

BECOMING ELITE

Terumah 5779

I.

“EVERY RABBI OR RELIGIOUS LEADER would love the Rams to make a comeback right now for one reason only...” wrote a rabbinic colleague of mine on Facebook this past Sunday night, “The sermon would basically write itself.”

My first thought upon reading this was that we don’t need a comeback in a sports game to inspire us religious – the very game itself should inspire us for a very simple reason: it shows us elite performance in action, the very thing we ourselves are seeking in our Judaism.

How does one become an elite athlete, worthy of stepping onto the field of a major game? It requires a few simple to understand, yet near-impossible attributes to master. Athletes require dedication, commitment, consistency, and sacrifice. It’s best captured by Gary Neville, a legendary player for Manchester United:

I was willing to ditch everything in my life apart from football and family. So much for my wild teenage years. If there was a game on a Saturday, I was in bed by 9:15 every Thursday and Friday night.

It was extreme, and I know others were different. Some would go for a few pints in the week, sometimes even on a Friday. Others always had girlfriends. But I knew my talent wasn’t at their level. As far as I was concerned, I couldn’t afford even to sniff a pint of lager. I wasn’t going to let anything mess it up.

You don’t play in Super Bowls, World Cups, or World Series’ without the constant attention to your profession. Olympic athletes don’t just turn up the day of a run! Every part of an athlete’s life is calibrated to get the best out of them. Their diet, their routine, their sleep schedule – everything they do is geared towards the few moments in their week in which they will need to perform.

And, what’s fascinating is the extent to which athletes micromanage their lives. When *The Guardian* interviewed sleep doctor Nick Littlehales, he spoke about how it is the best teams, the ones known for success, that are most desperate to wring out every drop of improvement they can. This is best typified by the maxim of Team Sky – Great Britain’s Olympic gold-winning cycling team – which sought “marginal gains,” a 1% increase in every aspect of training and preparation, which would lead to a cumulative increase in performance.

But not every athlete prepares the same way. But what you often see is that, the better the performer, the more intensely scripted their life. In a different interview, Nick Littlehales noted that, though he has pitched the need for better sleep to a variety of teams and athletes, only a handful are interested in a more granular application of sleep science. Coincidentally, it’s the very same athletes at the top of their game. They will seek any and every advantage they can get to stay at the top.

II.

The mere existence of the Super Bowl this past Sunday should have inspired us. Here were athletes who have dedicated so much of their lives to what they do. Who embody dedication, commitment, consistency, and sacrifice.

The analogy for our lives as Jews is obvious. God demands from us that same life of dedication, commitment, consistency, and sacrifice. Heavily calibrated diet? Check. Micromanaged life? Check. We don't get millions of dollars and millions of people cheering us when we *daven* in the morning, but that same elite spiritual level is expected of us. There are no days off – just like the soccer players on vacation who take with them personal trainers because they can't afford to miss even one day at pique fitness – we can't afford to miss even one day at pique spiritual level.

But just as with athletes, even within our world of elite spiritual performance, there are differences. Not everyone prepares with the same intensity. Not everyone exerts themselves with the same effort. And the implications of this are clear from our *parashah* this morning.

The Torah describes two curtains that the Jewish people must make for the *mishkan*. The first is for the entrance to the *mishkan* itself:

וְעָשִׂיתָ מָסָךְ לַפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשׂוּר מֵעֵשֶׂה רָקָם:

You shall make a screen for the entrance of the Tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, done in embroidery (Ex. 26:36).

The second is for the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the *kodesh ha-kedoshim*:

וְעָשִׂיתָ פָּרֹכֶת תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשׂוּר מֵעֵשֶׂה חָשֵׁב יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָהּ
בְּרָבִים:

You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen; it shall have a design of cherubim worked into it (v. 31).

The two curtains are almost identical, save a design feature. The *parochet* in front of the *kodesh ha-kedoshim* has a complex design worked into it, the product of a *ma'aseh choshev*, as Rashi explains, an artist's work. The *parochet* for the *mishkan* lacked this extra piece of design. It required *ma'aseh rokem*, embroidery alone.

Both curtains required skill and effort to create, but one more so than the other. Though the *parochet* before the *mishkan* required a tremendous skill to make, embroidery, the curtain in front of the *kodesh ha-kedoshim* required an extra effort, it required a more elite skill on display. And this, I believe, teaches us the significance of our own effort and exertion in our Judaism.

To enter the *mishkan*, to enter the place of God, to be holy, it requires a *ma'aseh rokem* – a skill only cultivated through dedication, commitment, consistency, and sacrifice. That same *ma'aseh rokem* is demanded of us in our religious lives through our observance of halakhah. But, if we want to reach the ultimate spiritual heights, if we want to reach an elite level even within a world that sets

such high expectations, we can only enter the *kodesh ha-kedoshim* through a *ma'aseh choshev*. One level higher still.

The demands of our Jewish life are intense because of their results: an elite spirituality. But, within that, there are still great expectations. The more of our lives we apply halakhah to, the more we endeavour to fulfil God's will, the closer we come to the *kodesh ha-kedoshim*.

III.

But this is not to say our lives are easy. The thing about elite performance is how few people are able to achieve it. There are far more athletic rejects than successes, far more people who “don't have what it takes” than those who do. And this is why, I think, so many of us don't strive higher – because it's too hard. And even in my own life, the idea that I must constantly push myself religiously is not one I find easy. There are probably more days where I don't meet the standards I have set for myself than those that I do.

But this is where mentality comes in. Because there's a cliché in the world of athletics that's also true: it's rarely the most talented that make it. It's often those with the desire and the mentality to push themselves. To do the difficult things.

It's at this point when writing my *derasha* that I paused and, looking for something to distract me, turned to *The Guardian's* soccer page, where I stumbled on an interview with an up-and-coming Scottish soccer player out in Spain. Here's what I read:

Like Ryan, who played for nine Spanish clubs before suffering a knee injury, and younger brother Mac, forced out by back problems, Harper could play, leading him to Madrid at 13 and a meeting with Cristiano Ronaldo [one of the greatest players currently playing]. A lesson too. “I took a picture. I was tiny, it's funny looking at that. I'm a fan – he's the hardest worker, he was always there, I don't think I've ever seen his car move. *If it was easy, everyone would do it.* He's obsessed.”

If it was easy, everyone would do it. This is why we do what we do. This is why we expend so much effort seeking spiritual greatness. It's not easy, if it were, everyone would do it.

I didn't care who won or who lost the Super Bowl. But it's not the score that inspires us, it's the players. And we, in our own way, live that same life. That's our Judaism. Striving for that same elite level. If it was easy, everyone would do it.

But it's not. But, nevertheless, we do.