

PARSHAT SHEMINI
MARCH 22, 2014
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Many of us watched with rapt attention the Winter Olympics in Sochi. We were amazed by the athletic expertise that was shown and the remarkable human feats on ice, snow, and mountainous hills. These athletes put on quite a show and for two weeks captured the attention of the entire world. But, how many of us paid attention to the Paralympics which were just recently held in the very same venues in Sochi? In many ways, these athletes are even more remarkable. To do what they can do on the snow, ice, and those mountainous hills is simply remarkable. They all come with physical disabilities, including amputations, birth defects, and serious physical and visual ailments. Yet, many of these athletes can perform at such a remarkable skill level that you and I, even though we may be physically able, cannot in any way reach.

The motto of the Paralympics is “Athletes define themselves by what they can do – not by what they can’t.” These remarkable feats of courage, bravery, and enormous skill were there for the world to behold. Yet, their feats did not make the front pages of our newspapers; the competition was not regularly broadcast on the major TV networks or streamed live on our computers. Even in the sports pages they received little notice. But, just watching what these remarkable athletes can do makes you understand that the human spirit is greater than physical disabilities and ailments.

I happened to be home last Sunday afternoon after our Purim festivities at the Synagogue and needed a little break. I turned on the television and was fortunate enough to see some of the closing ceremonies of the Sochi Paralympics. I wonder how many of you watched those festivities. The ceremony was entitled “Reaching the Impossible” and celebrated the strength of spirit and principle of inclusivity. The Russian Wheelchair Dance Sport Federation in its final act spelled out the word “Impossible” in large black letters. This led to the highlight of the ceremony in which a Russian summer Paralympian missing both legs, climbed a 15 meter rope using just his arms and added an apostrophe to “Impossible” to make it “I’m Possible.” When the entire stadium saw that one little apostrophe the crowd went wild. One little apostrophe and an entire concept was changed. As the actress Audrey Hepburn once stated: “Nothing is impossible, the word itself says ‘I’m possible.’”

This type of human spirit was displayed throughout the Paralympics. As just but one example, Oksana Masters became one of the biggest stories of the London 2012 Summer Paralympics Games as she and her teammate Rob Jones won a bronze medal in rowing in the trunk and arms mixed double sculls. Masters was named U.S. rowing’s Female Athlete of the Year for 2012. In late 2012, Masters met one of the coaches of the U.S. Paralympics Nordic ski team and was invited to a camp in Colorado. While she had originally been interested in downhill, not cross country skiing, her endurance from rowing quickly translated in the snow. In her first year of skiing, Masters earned a bronze medal in the 5km at the IPC World Cup in Canmore, Alberta. Just over a month later, she claimed bronze again at the IPC World Cup Final in Oberstdorf, Germany, in the women’s skiing 12km cross-country race.

Masters was born in Ukraine, with both of her legs damaged by in-utero radiation poisoning from the Chernobyl nuclear reactor incident. She was adopted when she was seven years old and began rowing at 13. At the Sochi Paralympics Oksana won bronze in the women's 5km sit ski cross-country race and a silver medal in the 12km cross-country race.

This same remarkable human spirit is also displayed in everyday life as people overcome tremendous hurdles, great difficulties, and with courage, strength, and enormous determination, make a difference in their families, in our communities, and in the world. The inner strength that is found in a human individual cannot be quantified and sometimes individuals are able to overcome the most astounding odds and perform feats of true wonder.

A few weeks ago, while I was in Israel for the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations annual mission, we were treated to one session that was truly remarkable. Most of our discussions were about geopolitics: Iran, the Syrian situation, Lebanon and Hezbollah, Turkey, and the U.S.-Israel relationship. Other sessions concerned Israel's economy, its social dynamics, and the relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. However, one of our last sessions brought to us extraordinary individuals who make a difference in Israeli society. Some of them were Jews and some were Arabs. Some were involved in new start-ups and others in educational endeavors. One of the people to whom we were introduced was a young man, Daniel Yuval, who stood before us as a teenager with a remarkable story. His English was not fluent so he read from a prepared text. But, it was clear that he was a young man with remarkable resolve and as we heard his story we learned that this indeed was the case.

In February, 2010 Daniel Yuval and his family went to the Golan Heights to spend a day skiing and playing in the snow. That day changed his life. He stepped on a land mine that blew off his right leg below the knee and shot shrapnel at his 12 year old sister, Amit. Fortunately, he told us, Amit was fine. However, Daniel's leg below the knee had to be amputated and he had to go through the fitting of a prosthesis and learning to walk again. As he stood before us as a regular teenager, one could not see his injured body, and as he told us that that was, indeed, his motto. It took him a while, but he began to play soccer and become one of the boys.

At the very same time, Daniel took upon himself a remarkable project. He has said: "When I woke up from the operation in the hospital and saw that my right leg had been amputated, I said to my mother that I didn't want anyone else to be hurt by land mines and that I intended to do something about it." And, indeed, he did. He started by telling Prime Minister Netanyahu by phone and many other senior officials in person that Israel's policy had to change. The policy that Daniel wanted changed was that Israel needed to clear its areas of all land mines not required for security purposes. After he was well enough to proceed in his task he began to circulate petitions and contacted Knesset members. He worked with some of them to create a bill which was brought and passed by the Knesset. Daniel was named the Youth Ambassador for the campaign for a Mine Free Israel and addressed the International Committee on the Mine Ban Treaty in Geneva. He has established relations with others throughout the world to move this legislation to other countries as well. Rather than feeling sorry for himself, he told us that he felt somewhat fortunate to have experienced this horrible accident, to learn from it and to use it for a good purpose.

Recently, I listened to the equivalent of a Ted talk that Daniel gave at Ben Gurion University in Hebrew to a large audience. Without much emotion, and since this was in Hebrew he did not need a written text, he told the audience of his horrible accident and how he used it to make a difference not merely in his life, but in the lives of so many others. The impossible became the “I’m possible” and Daniel Yuval changed Israel’s policies and hopes to do the same in other countries around the world.

Our Torah reading this morning tells of the horrific deaths of the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu. According to the text, they brought a strange fire into the Lord’s presence and the fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them. We do not know exactly what happened and there are many commentaries - rabbinic, medieval, and modern, which attempt to understand this strange occurrence. However, what interests me is what occurs after that. According to the Torah, Moses calls upon Mishael and Elzaphan, cousins of Nadab and Abihu, and said to them: “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” The text tells us: “They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered.” That’s all we know about the aftermath of that strange fire and its horrific outcome. Members of the family were asked by Moses to go into the Tabernacle and carry out whatever remains were left of these two individuals. How difficult that must have been! We have no idea what their emotions were. One can only imagine what inner strength it took them to carry their cousins out of the Tabernacle. All we know is that they rose to the occasion, did exactly what they needed to do, and in that way honored Nadab and Abihu. We also know that Moses instructed Aaron to continue to carry out his responsibilities as the High Priest. How difficult that must have been! A father had just lost his two sons and must now move forward. We do not know directly how Aaron felt, we do know that he proceeded with his responsibilities without complaint.

It seems to me that nothing is greater than the human spirit. It can rise above disaster and move others to great deeds. It can overcome tragedies and inspire others to momentous activities. I have watched individuals who have had debilitating illnesses, suffered horrific accidents and horrible disasters use the energy that is within them, the strength of their convictions, their faith, and their great spirit and to rise above possible expectations and predictions. They truly make the “impossible” become the “I’m possible.”

While we should extol the athletes of the Sochi Winter Olympics and relish in their athletic achievements, we should also take greater cognizance of the Paralympians whose magnificent exploits from the very same winter venues showed great human spirit and courage. The last words uttered to the Paralympics participants were made by the International Paralympics Committee president, Sir Philip Craven. He said to the athletes assembled: “The Paralympics spirit has united and infected us all. Proud Paralympians, your inspirational athletic performances have redefined the boundaries of possibility. You have shown the world that absolutely anything is possible, and that life is about amazing capabilities, and not perceived deficiencies.”

Let us never sell ourselves short, let us never lose the spirit of attempting to make the “Impossible” the “I’m Possible.” Let us never give up in the face of difficulties and let us make

sure that others do not so either. The human spirit can never be vanquished, nor should it be. Instead, it should be extolled, celebrated and appreciated.