

Noodle Kugel and the Olympics

By David Nelson

There we were on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, which also happened to be the next-to-last day of the Olympics. For weeks, even before the competition in Sydney began, we had all been inundated with Olympic news, feature stories, human interest, and other forms of media excitement. The congregation got to its feet as the gabbai called two members forward for the honors of hagbah (lifting the Torah scroll from which we had just read) and g'lilah (helping to roll and dress the scroll). The magbiah (the Torah lifter) then astounded one and all by doing one of those fancy maneuvers, starting with arms crossed and hefting the mighty scroll over his head in one swift motion so that he could show the Torah text to the congregation without having to turn his back on us.

Overwhelmed and inspired by this impressive feat, I couldn't stop myself from supplying a commentary: "A beautiful lift from the American! This will definitely mean a gold medal for him, especially now that the Bulgarian hagbah team has been sent home for steroid use! What an athlete! What a champion!"

Okay, I admit that this was a somewhat unprofessional lapse of self-control, and a shameless attempt to bring a bit of light-heartedness to the Rosh Hashanah services which often desperately need it! But my outburst led me later on to ponder the interesting fact that "mainstream" (code for "traditional") Jewish culture does not have much room for excitement over athletic prowess or competition. This attitude goes all the way back to the rabbinic encounter with Hellenistic culture and its arenas, gymnasias, and statues of naked men with six-pack abs. The rabbis tended to dismiss it all as Greek nonsense, a distraction from Torah and mitzvot. Over the centuries this evolved into a culture that cared deeply about how many pages of Talmud you knew (or, in a more contemporary incarnation, what your kids got on their SATs), but not about how fast you could run a mile or how many pounds you could lift in the "clean and jerk."

In all fairness, these thoughts accompanied my umpteenth delicious holiday meal, with more kugel and honey cake than I am comfortable thinking about. In the wake of all that eating, and with the memory of that gold medal hagbah still fresh in my mind, I think it's time for the organized Jewish community to do some teshuvah by borrowing gratefully from Greek culture, spending a little less time at the table, and a little more time and attention on taking care of our bodies.

In the past, Israel has valued fitness and sports—that was part of the Zionist yearning to be "normal." But among American Jews, only the JCC crowd has paid much attention to the Jewish body. I believe it's now time for a change. Let us declare the care of the body a core mitzvah. Let us create a culture that disapproves of physical unfitness as much as it disapproves of intellectual slovenliness. In synagogues, day schools, and throughout our communities, let

us learn to be as proud of our time in the 50 meter butterfly as we are of our scores on the Mishnah test, or even on the LSAT!