

Victory in Athens
Kee Tetzee: August 28, 2004

Although Alexander the Great is treated favorably in Jewish sources contemporaneous with his reign, for he is appropriately lauded for his benign reign and benevolent attitude towards his Jewish subjects, for the most part Greeks do not fare too well in rabbinic literature.

The rabbis who, after all, were the individuals who created the modes and standards of Judaism took a dim view of the Greco-Roman world. Hellenistic and Hellenic cultures were lumped together and were seen as the antithesis of the world the rabbis sought to create. Their values clashed harshly with the teachings of our sages and their outlook. The hedonism, materialism and self-indulgence so much a part of the non-Jewish society was scorned. The concept of a pantheon of gods directly conflicted with the Jewish profession for a belief in monotheism. The cruelty of Rome, which imposed its rule and will on others was recorded in our Talmud, and preserved in the martyrology portion of the Yom Kippur liturgy stood in contrast to the system of mercy, compassion and caring for others, the world of *hesed* and *rahmanus*, the rabbis sought to devise. Repugnant to the rabbis was the whole concept of the glorification of the human body, as evidenced in the emphasis on athletic competition, especially since the contests were so often conducted in the nude. The rabbis preferred the spiritual realm over the physical, and the very symbol of the stadium with its allure was belittled, for it was the *beit midrash*, the house of study, where the rabbis felt true meaning, happiness, and eternal bliss could be found.

Although these thoughts, probably do not figure in the minds of most people watching the Olympics currently taking place in Athens, they are never too far from my level of consciousness.

I admit that I usually like to follow sports, for I find the stories of personal efforts and gallant team struggles to often be inspiring, entertaining, and metaphors for life itself, as well as an entertaining means of diversion and escape from the more serious and significant vagaries of life. Yet I also confess that I have little interest in sports that only matter on a quadrennial basis, and which normally would not hold my attention. While granted that many may find the various competitive events exciting, I personally find it difficult to get emotional about skeet shooting, volleyball, kayaking and other sports, which appear to be of minimal consequence. I am proud to say that I did not view a single interview Matt Lauer or Katie Couric have conducted the last two weeks.

Finally, one other confession about my attitude about the Olympics.

Ever since 1972, I find it hard to get excited and be supportive, much less enthusiastic about the Olympic venture. That was the year Palestinian terrorists killed 11 Israeli athletes in Munich, and the games went on. It was not just the cold-blooded murder, or even that the games still went on, but the apathetic attitude and negligent response of the rest of the world that was so despicable.

So, ask me who won synchronized swimming, last week, and I have no idea. I know there was a swimmer from Baltimore who did very well, that our men's basketball team has been a disappointment, and that there was some kind of controversy surrounding the medals won by a guy named Hamm. But I don't know much more than these few facts about what is going on in Athens, Greece, which, by the way, according to many sources is one of the most anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli countries in Europe, another reason to take a pass on these games.

But all that changed last week.

For the first time in 50 years of Olympic competition, Gal Fridman won the first gold medal ever for Israel, in wind surfing, again, one of those sports I might not usually care about.

It released a torrent of unprecedented emotion throughout Israel. An email I just got yesterday from a friend and colleague, Rabbi David Forman in Israel put it this way:

"The big news here - HUGE NEWS - which has plunged the entire country into a frenzy of ecstasy, and which I understand was on the front page of the New York Times, and which I am sure you know about. is: An Israeli, Gal Fridman, won an Olympic Gold Medal in the windsurfing competition. Finally, something to celebrate. Who cares about anything else swirling around us, like the Haredim just being awarded millions of shekels to join the government or the continued terror alerts, little Israel showed the world that life goes on. What could be more carefree (with the emphasis on the "free" part of the word) than windsurfing. It's great to be a Jew in Artzeinu!

This victory was a source of tremendous national pride, as the tv stations interrupted their regular programming to broadcast the event live. Gal, which means "wave" said, "It feels like a dream. It's an amazing, indescribable feeling. I simply felt that the entire country was pushing me from behind. I suddenly felt extra energies, and I didn't know where they came from."

Although I didn't see the race, I saw the link on the internet when the Israeli flag was raised and the national anthem, HaTikvah, was played. In the words of the New York Times, "For people from a country that lives with terrorism day to day, a country that lives with the memory of Munich, this was a moment they cherished." Watching the people in the crowd proudly hoisting the flag of Israel, with the Star of David freely flapping in the wind, while chanting HaTikvah, with tears in their eyes, and seeing the lanky, young athlete, draped in the flag of Israel, clearly overcome with emotion brought tears to my eyes.

Alex Gilady, the head of the Israel Olympic Committee said, "I know this doesn't change the situation in the Middle East, but for one second, it brings the very hard-working people of Israel the joy and honor they deserve."

For Israel, events always seem to take on greater significance and proportion, for they are measured against the backdrop of the history of a small nation, struggling for its very survival. Fridman said he hoped his victory would symbolize more than a momentary freedom from fear. Zvi Varshaviak, Israel's Olympic committee president said, "They want to kill us, but we are here," words, very similar to sportscaster Jim McKay's stirring speech at the opening Maccabi ceremonies here in DC a few weeks ago.

"One thing I want is to bring peace to Israel," Fridman said. "I hope the fight will stop, and I show if you want to fight, fight in sport to show who is better, not in different ways.

"This is our job as athletes, to show the other side of the Israeli people. We want peace."

Jerusalem Post columnist Herb Keinon put the victory into an interesting context, "At a time when Jews in France are afraid to walk out their doors displaying any sign of their Jewishness, when the Foreign Ministry tells Israelis going abroad not to wear T-shirts with Hebrew writing, there was something deeply moving about watching Fridman proudly wrap himself in an Israeli flag.

What crossed my mind while watching the race was how this achievement speaks volumes about this country's vast reserves of resiliency. Thirty-two years after the Munich massacre, [the Israeli flag was raised at the Olympics in victory](#), not lowered to half mast in mourning."

For Jews, for Israelis, simple events often take on historic magnitude and proportion.

By now we Americans are accustomed to the commercial refrain after a significant athletic victory. In what has become a ritual, where does the Super Bowl MVP say he is going now that his team has won? The athlete gleefully looks into the camera and proclaims, "I'm going to Disney World."

What about the Israeli team? Where will Gal go now that he won the gold medal? Not to Disney World. He said that he plans to take the medal to the Tel Aviv memorial for the 11 Israeli athletes murdered in Munich. As he explained, "'We think about them all the time. They're always in our mind. When I get home I will go to the memorial place for them and show them the gold medal...to bring them the honor that they deserve.'"

I would contend that it is about more than just honor. It also has to do with the values of a society and the contrast I spoke about at the outset between Rome and Jerusalem.

Today's torah reading *Parashat Kee Tetzee* contains a number of laws teaching us the importance of ethical treatment of others, including our enemies. Yet we are also reminded to proudly recall our past, both its glory and its tragedy. The maftir implores us, "*Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek: Remember what the Amalekites did to you upon your departure from Egypt.*" To be a Jew is to be immersed in memory. We have a

sense of where we are going, for we must never forget from where we came, and what happened to us along the way.

And that is also why Gal will take the medal to the memorial for the Israeli athletes. As Jews, history is always a crucial element forging our identity and sense of purpose.

This past week, although sorrow is never very far removed from our existence, we could for one brief moment celebrate the glory and pride of a young man and a proud people. May the pride in Athens continue to inspire peace and free loving people and Jews everywhere.

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