

The true message of the Olympics - humility

Rabbi Stephen Wise – Aug. 4 2012

(based on Rabbi Kaufman “we are for Israel” – July 27-2012 and Rabbi Reimer
“who won and who lost at the Olympics’ YK 5773))

The Olympic games in London this past summer were spectacular, watching athletes from all around the world compete in hundreds of sports. I have to admit that summer sports are not as compelling for me as winter sports, no Sidney Crosby gold medal winning hockey goal, but having said that I did enjoy watching rowing, swimming and the 100 metre dash, and even sports like Badminton and pingpong that I probably would never otherwise watch. I get a great sense of pride when Canadians win medals, and we seem to have cornered the market on Bronze medals. These London Olympics were a huge success in terms of avoiding violence or threats, for turning a profit, and entertainment by having the

Queen of England parachute into Wembley stadium and having the boy band One Direction perform on stage.

And yet I felt there was something amiss amid all the hoopla. Rabbi Jack Reimer put his finger on this when he recently wrote that “the Olympics were in many ways a profit victory but a moral failure”. I agree with him. I believe the Olympic planning committee and leadership failed in bringing a sense of global unity by refusing to honour or even acknowledge those athletes who were murdered at past Olympiads. Secondly I believe some of the athletes failed not in their performances but in their actions immediately afterwards.

I give my first failing grade to the Olympic heads for their glaring omission of even a mention of the

Israeli athletes who were murdered at the Olympics in Munich in 1972. It was 4:30 am local time on September 5th 1972, midway through the games, as the athletes slept, eight members of the Black September Palestinian terrorist group, carrying duffel bags loaded with assault rifles, pistols, and grenades - scaled a two-meter chain-link fence. The security was deliberately lax to promote a sense of inclusiveness and ease of access to the athletes. The terrorists came to the apartments in which the Israeli team was staying, killed 2 members and took 11 hostage. The world watched in horror for the rest of the day as cameras focused on the rooms and a terrorist emerged with a list of demands. The Palestinian terrorists demanded a plane and were allowed to transport the hostages to the airport where a German police rescue assault was planned.

It went terribly wrong and all the Israeli's were murdered while the terrorists escaped unharmed.

In the wake of the hostage-taking, competition was suspended for the first time in modern Olympic history and the next day a memorial service attended by 80,000 spectators and 3,000 athletes was held in the Olympic Stadium. Then the games went on.

This year, the 40 anniversary, it was assumed some sort of memorial or mention would be part of the games, to remind us of the human beings behind the athletic events. However the IOC refused, stating it would make the games political. Let me state categorically that the Olympic Games have never been free from politics.

In the 1936 Berlin games, the Nazi regime at first did not wish to allow Blacks or Jews to participate, but relented when threatened with a boycott of the Games by other nations. What a slap in the face to Hitler when African American sprinter Jesse Owens won the gold medal. In the 1968 Mexico City games, Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists on the medal podium in support of Black Power and civil rights. The Americans and Russians both held Olympic boycotts through the Cold War. To divorce the games from the reality of the world is impossible. The widows of the murdered Israeli athletes asked only for a moment of silence during the opening ceremonies but were refused. As famed historian Deborah Lipstadt wrote recently, "the reason is that Jewish blood is cheap". We can at least thank Bob Costas

on NBC and Brian Williams on CTV for taking a moment of silence and saying live on the air that we must remember the murdered Israeli athletes. Let us strive to remember the spirit of the Olympics, with people from all cultures, religions and nations competing and striving against one another for the thrill of competition, and value those whose lives were cut short before they even had a chance to compete.

My second failing grade goes to the young athletes who starred at these games, who trained and practice for years perfecting their bodies into efficient machines yet failed as role models in the moments after they won. Michael Phelps, a star American swimmer, won his 22nd Medal – the first person in history to accomplish that feat. But right after he won he declared, “I am now the best

swimmer of all time. I am the Michael Jordan of my generation and more. I did everything I set out to do and did it perfectly!” Is that the way an athlete, or anyone should talk? Not a word of appreciation to coaches, parents and teammates, not a tribute to the other swimmers in the pool he defeated. When a hockey playoff series ends, what happens? The players line up at centre ice to shake hands and congratulate each other. Usually an athlete will say how fortunate they are to win, as the opponents were excellent. Michael Phelps has never learned the meaning of humility.

Unfortunately he is not alone. Usain Bolt is undeniably the fastest man on the planet, two Olympics in a row winning gold in both the 100 and 200 meters. But after he wins he poses like a statue with his arms in the air, barely acknowledging the

other runners, even the ones that are also from Jamaica. What did he tell reporters? "I am now the greatest athlete who has ever lived". He may have won the race as an athlete but clearly lost the race to be a mensch.

American Carli Lloyd scored the winning goal over Japan in the women's soccer final. Of course it should have been Canada in the championship game, but as I watched her interview I had to wince as she said, "When someone tells me I can't do something, I decide that I am going to do it. That is what a champion is all about and that is what I am." She too flunked the character test. Isn't soccer a team sport? Weren't there 10 others players on the field that helped the team win? Of course these athletes achieved greatness on the field, but a true definition

of humility is not thinking less of yourself, its thinking of yourself less.

A world away sits a young man named Joel Dembe who Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps could learn from. I read about Joel in the Hamilton Jewish news. He belongs to Temple Anshe Sholom and represented Canada in wheelchair tennis at the London Paralympic games. Joel was born with a tumor on his spine that left him partially paralyzed. But even in a wheelchair he began to compete and is ranked 1st in Canada and 39th in the world. As 50,000 fans crowded into Wimbledon stadium for the paraolympic games, the true heroes competed. As Joel said in an interview, "its a lonely sport, especially in wheelchair tennis, you don't have your coach normally, its too expensive and you usually have to find a way on your own to win matches". His

mother Cheryl dedicated much time, money and energy to helping her son get to this level. "It started out fun, but its so important to him, he's met all these wonderful people and travelled the world. He had to take a year off from his job, to prepare, and spent his savings, but he deserves it, this is the pinnacle". That shows true dedication to a sport. This is the athlete that win or lose, would never declare he's the greatest in the world. Unlike Carli Lloyd, he truly did something that probably many said he would never do from the moment he was born with the tumor, yet Joel only said, "its a mental game". This sense of humility about the game and how difficult it is, is his crown of glory of a true champion, both on and off the tennis court.

One other athlete that deserves our commendation is Aly Raisman, a young Jewish girl

from Temple Shalom in Boston. Her comment after being the most decorated gymnast with 3 medals was to thank everyone around her, "Thank you to my amazing parents! Love them so much. So thankful for their love & support all these years. I couldn't ask for better parents." Aly performed her floor routine to Hava Nagilah and connected it to the 40th anniversary of the Munich Olympics. As her Rabbi Keith Stern told the Boston Post, "She's very proud and upfront about being Jewish. Neither she nor her family explicitly sought to send a message. But it shows how very integrated her Jewish heritage is in everything that she does." Her Olympics may be over, but it's a safe bet that the naches is just beginning, as she set a true example of performance and humility.

The other character champions this summer, weren't even in London, but participated in a worldwide event for the mind instead of the body. I'm talking about siyyum hashas, the party that concludes the study of all 63 tractates, 2700 pages of the Talmud, which takes about 7 and a half years. It took place at the Metrolife stadium in New Jersey where 90,000 people came and thousands more watched on broadcasts to auditoriums around the world including the Sony Centre in Toronto. It was estimated that around 250,000 in total participated in this event. In studying Talmud there is no competition, no first and last place. Instead its a communal experience. No one boasted that they were the best Talmudist. No one bragged how quickly they completed the cycle as everyone finished on the same day. Instead the people all said

the Shema together, praising god, congratulated each other and promised to continue and meet again in another 7 and half years. What a contrast, the celebration of the power of the human mind instead of the power of the human body.

What do the Olympics and Talmud parties have to do with Yom Kippur? Because this is the day we are supposed to take a long hard look at ourselves. To look at where we missed the mark and aim to do better. Yes, it's hard to resist the sin of arrogance. If you do something well you should be proud of it. However, we should try to resist the temptation to brag about our accomplishments, especially after winning great prizes or achieving high goals.

Humility is not easy to achieve but here are some keys to finding it. Remember that fame is fleeting. Today you might be the fastest runner or

swimmer in the world, tomorrow someone will break that record. No matter how great you are today, it passes. Does anyone remember who won the Olympic gold medal in swimming back in 2004? Neither do I. Days of celebrity are numbered and will soon be gone.

The next reason to avoid boasting is that we are not self-made. To get to the top we have parents who paid the bills and drove to practices and tryouts and tournaments in far flung places like Sarnia and Whitby. We had coaches who recognized potential and pushed a young boy or girl to succeed. There were donors who provided financial support and teammates who worked determinedly side by side. You might feel like a monarch standing at the podium but you'll be far better off by remembering those who helped you get you there. Like today

here at shul, someone set up the chairs, someone set up the microphones, the choir and Aviva practiced for hours all summer, Ingrid worked tirelessly in the office with forms and tickets, Cheryl and Alyse created a meaningful program for our children, someone's in the kitchen getting the food ready to break the fast. All the details make this shul look great and I am grateful. The greater the performance, the more people behind the scenes who helped that person get there, and the more humble he or she should be.

And finally we are humble when we realize we are all merely mortal. As Rabbi Jack Reimer wrote, today on Yom Kippur we wear white, symbolizing the burial shroud, to remember you can be here one day and gone tomorrow. That is why we focus on the preciousness and precariousness of our lives.

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you more like Moses or why weren't you like King Solomon or why weren't you like King David?" But when God appeared, rabbi Zusya was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you more Zusya?"

This beautiful story reminds that we are all equal when we stand before the gates of heaven. Whether we win a medal or not, we are all human beings. We should to be the best of who we are. That is what some of the Olympic athletes forgot this summer after their triumphs as they raised their victories above themselves, as though there were the greatest ever. That is what the IOC forgot when

they refused to honour the Israeli athletes who lost their lives. But its what Aly Raisman, Joel Dembe and the participants in Siyyum Hashas remembered, to be the best they could be and remember how they go there. We all seem to forget this sometimes in our time of success. That is why we are here on Yom Kippur to remind ourselves. To remember about those that came before us. To think about those that helped us get here. To be humble of your talents, be humble and thankful and wary of boasting and conceit. As the prophet Jeremiah aptly said, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, the strong man glory in his strength, the rich man glory in his wealth, for all I care about is kindness, justice and righteousness.

Let us all take these lessons to heart and may you be inscribed in the book of life for goodness, g'mar chatimah Tova.