



*Parshat V'etchanan*  
August 20, 2016 — 16 Av 5776  
**Going for Gold:**  
**Wrestling with the Contradictions of the Olympics**  
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On this Shabbos of comfort, I find myself conflicted.

On the one hand, when the Olympics start and my newsfeed fills with stories of incredible human accomplishment; videos of teenagers and young adults doing fantastic acrobatics and feats of strength, I am in awe. I love reading stories about people who have succeeded against the odds. People like Lars Grael, a two-time Olympic medalist who was considered one of the top sailors in the world 20 years ago, before a freak accident cost him his leg. Grael refused to allow his injury to dictate his life, and returned to competitive sailing—he was a world champion in the star class in 2015. But Grael did not stop there. He chose to open a sailing school for state-educated children in Brazil. This year Grael competed with one of his students, world champion Samuel Goncalves.

People like Yusra Mardini, an 18-year-old who developed a love of swimming in Syria, despite the constant threat of violence and swimming practices interrupted by bombs in the pool. When Yusra fled Syria with her sister, she found herself on a tiny inflatable boat packed with refugees who couldn't swim. Passengers began to panic when they reached the open sea and the boat began to take on water. But Yusra and her sister jumped in, together with two other refugees who knew how to swim, and pushed that flimsy boat to the shores of Lesbos, Greece. Now, Yusra is competing on the first ever Olympic refugee team. In an interview posted by the International Olympic Committee Newsroom, she says, "When you have a problem in your life, it doesn't mean you have to sit around and cry like babies or something. The problem was the reason I am here, and why I am stronger and want to reach my goals. So I want to inspire everyone that [they] can do what they believe in their hearts."

I could go on and on. Watching American athletes like Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, and Ally Raisman has been incredible. Seeing the public discourse engrossed in stories of human accomplishment and international sportsmanship has been a wonderful balm for the ways

in which news about ISIL and terrorism, political turmoil and environmental catastrophe, have dominated the news-stream and worn away at our hearts.

But even as I watch these phenomenal events and brilliant videos, even as I read the incredible stories of the individual athletes, I feel conflicted. Because despite the inspiring stories of success, the Olympics have come at a cost.

When the location of these summer games was being decided, Brazil threw their hat into the ring despite crippling economic crisis. The government promised the world that hosting the Olympics would help them to build better infrastructure. They claimed they could solve the problem of non-existent water treatment facilities and stop the sewage and toxins leaking into the waterways. They promised to quell gang violence and prevent petty street crimes. But, in the end, they could not fully deliver.

Instead, troops were brought into the favelas, the shanty towns, where they set up oppressive guard towers, putting residents on lock down and responding violently to local gang activity. The government garnered retirement checks and the salaries of its employees to help cover the costs of the games. At one point, unpaid police officers met tourists at the airport with signs reading “welcome to hell.” Adding insult to injury, the government built colorful walls to hide the poverty and hopelessness of the slums from the eyes of the Olympic Village. Many hoped that the Olympics would motivate recovery and healing in Brazil, but instead, resolution seems farther away than ever. As one 64-year old favela resident, Marie Auxiliadora, reported to the New York Times, “I am so upset. I have not gotten my retirement check for a month. Our hospitals and schools are broken. Shooting every day, and they spend all of our money on this Olympics. The rich play, and we die.”

There have been several articles written about living conditions in these favelas, and since reading them, I have been haunted by the images of those slums. By the pictures of all the people who are struggling each day just to survive, who dream about having enough food or a place to live which doesn't reek of sewage. People who are standing at the edge of an economic desert looking over into the Promised Land of the Olympics with its extravagant wealth and abundance—people who know they may never make it out beyond that wall.

And this is exactly why I feel conflicted. I know the Olympics have been a force of good in the world. And I also know that the Olympics have been hosted at the expense of Brazil's most vulnerable.

How can I benefit from the entertainment of the Olympics when I know the games have amplified violence and beggared an already struggling economy? When I read a story or watch an event, am I complicit in the oppression of the Brazilian people? Is it possible that despite the suffering these games have caused, the Olympics have Torah to teach us?

Perhaps the Olympics teach us to tune in—to tune into the incredible feats of human achievement. To see what it looks like for people to do the impossible with style. To know that just as Simone Biles can execute a perfect floor routine and just as Michael Phelps can swim faster than anyone else, we have the ability to exceed our own expectations and to do more than we've ever imagined possible.

But the Olympics also invite us to tune into the pain and brokenness which exists in the world around us. To feel the plight of the people in the favelas; people who, like our ancestors, languish in poverty and dream of a Promised future.

We can't fix the moral bankruptcy of the Olympics by watching them from Boston or even by boycotting them. We can't fix the poverty in Brazil's favelas. But, we can choose to harness our inner conflict, to feel the brokenness in the world, and to commit ourselves to living lives of moral integrity.

Just as we've opened our eyes to the pain and suffering underneath the colorful magic of the Olympics, we can choose to open our eyes to the pain and suffering which exists around us here in Boston. We can choose to be God's agents on the scene, working to heal the world. We can choose to, as we say in the Aleinu each and every day, "l'taken olam b'malchut shadai" to heal the world with the power of and in service to the Holy One of Blessing. We don't need to commit ourselves to finishing the work or to finding all of the answers. As Rabbi Tarfon taught, "lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor," we aren't required to complete the work, but we sure do need to start.

In the late 90s, Roseanna Means was a primary care doctor who dreamed of bringing heart-felt medical care to war-torn residents of Cambodia and South America. She hoped to give

her three sons, who were growing up in Wellesley, a vision for how to be an agent of change in the world. But as she prepared to move abroad for a year of service, she started to notice that there were hundreds of local Bostonians who were living like refugees in their own cities—people who had no possessions, no homes, and who struggled with many of the same health challenges you might expect from residents of a third world country. She was particularly struck by the unique needs of Boston’s homeless women, nearly 100% of whom have been assaulted at some point in their life, for whom post-traumatic stress presents a serious barrier to medical care.

She began walking the streets of Boston armed with her medical bag, socks, cough drops and Tylenol. She would seek out women in need, offering them medical care and connections to drug treatment facilities and medical specialists. She would try to convince them to sleep out of the cold, recommending organizations which could help them find housing and a job. The need was overwhelming.

In 1998, she founded Women of Means, an organization which aims to provide quality health care, education, and advocacy to women who are poor, homeless, or marginally housed. Now, Roseanna is joined by 16 volunteer female doctors who together provide more than 10,000 free healthcare visits annually. In addition to direct support, her organization provides training for more than 100 medical students and has become a model for innovative and transformative health care around the world.

Like Roseanna, we must open our eyes to the brokenness in our world. We can’t change what has happened these past weeks in Rio, but we can make sure that the story that is told about Boston is a story of healing, justice and hope. The Olympics are almost over, but our true work has only just begun.

Shabbat shalom!

Want to read more? Here are some of the articles I’ve been reading:

<http://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/36683254>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/06/03/rios-symbol-of-hope-the-incredible-stories-of-the-worlds-first-olympic-refugee-team/>

<https://www.olympic.org/news/the-inspirational-olympic-journey-of-refugee-swimmer-yusra-mardini>

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/sports/olympics/rio-games-highlight-problems-model.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/sports/olympics/rio-games-highlight-problems-model.html?_r=0)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/15/sports/olympics/rio-favelas-brazil-poor-price-too-high.html?emc=eta1>