

Lessons of Olympic Proportions

Rosh Hashanah Evening
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Shanah tovah. Aaron and Eli join me in wishing each and every one of you a most happy, healthy and fulfilling New Year. As we take these High Holy Days to reflect upon the year that's been, may we find much to embrace and build upon for the future; strength and resolve to make changes where things did not go as we would have wished. May the new year be a good year for all of us.

Though we tend to scatter a bit before we reunite for these High Holy Days, it seems that many of shared at least one common experience this summer. Judging by the number of people who forwarded me articles and video clips of Aly Raisman – the Reform Jewish gymnast from Massachusetts – a great number of us tuned in for at least a portion of the summer Olympics. And what a treat they were, for the Jewish community in particular – even helpful for me as a rabbi. I am privileged to work with a number of individuals pursuing conversion. We study and reflect together, but I don't make them Jewish. Eventually we reach a moment where, in the words of my colleague and mentor, we "affirm what is already an essential reality" – that these individuals have developed Jewish souls. Naturally, I am often asked: How will we know when that moment has come? How will I know when I'm Jewish? Well, here's my new test: When, on a lazy summer evening, you're clearing dishes in the kitchen, Olympic gymnastics on in the background, and you hear the first few notes of Hava Nagila – (1) did you recognize it and how many notes did it take? (2) and second, did it send you flying to the TV, smile on your face, dish towel still in hand? If so, you'll know: You've got a Jewish soul. I think it's as true a diagnostic as any.

But even were there not a Jewish athlete of prominence to follow, there was so much to glean from the 16 days of Olympic competition. This year, I found three lessons especially compelling. They each emerged from controversial moments and issues specific to these 2012 games, but I believe are particularly relevant and powerful for all of us as we stand at the precipice of 5773. The lessons are these:

1. There are no prizes for the path of least resistance.
2. Advantage and disadvantage will always be relative terms.
3. Joy and sorrow must be allowed to coexist.

So first, **there are no prizes for the path of least resistance.**

It may not be the most followed sport, but did you happen to see the opening round of Badminton? You and I could play in our backyards – with a barely standing, not quite vertical net; drink in hand; pets and children running between our legs – and our performance would surely outrank some of what was seen in Olympic competition this year. Four teams (8 players total) deliberately threw matches in an attempt to draw weaker opponents in the next rounds of

competition – dumping serves into the net; not even trying. Ultimately they were ejected for, among other things, “not using one’s best efforts to win a match.” The punishment meant that the pairs, including the reigning world champions from China, not only wouldn’t be able to draw an easier challenge in the second round, but forfeited any future competition in these Games at all. Anything less would hardly have satisfied the great public outcry of disdain for their actions. Fans in attendance were booing what they saw, queuing up to demand refunds. They had come, after all, to see competitors give it their all.

Yet how often do we – you and I – also try to take the path of least resistance in our lives. It might be innocent enough – the declined invitation to a gathering where we might feel out of our league; begging to be excused from a position of leadership (or rendering our regrets in the first place); turning down a new opportunity, the chance to demonstrate some creativity, or go out on a limb, in favor of simply keeping the course, the path of least resistance. What must those efforts look like to the Great Spectator on High? Is it too much of a stretch to imagine God inquiring about a refund when we’re essentially dumping the opportunities served up to us into the net? At the very least, I imagine God turning away from the action, bored with the effort—or lack thereof—on display.

Could it be that our ambition simply doesn't reach far enough? There's a Chasidic story told of Aryeh ben Pinchas who took his little granddaughter into the synagogue. They walked down its center aisle, hand in hand, climbed up the steps of the Bimah, and stood in front of the Holy Ark. The grandfather opened its big heavy doors to show her the Scrolls of the Torah, clad in their velvet mantles. The little girl looked at them raptly, then back down the steps they had climbed, and exclaimed: "I want to go still higher!" Her grandfather smiled, bent down and kissed her, and said: "May you always want to go higher."

Could our lack of effort reflect a feeling that it's too late to try? Whether our days, or years, are long, we often say: Now is not the time. Then may we learn from Cato the Elder, who we are told began to study Greek when he was eighty. When asked why he was beginning so large a task at such an advanced age, he replied: "It was the youngest age I had left."

Or maybe it's simply our fear of failure. Yet, as Rabbi Louis Binstock once put it: "Failures are made by those who fail to dare, not by those who dare to fail." In 1908, at the first London-hosted Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin introduced an informal but well known motto that has since guided all competition: “The important thing is not to win, but to take part!” Were that we could make this our motto, too – mustering our nerve to push ourselves a little further, to take a risk; to replace a reflexive “no” with an enthusiastic, if anxious, “yes”. It’s OK to wonder if we're up to the challenge and harbor our doubts. When in life are results a foregone conclusion? That’s what makes it so exciting! There are no prizes for the path of least resistance, but when you make the effort and take part, the rewards commence from the outset.

Lesson number two: **Advantage and disadvantage will always be relative terms.**

One of the most enduring images of these past Olympic Games will most assuredly be the sight of South Africa’s Oscar Pistorius racing toward his personal goal of making the 400-meter

semifinals – and achieving it. Pistorius would leave the games without a medal, yet having achieved victories that simply aren't valued by bronze, silver or gold.

Oscar Pistorius was born without fibulas in both legs, and underwent a double-amputation below the knee when he was 11 months old. Fitted with carbon-fiber prosthetics called Flex-Foot-Cheetahs, he is a Paralympic gold medalist, and competed for the first time in the “able-bodied” Olympics in London – clearly another relative term, if ever there were one.

I was first introduced to Pistorius' story months before the Olympics in a *Post and Courier* column. The writer noted that many view Pistorius' accomplishments, not as a source of inspiration, but rather as a point of controversy.¹ He described concern as to whether or not the lighter weight and bouncing motion of Pistorius' carbon-fiber blades gave him an “unfair advantage” over other runners, and summarized the international testing conducted to determine as much. Ultimately it was decided that it all evens out in the end – perhaps these “advantages” are true, but there's also the considerable “disadvantage” of lack of blood flow and oxygen one has in natural legs.

I'm pleased that the findings enabled Oscar Pistorius to compete in the Olympics and thus provide encouragement and inspiration to so many around the world. What poise and dignity Pistorius showed throughout both testing and competition – he is as talented a spokesperson as he is an athlete. Yet I hope we can question the entire premise of the discussion... why *shouldn't* Pistorius' prostheses be able to give him an advantage? Is not the fact that all of his competitors have two healthy legs and he has none the definition of unfair advantage?

In 1904, American gymnast George Eyser won 6 medals in one day – including gold in the vault – competing on a wooden leg. Public support and excitement were extraordinary because his achievements came *in spite of* his disability. Overcoming a clear disadvantage qualified him as a hero. I wholeheartedly agree. But isn't it as heroic, if not more so, to simply not accept disability in the first place – to transform precisely that which might have held you back, *should* have held you back, into your greatest asset? To say that his engineered legs give him a competitive edge – well, why shouldn't they? 19th century minister John Fort Newton once said: "We cannot tell what may happen *to* us in the strange medley of life. But we can decide what happens *in us* – how we take it, what we do with it – and that's what really counts in the end. How to take the raw stuff of life and make it a thing of worth and beauty – that is the test of living."

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka's parenting manual, *Raising Your Spirited Child*, became a national bestseller by preaching a similar lesson. Now, I don't frequently read parenting books – not because I'm already an expert (far from it!), but because Eli doesn't read them and I find the advice far less helpful when he doesn't know how the books say he's supposed to behave. Yet I have found this one to be insightful, not only for parenting, but for our outlook on life, in general. She encourages us to take a different view regarding the labels we so often use and to reframe our perceived challenges as strengths. Consider the child whose teacher describes him

¹ “Amputee sprinter Oscar Pistorius: Source of controversy or inspiration?” *The Post and Courier*. May 24, 2012.

as stubborn in the classroom, she writes. At the next parent-teacher conference, his mother nods her head in agreement, but says, “We find him to be very tenacious at home, too.” Or the child without a volume switch: “She sure is loud, isn’t she?” someone will likely ask. And her father responds, “Yes, she really is dramatic, isn’t she? Let’s go outside where we can appreciate her more.”

This isn’t merely an exercise in semantics. Language and labels have power, and reframing “demanding” as “holding high standards”, “argumentative” as “strongly committed to one’s goals”, and “anxious” as “cautious” remind us that we don’t need to succeed *in spite of* who we are; rather our greatest successes can be achieved by *embracing* who we are. Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin once spent Purim with his teacher Rabbi Mordechai Lechovitz. In the middle of the meal, Rabbi Mordechai exclaimed: “This is a time for gifts. Reach out your hands and I will give you whatever gifts of spirit you crave!” The other disciples present asked for a variety of spiritual gifts and received them, but Moshe was silent. Finally, his teacher inquired: “Well, Moshe – nu? And what do you want?” Moshe replied: “The only thing I want is to serve until I deserve what I get.” Advantage and disadvantage – whether in the realm of spirituality, personality or physicality – are relative terms indeed, and it’s our own perspective that makes the difference.

And lastly, Olympic lesson number three, **joy and sorrow must be allowed to coexist.**

Forty years ago, at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, 11 Israelis – 3 weightlifters, 2 wrestlers, 1 fencer, 3 coaches, and 2 officials – were murdered in a devastating massacre that cannot, and will not, be forgotten. In synagogues around the world (including our own), the names of these 11 individuals were read before Kaddish during the Olympics. Individual teams and countries devised their own commemorations. Yet, despite substantial international urging and pressure, the Olympic Committee declined to remember these tragic murders with but a moment of silence during the Opening Ceremonies. Yes, there was a brief tribute in the Olympic Village – but it touched the *100 people* in attendance as opposed to the estimated *700 million* viewers who watched the opening broadcast. And, yes, there was undoubtedly antisemitism involved – as a Canadian Member of Parliament wrote to the IOC President: “It is not hard to infer – as many have done – that not only were the athletes killed because they were Israeli and Jewish, but that the moment of silence is being denied them also because they are Israeli and Jewish.”

But I’d like to reflect upon another rationale that’s been cited for omitting such a necessary and important tribute: The idea that remembering such a tragic event from the past would detract from the joyful spirit of the present. It’s a perception that seems to be gaining greater and greater traction in society today: To feel sadness is to wallow; to long for what was is to be ungrateful for what is.

Yet Judaism has never understood it this way – that joy and sorrow stand in dichotomous opposition to one another. Our tradition intuitively recognizes that joy and celebration are not dampened by remembering grief and loss – rather that’s the only way the former can be honest and real. Consider the fact that all of our most joyous festivals—Simchat Torah, Pesach and Shavuot – all include Yizkor commemorations. Jewish weddings conclude with breaking a glass – a remembrance that even as we celebrate, the world is still a broken place; that there are loved

ones no longer living, we wish could be with us in body as well as in spirit on our most joyous days. To allow joy and sorrow to commingle is the only way the former can be honest and real, and therefore reach it's fullest expression.

Each year Susan G. Komen for the Cure conducts 3-day walks in several U.S. cities and around the world. Thousands of men and women train and work to be able to complete the 60 miles each walk covers. (That's more than 2 marathons!) And their combined efforts raise millions of dollars for breast cancer research, screening and support. A win-win for healthy living. Inspiring virtually all of the participants is the memory of a loved one whose life was claimed by breast cancer, or celebration by and with those who survived the disease, or solidarity and support for those currently hoping and fighting that treatment might prevail. As they walk side by side, joy and sorrow join together on the course. They commingle on the faces of those who cross the finish line as they wish so many loved ones could have been present to share in their pride of accomplishment – all the while knowing that, had it not been for the ways in which cancer touched their lives, they probably would not have had the drive and resolve to attempt their feat in the first place.

In our new Shiva books we read: It is our tradition to say shalom, and not goodbye, for shalom is goodbye and hello and wholeness and peace all threaded together in one breath. In one breath we say goodbye – to a hand to hold, a kiss and a tight embrace; and in the same breath we say hello – to an ocean of memories and a rush of emotion, gratitude and sorrow, trembling and fatigue, laughter and tears ... all in one breath.² Anything less would be lacking.

Conclusion

I know my own window for Olympic competition has ended. I look at Eli and think ... well, maybe, if he decides he wants to – who knows. But I do know that three of the lessons learned from this year's games can serve us all well far beyond athletic competition. In the new year may we remember there are no prizes for taking the path of least resistance, and resolve to push ourselves, take more chances, measure success by giving it our all regardless of outcome. May we appreciate that advantage and disadvantage, ability and disability, even blessing and curse are always relative terms, and may we strive to find the perspective that views what lies before us most positively. And rather than stifling our sadness, suppressing our grief, may we give full expression to our emotions so that we can know happiness and joy in their greatest measure, as well. In these ways, may the new year be good and sweet for us all. Amen.

² *Mishkan T'filah for the House of Mourning* (adapted).