

OLYMPIC SUCCESS... OR FAILURE?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"When HaShem your G-d has cut off the nations from before you, those whom you are going there to inherit, and you succeed them and dwell in their land; guard yourself lest you be trapped into following them, after they are destroyed from before you, to ask, 'how did these nations serve their gods? I will do the same.' You shall not do this to Hashem your G-d..."
[12:29-31]

The Torah tells us that we are not to follow idolatrous practices. The *Ramban* [Nachmonides] says in his commentary that this passage is not talking about idol worship - but about using the methods used to serve idols, to serve G-d.

In general, we may look at the laws of idol worship, and congratulate ourselves on how well we're doing. Though I might have trouble with other commandments, I really can't recall bowing down to a statue, or serving up an offering to one!

But in the eyes of our Sages, there are many other practices that have the "scent" of idolatry, even if they aren't the real thing:

"Anyone who looks away from giving charity, is as if he served idols" [*Talmud Kesubos* 68a]. What is their proof? Our parsha! The Torah says, "Guard yourself lest there be a lowly thing within your heart..." [15:9], and earlier, "Men have gone out, lowly persons from among you, and have drawn the inhabitants of their city to idolatry" [13:14]. Just like the latter case is discussing idolatry, so too the former.

And there are other cases, such as "Anyone who has the trait of haughtiness, is as if he served idols" [*Talmud Sota* 4b], and "Anyone who mocks the holidays, is as if he served idols" [*Talmud Pesachim* 118a].

What do these three have in common? A rejection of G-d's influence on our lives, our connection to G-d. Obviously, one who mocks the holidays is rejecting these "remembrances of our departure from Egypt," the time when G-d established His eternal relationship with the Jewish people. One who fails to give charity expresses his belief that he has earned his money, and he can keep it - ignoring the truth that success is never guaranteed, and depends entirely upon G-d, Who has commanded us to give His money to others. Finally, one who is haughty and proud cannot have a

full recognition of G-d; if he realized how small he was in comparison, how could he be so proud?

So what do we learn from this? That when we lose sight of G-d, and place too much emphasis on our own, human accomplishments, that may not be idolatry - but it's certainly a step in the wrong direction. Why did I think about this, this week? Actually, it's related to current events, which I usually avoid discussing here. The Lifeline usually isn't a controversial piece (and I hope it isn't this time; I hope you agree). But I was really bothered by recent news, and recent articles.

How should we react to the following: We find a child with a special skill. We encourage him or her to develop that skill, by practicing for several hours each day. We may even place the child in a special school in order that more hours can be spent on practice. Is this a good thing?

Maybe so - it depends on the skill. If a child is a musical protege and loves music, then even if he (or she) will not be the next Yitzchak Perlman, he will still enjoy playing an instrument, generating music for a lifetime. We can debate whether it's worthwhile, but who knows how the child might benefit from the skill and discipline acquired?

But what if we insist that all the training is to perfect the body for a few days of competition? And all the training is not in order to find and develop one's true potential, but in order to demonstrate one's superiority to the others - by winning? And what if we work the child to the point of injury - and beyond - in order to win?

Obviously, that's insane. Obviously, we should condemn this abuse. Obviously, we should... applaud with the full volume of international hysteria every few years. Welcome to the Olympics. I need to put in an important disclaimer here. I do not mean to criticize the young athletes who have trained since early childhood. It's not their fault. The system, the coaches, and the parents - are ill.

How did I hear about this? [Promise - I didn't watch the Olympics.] Because a local Jewish journal ran an article on Kerri Strug, who ensured a gold medal for the U.S. Women's gymnastics team. How? By performing a terrific vault on a severely injured leg - further damaging her leg in the process. She accepted the gold medal wearing a cast, and will quite possibly never vault again. Yet the tenor of the article was "didn't this Jewish girl do a wonderful thing?"

No. I mean, yes she did something truly admirable, demonstrating real selflessness and dedication. But something is truly wrong with a system that called upon her to do something quite so insane. Because she succeeded, she's worth \$10-15 million in endorsements (no exaggeration). Had she collapsed a second earlier, she would have been "worth" much less in the eyes of the advertisers, perhaps not enough even to pay for the surgery to repair her leg.

And when I spoke with others about this, and read a few more articles, I discovered stories about other athletes, so badly injured that they were forced out of sports altogether - long before reaching their day in the lights.

I could not help but recall the Medrash about the Tower of *Bavel* (Babel). The *Medrash* says that the

people were so involved with the building that if a brick fell, they cried - but if a person fell and was killed, they didn't cry. To them, the building was far more important than the people. What is important in the Olympics? Physical fitness? Sportsmanship? People doing their best? Or winning the gold medal - at any cost - leaving the losers in tears?

Now in comparison, how should we react to those individuals who are so dedicated to Torah, Judaism, G-d and the Jewish people, that they study Torah for ten hours (or more) each day? Do we see mainstream Jewish journals celebrating the growth of day schools and advanced Talmudic institutes, which are ensuring the Jewish future while attaching their students to that which is of Eternal value? Or are we treated to articles by Jewish "leaders" who call these schools useless?

Fortunately - I hope - we know better. We know what is destructive, and we also know what has eternal value. We know who we truly admire - those who work to acquire Torah and Jewish learning, for "it is a tree of life to those who grasp it."

My thanks to my teacher, Rabbi Moshe Silberberg shlit"a, for helping me to formulate this week's Dvar Torah.

Text Copyright © 1996 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.
The author is the Director of Project Genesis.