, attend services each week for a few months before his death, and tell Alan "Son, I was really proud of you as a football player with that Packers and Cowboys helmet on your head, but I'm prouder of you with the yarmulke on your head," Veingrad said.

Joshua Cohen of Marlboro, age 10, received a signed football from Veingrad in a raffle held after the speech.

"It was humorous and inspiring," Cohen said of the speech. "The ball is going to help me keep the memory of when I met Alan."

Joan Redding of Manalapan said she grew up across the street from the Veingrad household in Englishtown and was good friends with his mother, Marilyn. Veingrad doesn't look anything now like he did as a short, blond child, she said.

"I would pass him on the street and never know him," Redding said.



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