

## **The Joy of Judaism: Yom Kippur 5773 (2012)**

*By Rabbi Michael Schwab (written for speaking purposes)*

*Shanah Tovah* and *Gmar Tov*! Did any of you watch the Olympics this summer? I definitely watched what I could. I always find the Olympics to be a fascinating joyous occasion: the gathering of talented athletes from around the world, all in one place, in the spirit of human fellowship. We follow their stories, their ups and downs, successes and defeats. Thus, for me, the Olympics is both *personally* touching and *magnificently* grand at the same time.

In that sense, this year's Olympics did *not* disappoint –we witnessed astonishing displays of athleticism, the breaking of world records and lots of personal drama. And who can forget the moving opening scene in which thousands of athletes entered, behind the flags of their countries? Or the sight of James Bond and the “Queen of England” parachuting into the stadium together?

Yet, despite the great potential for the Olympics to serve as the uplifting world event I think it *should* be, there was a great deal about the Games this year that troubled me. Some of the hallmarks of the Olympics, as an international event of peaceful competition, are sportsmanship,

fellowship and mutual respect. There is indeed something reassuring that peoples of all countries, ethnicities and backgrounds can peacefully participate together in such a positive event. Yet, this time the Olympics fell short of achieving these ideals. Due to the behavior of some of the athletes, as well as the decisions of the Olympic Committee, amidst the spirit of unity, there was also sadly a spirit of indifference, divisiveness and enmity.

One aspect of this problem was illustrated in the interviews with some of our greatest athletes *after* their victories. Their comments were not exactly cut from the same stone as the ideals of the Olympics. As Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby remarked, any sense of *humility* or *camaraderie* was notably *absent* from the reflections of these young athletes. As I said on Rosh Hashanah Eve, CS Lewis wrote that humility, doesn't mean thinking less of yourself. It means thinking of yourself, less. But as Jacoby points out, after Carli Lloyd scored the goals that lifted the US Olympic women's soccer team over Japan in the gold medal match, thinking of herself, less, was decidedly *not* on her agenda. Her first comments after her team's win were, "When someone tells *me I* can't do

something, *I'm* going to always prove them wrong. That's what a champion is all about **and that's what I am -- a champion!"** How about Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt? After his impressive gold medal wins in the men's 100- and 200-meter races, he engaged in a frenzy of attention seeking behavior and said, "I'm now a **legend**. I'm also the **greatest athlete to live.**" While Michael Phelps steered clear of Bolt's spotlight-seeking antics, he too reached for singularly *immodest* language after winning his 22nd Olympic swimming medal. "You know what," he said, "I've been able to become the **best swimmer of all time**", describing his successful drive to become the "Michael Jordan of swimming". "*I did everything I wanted to*", he concluded.

Me, me, me. -- Not a word of thanks from any of them. Nor appreciation for their coaches, parents, or even teammates. Not a word of tribute to the other athletes whom they defeated. It was as if their victories were only reflections of themselves; accomplished only for their sake. What about for their team, their country, the world? This was the Olympics!

“Even in a society fixated on fame and self-esteem, there is nothing admirable about anyone whose first instinct is to sing his own praises”, Jacoby writes, “To be sure, showboating narcissists can go far in the world. They may amass money or power or star in their own reality show. Yet an exaggerated sense of self-importance is **not the same as greatness**. No one can be great who can't be humble, and humility begins with the understanding that it's not all about you.”

For a context of contrast take Sergeant 1st Class Leroy Petry, a US Army Ranger. Last summer he became only the *second* living soldier since the Vietnam War to receive the Medal of Honor. During a harrowing firefight in Afghanistan, he had saved the lives of at least two men in his unit by lunging for a grenade before it could kill them. It exploded in his hand, which he subsequently lost. Yet Petry doesn't trumpet his heroism or brag about his courage. "It's not courage," he said when interviewed. "It was love. I looked at the two men next to me that day and they were no different than my own children or my wife. I did what *anyone* would have done." Anyone? Carli Lloyd, Usain Bolt, and Michael Phelps flaunt their

Olympic gold and tell the world how great they are. While humbly deflecting the spotlight, Sgt. Petry's true greatness shines ever brighter.

Of course, I say in all fairness, that many gifted athletes are still models of grace and good manners. And even the athletes I mentioned, at other times in their careers, or perhaps even at different times during this Olympics, may have presented themselves in another way. However, as I watched the recent Olympics, it was striking to me how many athletes were so focused on themselves to the exclusion of even mentioning opponents, teammates, coaches or other supporting staff. It was a bit disturbing to witness how much, in this focus on *themselves*, they *forgot* about what the Olympics represent and what their participation meant to their country, to the communities to which they belong and to the world as a whole.

Yet, there was at least one young woman at the Olympics who did **not forget**. Whose greatness was found not only in her athleticism but in her *leadership*. Her name is Aly Raisman. Raisman was the captain of the US women's gymnastics team. She won two gold medals and a bronze and became the first American woman to win gold for her floor routine.

Yet, what made her performance even more outstanding, beyond the realm of athleticism, was the statement she made to the world *with* it. She performed her winning floor routine on the *international* stage to the tune of “Hava Nagila”, the most universally known Jewish song, proclaiming to the world her unabashed pride in her identity as a Jew. When asked why she chose to perform to “Hava Nagila,” she simply said she was proud to be Jewish and she wanted to **represent her heritage at the Olympics**.

When so many were focused on themselves she understood the importance of her performance not only to herself, not only to her team (and there were a number of articles on what a caring teammate she was), not even only to the United States but also to her world-wide *Jewish* community.

But her merits go beyond this – in the spirit of the Passover Haggadah we would say, “it would have been inspirational enough” had a young eighteen year old Jewish girl danced her gold medal routine in the Olympics to *Hava Nagilah* and given us all *naches*, great Jewish pride and joy, and granted our people a voice and a presence in a world ever more hostile to us. Yet, she did more.

As many of you know it was the fortieth anniversary of the massacre of the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. In 1972 eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team were captured during the Games and were subsequently killed by the Palestinian group, Black September. It was a devastating tragedy for Israel and for the Jewish community as a whole. An international coalition, including the State of Israel and the US Congress, requested that an official moment of silence take place during the Olympics this year in their memory. The Olympic committee shamefully *rejected* the request, to the astonishment of many, and did not even reconsider after great protest, including from our own president.

Yet, Aly did *her* best to correct this wrong. When her routine was over and her gold medal was announced in an emotional display she publicly dedicated her performance to the memory of these slain Israeli athletes on the world stage, giving honor to them as individuals as well as to our people. As Jordana Horn, a Jewish author wrote, “Aly, you showed the world that *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel – despite all those who would wish us dead—not only live, but thrive. You showed the world that you would *speak* when it would have been far easier for you to **revel in**

**your own personal triumph and remain silent.** You showed the world the *right* thing to do. Your value and values are worth far more than . . . gold”. Aly Raisman showed the world the power an action can have when it is tied, not just to the self and to personal glory, but to cherished values, to uplifting a beloved community and to doing what is right. She gave honor to the memories of *others* who were killed for no other reason than they were Israelis and Jews and she did so despite the decision of the Olympic committee. She did so even when many of her fellow athletes were only thinking of themselves. And she did so out of a deep love for her Judaism and for the Jewish people.

What she probably could never have anticipated was the incredible reaction so many had to her honorable act of bravery, which demonstrates how powerful and full of resonance, principled selfless deeds truly are. For example, The New York Post ran a huge cover article about Aly with the Star of David as the backdrop. Her quotes, far from being about herself, were about what her medal meant to her family, her team, our country and to her Jewish community. The author, not a Jew, praised her for her dedication to her heritage and for standing up to the Olympic

Committee by dedicating her medals to the victims of the Munich Massacre.

There are also thousands of posts from people of all backgrounds on Facebook, calling Aly, “inspiring” and “a real hero”. One mother wrote, “May this teenage girl continue to stand up for what is right. She has the ability to **inspire** the next generation against bullying and hate.” Another posted, “I think we need to applaud when a young person -- especially someone who could understandably be blinded by the **glorious moment of the present** -- takes the time and thought and fortitude to commemorate and respect **the past**. This is the kind of person I want my daughters and sons to see as a role model”. Or, how about, “Aly Raisman defines the word "mensch" . . . her self-respect and Jewish pride are exemplary. . . She restores my faith in a brighter tomorrow”. And finally one that was particularly touching: “I am a Holocaust survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, five different concentration camps, a death march and I am also a Veteran of the Korean War. And with tears in my eyes I couldn’t be prouder of being Jewish while seeing you perform and be interviewed and expressing your thoughts so **unselfishly**. You are a Jewel”. Now that is a

compliment. Clearly, Jews and other fellow Americans, were inspired by her ability to look beyond herself, to see the importance of her heritage even at such a young age, to have joyous pride in her Jewish identity and to resist the pressures to self-aggrandize and instead use *her* moment to do the right thing for *others*.

As you can imagine, her actions also reached across the world and had a particularly profound impact in Israel. In fact, the Israeli Minister of Diaspora Relations, Yuli Edelstein, wrote her a public letter of gratitude in tribute to her conduct at the Olympics. He wrote, “I am sure you know that beyond your wonderful *personal* achievement, you also brought great pride to *millions* of Jews in Israel and around the world. For me personally . . . hearing why you chose the song made me realize that the concept of *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh* [All Jews are responsible for one another] still holds true and that the Jewish people remain *united* no matter how far apart we may live. I was impressed that someone so young made such a monumental, **ethical** decision.”

On an emotional level, perhaps even more powerful, at least for me, was a note posted on Aly’s Facebook page by a young Israeli soldier. It

read, “Dear Aly, I want to tell you about how you became the *hero* of a gym full of Israeli soldiers. The same Israeli soldiers who have to deal with Iran's nuclear threat to the Jewish state. The same ones who serve two-to-three years of their lives . . . because there's no one else that would do it besides us . . .

You picked a song for your floor routine in the Olympics that *every* Jewish kid knows, whether their families came from the shtetls of Eastern Europe, the Asian steppes of Azerbaijan, the mountains of Morocco or the Kibbutzim of northern Israel. It's that song that drew almost everyone at the Israeli army base gym to the TV . . . After showing your floor exercise to *Hava Nagila*, the announcer talked about your gold medal with unmasked pride, and of your decision to dedicate it to the Israeli athletes who were killed in the Munich Olympics in 1972.

There were some tough people at that gym, Aly. . . You probably understand that words like 'bravery' and 'heroism' carry a lot of weight coming from them, as does a standing ovation (even from the people doing ab exercises.) There was nothing apologetic about what you did. For so long we've had to apologize for who we are: for how we dress, for our

beliefs, for the way we look. It seems like the International Olympic Committee wanted to keep that tradition. Quiet, Jews. Keep your tragedy on the sidelines. Don't disturb our party. They didn't count on an 18 year-old girl in a leotard.

There wasn't one person at the gym who didn't know what it was like to give back to our people, not one who didn't know what happened to the good people who died in 1972, not one who didn't feel personally insulted by their complete neglect in the London Olympics, the 40 year anniversary of their deaths, and not one who didn't connect with your graceful tribute in their honor. Thank you, for standing up against an injustice that was done to our people. -- As I was walking back to my machine at the gym, I caught one of the officers give a long salute to your image on television. I think that says it all. -- Sincerely, Dan Yagudin - Officer, Israeli Defense Force.”

Each time I read that letter I am moved. I am moved by the image, the unexpected juxtaposition, of a tough Israeli soldier in uniform saluting an American Jewish girl in a leotard. I am moved because a member of our people showed such strength and character in such a public way on an

international stage. I am inspired by the power of an act that reaches beyond the glory of personal achievement, enacted by a young girl who used a moment of individual satisfaction to honor the lives of others, whose memories are held dear by people she does not even know, who died well before she was born. I was touched by her feeling of connection to her past and to her heritage. The way in which her identity as a Jew was a source of pride and joy and acted as an inspiration for her as she demonstrated such impressive leadership.

So often, in history, as in current times, Jews or Israel are castigated. We are criticized, marginalized or worse. The effect of using *Hava Nagilah* and declaring herself to the world as not only an American, but as a Jew, uplifted many of us around the globe -- especially in light of the fact that the memory of the victims of the Munich massacre were ignored. Her dedication of her routine to them, showed a bravery, sensitivity and maturity that was very impressive. It was an act that displayed leadership and meant more to so many, than any of the gold medals won at the games. And it made me not only proud that *she* is a Jew but it reminded me of how important my Judaism is to *me*.

And therein lies the deeper power of her action; it's inspirational quality. The fact that what *she* did made *me* appreciate my own Judaism, made *me* treasure *my* heritage all the more. And in this realization we learn another lesson from her leadership – the power of self-respect and the might of value based actions carried out in joy. Every image of Aly exuded positivity -- her constant smile, the bounce in her step, her choice of song, not just for its Jewish link, but for the content of the words, as well. *Hava Nagila* – “Come Let *us* dance and be merry, let's whirl and be happy.” When she spoke of her song choice and her dedication, she spoke not in the harsh tones of defiance, which she could have, or in anger, which would have been understandable. Instead, she spoke in joy and appreciation. She saw her dedication as an opportunity for which she was grateful. Her floor routine was thus a *celebration*: of both gymnastics and Judaism. Her bravery, maturity and integrity all reflected her pride and joy in being a Jew.

In fact, the joy of it all, I believe, was what gave her the strength to do what she did. She was not guilty or *forced* into doing it; it sprang from her naturally in a joyous and organic way. When interviewed, she said that

her choice of *Hava Nagila* was not an intellectual choice strategized to have a certain effect. She simply said, “I am Jewish, that is why I wanted that floor music”, as if it was that obvious. Aly reminded me, and should remind all of us, of the power of approaching Judaism in joy and of all the positives that can flow from embracing our tradition. With joy, and pride in her identity as a Jew, she somehow turned an act of the Olympic committee that bordered on anti-Semitism, into a moment of heartwarming Jewish pride and admirable leadership from which the world could learn.

A few weeks ago I taught that in *Parshat Ki Tavo*, Deuteronomy 28, it says, “All these curses shall befall you . . . **because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly . . .” As the Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, points out, amidst a list of consequences for not honoring our covenant with God, this is the only mention of a specific infraction – not serving God joyfully and gladly. Therefore, the Torah is telling us that for our Judaism to be fully realized it must be practiced in joy! What is more, the “you” in the verse is *atem* – the plural. The point is not that *I alone* should be happy, but the rest of my community as well. As Aly chose a song about *communal* happiness she expressed the truth that our**

lives should be about more than elevating the self. Rather we should always strive to spread joy and make sure that our “teammates”, so to speak, are included in the happiness that we are privileged to experience.

Too often we feel the need to focus on the negatives and hardships of being a Jew: the hate, the fear, the obligation, the burden. To be sure, these fears are real, the obligations immensely important and the burdens often very heavy. Yet, as Aly demonstrated, the power of Judaism is ultimately found in the positive values and meaning it brings into the world and in the joy with which we approach it. The ideal form of Judaism is, therefore, found by viewing the world through the perspective and mindset of gratitude for our tradition, appreciation for our heritage and pride in our identity.

Rabbi Neal Loevneger wrote a wonderful article entitled “A Judaism of *Joy* rather than *Oy*”. To paraphrase him, “We must look at living our Judaism in this manner: we are **privileged** “to pray moving, ancient words every day; we **get the opportunity** to say blessings of gratitude before eating; we are **blessed** to study laws for moral refinement; we **get the chance** to sing and dance and celebrate Shabbat and the holidays; **we are**

**happy** to bring holiness into our lives through beautiful rituals . . . Making religion into a dreary drag”, he concludes, “is probably the best way possible to drive people away from it”.

Maybe that's why not serving God "joyfully" is such a sin--not only do we fail to lift ourselves out of the burdens of daily life, we might even be convincing others that Judaism is a path of "oy" rather than a path of "joy." It's ironic, then, that in the middle of the most sobering passage in the Torah, we find a strong reminder that Judaism is supposed to be more sweetness than fright”.

Notice the language: “privilege”, “blessing”, “opportunity”, not “obligation”, “burden” “requirement”, even if these descriptors are also true. Because a Judaism of Joy is attractive. A Judaism of Joy is something we can spread. A Judaism of Joy is powerful, it resonates and inspires. A Judaism of Joy brings people in. A Judaism of Joy leads to an act like that of Aly Raisman, an act done gladly for the sake of our people, for others, and for the value of doing the right thing. On the other hand, a conception of Judaism that does not mention joy, that does not focus on Judaism’s potential to have a *positive* impact on our lives, may fail to

resonate, and therefore fail to inspire, especially the next generation. And this is a failure we cannot tolerate.

As Deborah Lipstadt, acclaimed Jewish historian of the Holocaust, Jewish activist and professor at Emory University wrote: “The thing that strikes me is that we talk so much now, and worry even more about, the rise of anti-Semitism and anti-“Israelism”. These are fears and worries which *are* justified. However, *even as* we worry about these developments, we *cannot* lose sight of the *positive* . . . If we do that we cheat ourselves **and future generations out of an opportunity to rejoice in their heritage, history, tradition, culture and future.”**

Her point is extremely well-taken. The next generation of Jews is not *automatically* seeking out Jewish institutions in nearly the same numbers, not *naturally* identifying in the ways young Jews used to and they do not necessarily value their Judaism in the same way as past generations. And many cite negative feelings about their tradition as part of this disconnect.

It is our responsibility as Jews who *are* connected, who *are* affiliated, who *are* invested in the continuation of the beautiful Jewish story that has

been unfolding for thousands of years, to reach these disenfranchised Jews, many of whom are in our own family. And, by and large, we will not be able to do it any more with guilt, with speeches about responsibility, or with fear – *even if we believe, as I do*, that there *is* an obligation and there *is* a great deal that should make us fearful. However, instead we *first* need to inspire, to attract and to turn on. And we do that through living our Judaism for the many blessings it brings us, for the positive influences our way of life brings to the world and by projecting our practice of Judaism in joy.

Just recently I read a great little D'var Torah. Rabbi Dan Moscovitz asked, “What is the difference between happiness and joy? Happiness is a feeling you have. When things are going well, we feel happy. On the other hand, when things don't go our way, happiness leaves us in an instant. Joy, on the other hand, is something entirely different . . . Joy, in the Jewish context, is not an emotion; it is not fleeting. Joy is an *attitude of the heart*, a comportment of the spirit. Happiness is found on your face; joy rests deep in your soul and is not necessarily based on something positive happening. Joy is something that lasts; happiness is temporary. Happiness

is a sugar rush from a chocolate bar, joy is the satiation that comes from a good, well-balanced meal. When happiness fades away, joy *remains* to nourish and sustain us.”

*This* is the true joy of Judaism. Having such joy doesn't mean that Judaism is always fun, always light, always entertaining. It doesn't mean that Judaism is not about obligation, doesn't carry a burden or isn't presented with dangers. Living Judaism as a joy *does* mean that living a connected, identified, observant, Jewish life will give you a well-spring of meaning, a foundation of wisdom, a deep sense of gratitude and a strong nurturing community connection that will act as a positive force in your life, always, no matter what you face. As the Baal Shem Tov taught, as Jews *we* have the power to turn the unholy into the holy, to find the seed of good buried in the pile of evil. *We* can unlock the joy even in the tragic. This is how we must teach Judaism to the next generation. This is how *we* must live Judaism in our lives. This is what Aly Raisman's performance and her subsequent dedication exemplified. She turned a snub of the Jewish community into a landslide of pride and appreciation. She did it with dance and music; she did it with joy. She did it because of the

positive influence of her values, her strong identity as a Jew, and through her act, she inspired and spread joy and meaning across the world.

Positive values, self-respect and joyous living resonates with people. The Boston Jewish community came together to study the issue of how to engage the next generation of Jews. After a great deal of research this is what they concluded, “The program we came up with recognizes and embraces one of the most important and reliable findings on Jewish engagement: an adult Jew who has had consistent, **positive** Jewish experiences as a child, teenager and young adult is *much* more likely to connect Jewishly later in life.” They listed Jewish camp, Israel experiences, dynamic synagogue life, engaging Jewish schooling, especially day school, and service programs that help people see how Judaism engages the world, as the pillars to their program. It is through these *positive* experiences, in *shared* settings that stress community, that people become strengthened as Jews.

As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi taught with a parable: "Just as it is with a victory over a physical opponent; like in the case of two people wrestling . . . if one of them is lethargic, he will be easily defeated, *even if*

*he is stronger than his fellow.* So, too, it is impossible to conquer the evil nature, hindering one's service of G-d, with lethargy, which is a symptom of sadness, and a stone-like dullness of the heart. The only way to win is with alacrity, which derives from joy...".

On this *Yom Hakippurim* let us learn from Aly Raisman, and from the wisdom of our tradition. Let us not look at today as a sad day, for in sadness we become easier to defeat. Let us look instead to the future in joy – for today we have the opportunity to be forgiven, the blessing to engage in self-reflection and the honor to gather together as a strong Jewish community. And may we be privileged to carry this positive energy forward, to renew our dedication to strengthening our involvement in Jewish life for our own sake, for the sake of the next generation and for the sake of the world. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* – May we learn from the great values of our heritage and be inscribed for a year of joyous inspiration which will propel us to become beacons of hope for our people and for the entire world, Amen.