# THE NON-OLYMPIC FLAME

*by Rabbi Avi Shafran*

All the pomp and glitter that attended the Athens Olympics this past summer, all the celebrated athletes and venerated ideals, obscured the true dark heart of the Games.

For although the modern Olympics are presented as a paragon of good-natured competition and a vehicle for global unity, their roots, stretching back to the ancient Greek Olympics, are gnarled and ugly.

In their original incarnation, the Games were fiercely xenophobic; only Greek-speakers needed apply. And their competitions could be beastly and bloody; the original Olympians were single-mindedly focused on victory, even at the cost of limb or life. That should not surprise anyone familiar with ancient Greek culture; in Hellas, death was an acceptable, even noble, outcome of competitive displays of physical prowess. The ancient Greeks did not subscribe to our contemporary notions of moral good or bad; those were bequeathals to the world from the Jews, whose beliefs puzzled the Greeks, and whose own rejection of Hellenism, as it happens, is at the core of what the Jewish holiday Chanukah commemorates.

What is surprising, and depressing, is that the modern Games, for all their life-affirming pageantry and paeans about the "spirit of friendship," possess a moral shabbiness all their own.

True, they may no longer feature events like the pankration, a form of extreme fighting that regularly saw competitors maimed or killed. And the primitive desire to utterly crush one's opponent that animated ancient Greek competitors is at least somewhat sublimated these days. But the egotism and amorality are still apparent; as is the antipathy for Jews.

Some still alive remember the summer Games of 1936 in Berlin, which Adolph Hitler exploited to help promote the Third Reich's image.

Many more recall the murder of 11 Israelis by Arab terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics - and how International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage boldly declared, after a one-day suspension of the competition, that "the Games must go on!"

This year, as it happened, there was a memorial service for those 11 slaughtered Israelis, at the Israeli ambassador's residence. Addressing the small gathering, the widow of one of the murdered athletes asked why, considering that the "whole Olympic family" had been attacked by the terrorists in 1972,

the participants were gathered in a private home and not at an IOC-sponsored memorial in the presence of all the Olympians.

The answer was not supplied, but it is likely not unrelated to the fact that when Olympic federation representatives gathered in Kuala Lumpur two years earlier to prepare for the Athens Games, 199 flags were flown, including the one adopted by the Palestinians, but Israel's was not among them.

Relevant, too, was the unpleasantness of Arash Miresmaeili, the Iranian judo wrestler who had been scheduled this year to compete with an Israeli but who, it seems, stuffed himself with food during the days before the bout so he would be disqualified for his weight class. Quoted in an Iranian newspaper as having "refused" to compete with an Israeli, he was awarded $115,000 by Iran for "sacrificing" a gold medal. The IOC, for its part, pretended that the entire episode was just the unfortunate saga of an athlete who neglected to count his calories.

There is no dearth of Israel-hatred these days in the world, nor of what most of it really is: Jew-hatred. But the particular Jew-focused animus that has accompanied the Olympics in modern times might serve as well as a reminder of something more fundamental: how diametric the essence of the Games is to the Jewish faith.

The Greeks' highest ideal was physical accomplishment; the Jews', moral. In contrast to the Olympic motto of "citius, altius, fortius" - "swifter, higher, stronger" - the Jewish credo was a simple, hopeful "holier."

The Hellenist worldview placed the human being on the highest pedestal. Nature was perfect and the human body and mind were its highest expressions. What "gods" were paid homage in Hellas were but actors in a sort of celestial soap-opera. The idea of an ultimate Creator, and that He expects self-control from His free-willed creations, was seen by the Greeks as just so much Jewish pollution.

In the second century before the Common Era, the Seleucid Empire sought to impose Greek belief on its subjects, including the Jews in Judea, who were ordered to abandon practices that seemed particularly antagonistic to Greek belief. According to Jewish historical accounts, circumcision, with its none-too-subtle message of man's imperfection, and the Sabbath, whose rest from work flew in the face of nature's ceaseless toil, were specific targets; as was the Jewish ideal of modesty, which the Greeks saw as the expression of unnatural shame over the human body.

Some Jews willingly accepted the new culture, and eventually became absorbed into it. Others, though, through whom Judaism persevered, resisted and eventually rebelled, establishing their independence from the Seleucids. Chanukah celebrates their refusal to abandon the Jewish ancestral faith.

In Jewish tradition, the Greek era is called a time of "darkness," a reference to its unenlightened worldview. The candles lit on Chanukah are meant to symbolize how, in the words of the Talmudic

rabbis, "a small bit of light can push away a large amount of darkness." And indeed, over the millennia that ensued after the first Chanukah, the Jewish vision of right, wrong and human responsibility has persevered over the once-ubiquitous Greek culture, which, at least in its original form, today resides only in museums and college courses.

The darkness that has yet to be banished, though, is the hatred for Jews that accompanied contempt for Jewish ideals. May that animus too, despite its current popularity, soon go the way of the pankration and Greek gods, forever exorcized by the small but powerful lights of Chanukah menorahs everywhere.

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