

SHABBAT SERMON
AUGUST 23, 2008
RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

The 2008 Olympics; Winners and Losers

I am now back ... for good! If you've been wondering where I have been ... now I can tell you. Although it is four years away, the past few weeks I've been training for the 2012 Olympics. After watching a fair dose of the Olympics these past two weeks, and watching gold medal winners from so many diverse countries, in so many diverse sports, from so many diverse ages and backgrounds ... I decided: if they can do it, so can I!

I know that there are some skeptics and cynics out there who think that with my age and with my body, my chances of being a gold medal winner can only exist if the Olympic Committee makes "eating" or "fast driving" a field event at the 2012 Olympics! I must admit that until recently even I would have been a bit skeptical regarding my possibilities as a world-class athlete. But in reading how the government of China decided to make an all-out effort to develop gold medalists – they did it by establishing special schools and programs for young children who exhibited a special aptitude in athletics – I remembered back to an article I read many years ago in *Psychology Today* magazine which convinced me that I, too, could be an Olympic gold medalist if I really set myself to it.

Psychology Today told of an experiment conducted by a Harvard psychologist named Dr. Robert Rosenthal on a group of students and teachers living in Jerusalem, of all places! The experiment went as follows: a group of physical education teachers and students were randomly chosen and randomly divided into three groups.

In the first group, the teachers were told that previous testing indicated that all the students had an average ability in athletics and an average potential. The teachers were told: "Go and train them!"

The second group of teachers were told that students in their group, based on previous testing, exhibited an unusually high potential for excellence in athletics ... "Go and train them!"

And the third group of teachers were told that their group of students had exhibited, based on previous testing, an extremely low potential for athletic training. "Now go and train them!"

The teachers were given several weeks to work with and interact with their student athletes. At the end of the training period the results were the same for male and female students, and for male and female teachers. All of those students who had been randomly identified as being rather average in ability performed about average on the tests. All of those students who were randomly identified as being above average, performed above average. All those students who were randomly identified as below the average, performed below the average by a considerable margin. The results of the test indicated that what the teachers *thought* their

students' ability was, and what the students themselves *thought* their ability was, went a long way toward deciding just how well they performed as athletes.

So, the first step toward becoming an Olympic gold medalist obviously must be an inner feeling that you are, in fact, capable of being one! "*Psychology Today*" took special note of this experiment because it confirmed in the physical arena what psychologists had long claimed to be true in the educational and emotional arena: that the concept of the self fulfilling prophecy ... students in classrooms, workers in shops, patients in therapy ... all do better when the person in charge expects them to do well, when they themselves expect to do well. One's own self-esteem, one's own self-image, what someone thinks of themselves and thinks himself capable of, is an extremely crucial factor in deciding what can be, of what one is to make of himself or herself, and the way we see ourselves plays an important role in the way others see us as well.

I tell you this today not simply to explain and justify my Olympic quest, but much more important, because this concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the importance of self-image helps explain an interesting question raised in regard to a verse from this morning's Torah portion.

Our Torah portion this morning finds Moses reviewing the history of the Jewish people as they traveled on the way to the Promised Land. He encourages their continued faith in God as they confront the challenge of conquering the land. He says to them: "*Ki tomar bilvovcha rabim ha-goyim ha-elah mimani eicha uchal l'horisham* – perhaps you will say in your heart these nations are more numerous than I, how will I be able to drive them out? Do not fear them. You shall remember what God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt." Have no fear; says Moses, God will be with you. A great sage was puzzled by this. *Now* Moses tells the Jewish people not to be afraid, that God will be with them in helping them to conquer the inhabitants of the land of Israel. *Now* Moses tells them that! But why didn't he tell them that years earlier ... years earlier when the Jews sent spies to scout out the land of Israel, and the majority of the spies came back and said, "*Lo nuchal la-a lot el ha-am ki chazak hu mimenu* – we cannot ascend to that people for it is too strong for us" ... Why didn't Moses then tell them: don't worry ... God will be with you. Don't worry ... remember what God did for you in the land of Egypt. *Now* he assures them that God will be with them. Then, they were punished and denied the right to enter the Promised Land ... why the difference in reaction?

The difference in reaction is because of the difference in what the Jews said. In our Torah portion Moses provided a hypothetical statement: "*Perhaps* you will say in your heart these nations are more numerous than us, *how* will I be able to drive them out?" The Jews didn't say: we can't drive them out. The Jews didn't say anything, really. It was simply "perhaps" you will say. The Jews were not doubting their ability to do it ... they just wanted to know *how* to do it! For such people, a promise that God would be with them was in order.

By the spies it was completely different. There were no theoretical statements, there were no questions of how we're going to do it. There was just the simple statement: we can't do it. The spies went even further in saying, "We look like grasshoppers in their eyes." If you think you look like a grasshopper ... then you are going to act like a grasshopper! There is no hope, eventually you're going to be stepped on.

If Dr. Rosenthal and his study of student athletes, if psychologists and their concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, if the lesson from our Torah portion and how the Jews viewed themselves ... if all this confirms and affirm the importance of one's self-image and self-respect as playing such a crucial and vital role in one's hopes, aspirations and achievements, then it should provide us with a unique perspective on who was the real winner at the Olympics ... and who was the real loser.

The winner? Well, obviously when you win 8 gold medals, when you do what no one else has ever done ... then you have to be considered a winner. And Michael Phelps certainly is a winner! But there was another man, another swimmer, who didn't win an individual gold medal, but he was just as much a winner as Michael Phelps was. Not only was he a winner, he made others winners as well. I am referring to Jason Lezak. He was part of the U.S. Olympic swimming relay team and when all seemed lost, when it seemed as Phelps – also on the relay team – was going to see his medal dream sink in the water with the French team leading ... as the race came to a close, Jason Lezak gave one of the greatest performances in Olympic history by catching up to and passing the French swimmer, and winning the race for his team. Jason Lezak did more than help win that race, he did more than help Michael Phelps keep his string of gold medal victories. You know who else Jason Lezak helped? He helped all the U.S. swimmers who swam the next day. The day after Lezak's victory, the U.S. collected seven medals; including three gold in four events. When asked what accounted for their great success that day, most all of the swimmers – male and female alike – said it was because of Lezak's performance. One said, "We gained a lot of momentum." Another said, "The way Lezak finished that race really moved me." A third said, "Jason knocked over a lot of walls for us." Another said, "It got a lot of us pumped up for the rest of the meet." You see, they were all the same swimmers as they had been the day before, but their attitude had changed ... their confidence had changed ... their self-image had changed. After seeing such a miraculous victory, they all felt: if he can do it, so can I! Jason Lezak gave all of the American swimmers a better picture of themselves. And that is the making of a real winner.

The real losers? No, not those who *only* got silver or bronze medals, or didn't get any medals ... they're not losers. They are all winners. They all had the honor to represent their country. How many people get to do that during the course of their lifetime? The real losers? The government of China ... the government that wouldn't let 7 year old Yang Peiy be seen singing at the opening ceremony. The story is now known to all, but it wasn't then. At the opening ceremony a young Chinese girl captured the hearts of many beautifully singing an "Ode to the Motherland." The girl the world saw was Lin Miaoke but she wasn't really singing. It was the voice of Yang Peiy that was being played over the loudspeakers. Lin Miaoke was only lip-synching. Yang Peiy was not shown because the government authorities decided that Lin Miaoke was cuter and the Chinese wanted the world to see everything connected to the Olympics and to the country as being perfect. But it's not perfect! It's not perfect when a country tramples on the self-image of a young girl. What's the little girl to think? That because her teeth aren't straight, she shouldn't be seen in public? Would you want to grow up feeling that way? Her father said, "The only thing I care about is that my daughter will not get hurt by this. She'll understand when she grows up."

I hope he is right. But in reading the story of that little girl, I thought of another woman. I oftentimes think back to the woman who came into my office some years ago. She was having a rough time, suffering from severe depression and feeling that she was worthless. We talked and she mentioned her grandmother for some reason; I don't remember why. I asked her, for some reason, I don't remember why, "What did your grandmother call you when you were a child?" She smiled through her tears and said, "She called me sheine ponim." I said to her, "Were you a sheine ponim?" She said, "Oh no, I was a clumsy, awkward, ugly kid, just as I am now." I said, "Did your grandmother lie?" She said, "Oh, my grandmother wouldn't lie. She must have believed that was what I was." I saw this woman a few weeks later and I asked her how it was going. She said, "It's still hard but I have to tell you, at least once a day I say to myself: If my Bubbe thought I was a sheine ponim, then maybe I am." What a gift that grandmother gave her grandchild ... a gift far more valuable than stock certificates. Without even knowing it, the grandmother, with just a few words, was giving her granddaughter a good self image, making her feel that she was pretty and that she was loved. And she didn't even know she was doing it!"

You see, in some ways, we're all like Jason Lezak. So many of the things we say and do impact on the self-image of others. I was once standing in the parking lot when school let out and I heard a mother, annoyed with her child, scream at him, "You're just like your father ... stupid!" There, she was killing two birds with one stone; much better to tell a child that he or she has a sheiner punim ... much better to tell that to ourselves as well. For how we view ourselves ultimately decides whether we are champions or not.

Let us always keep in mind the immortal words of Maimonides who taught in his Laws of Repentance, "Every human being is capable of becoming righteous like Moses or wicked like Jeroboam. Wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, uncharitable or generous; and so with all other traits, there is no one to compel him or to decree what he is to do. No one to pull him in their direction; it is he who directs himself deliberate toward any cause he desires."

The Olympics are now over. And yes, it may be a little too early to start preparing for the 2012 Olympics. But it's not too early to start preparing for the upcoming High Holidays. They are just around the corner. And what kind of year we're going to have – yes, it's in God's hands – but it is also in our hands. Moses or Jeroboam, good or bad, wise or foolish ... a lot depends on how we see ourselves and how others see us as well. "*U'seneinu hayom u'vchol yom l'chein u'lchesed u'lrachmim b'einecha u'veinei chol roeinu* – this day and every day may we find grace, compassion and mercy in God's eyes and the eyes of all who look upon us" ... and in our own eyes as well. Amen.

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** Rabbi Wohlberg's new book of sermons, "Pulpit Power," is available at: www.BethTfiloh.com/Register