

**“Going for the Gold”  
Parshat Ve-etchanan  
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How many of you have been watching the Olympics? Pretty incredible no? From the opening ceremony to the drama of the women’s gymnastics to Michael Phelps – is there anyone in America who doesn’t know who Michael Phelps is? More people are watching this year’s Olympic Games than ever before. NBC’s average viewership for exceeded the Beijing Olympics with more than 30 million people watching in the United States – the best primetime viewership in more than 30 years – unprecedented! Billions of people worldwide are reported to have seen portions of the Opening Ceremony.

I find these young athletes amazing. I find it amazing to contemplate what it takes to compete at the Olympic level. And I don’t mean all of those interesting reports focusing on Michael Phelps unusual body build – his web like feet and long legs etc that make him unusually built to do what he does better than anyone in the world – no, what I find most fascinating about all of them is the commitment and the drive that it takes to compete at this level.

Michael Phelps has an all encompassing commitment to his swimming regimen. Aside from eating – which I understand he does an enormous amount of to provide the fuel for his remarkable feats – and sleeping – he spends a good portion of his waking hours in the pool. He doesn’t seem to have much of a life outside of swimming. He practices 11 or 12 times per week – at least once a day, and 5 days a week he has a second practice – and each one is for hours at a time.

When we watch the drama of the Olympics – we see the final few minutes of a process that has taken years of dedicated preparation – countless hours of effort and tedious repetition of routines – developments of skill that require constant exercise and a pushing of one’s abilities to their very limits that are difficult for us normal people to comprehend.

I remember once a story that was told of the legendary pianist Arthur Rubenstein – after a particularly remarkable performance of Rachmaninoff’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Piano Concerto, a fan breathless said, “Oh maestro, I would give *anything*, to be able to play piano like that..” To which Rubenstein was reported to have replied – “Would you give 10 hours a day, every day of your life?”

And that is really a question worth considering – when we watch these achievements of skill and talent at the Olympic level. We watch with amazement as they fly through the air, swim through the pool, dive and run and jump and a whole host of other activities that literally take our breath away and we say – “I would give anything to be able to do that...” But would we? Would we trade the hours upon hours of tedious, injury inducing, painful effort that it takes to become an Olympic athlete? Would we give 10 hours a

day, every day of our life – to achieve such incredible accomplishments? And remember this – after all that – you might lose. All that work and all that effort – for the *chance* to win – no guarantees that you will – not by a long shot.

Effort and commitment are not exactly the watchwords of our faith in 2012. And then we might lose? All that effort and then no payoff? No thank you. We want the payoff without the effort. Don't you love those ads for the New York Lottery which promise a life of unimaginable riches and ease – "it only takes an instant" the announcer promises. Hard work? Years of dedication? And even then I may not be a success? Why – when it only takes an instant?

And it is not only in the lottery business – follow carefully the political candidates as they travel the length and width of this country – stumping and telling us why we should vote for them over their respective opponent. Each of them – Romney and Obama are very good at highlighting the problems that confront us as a nation – but then listen carefully as they offer solutions—amazing all their solutions are painless – if these candidates are to be believed all our challenges can be solved without any hardship to any of us – no need to increase taxes, no need to make sacrifices, no need for any commitment on our part – and if that sounds a bit absurd – of course that is because it is. So why not be honest with us and tell us that we can solve our dependence on foreign oil but we are going to have to make sacrifices, we can solve the dilemma of Social Security and Health Care but it is going to cost us? Because they know that nothing will turn off an American quicker than the idea that he or she is going to have to get involved – he or she will have to pay – we not only want something for nothing; we want everything for nothing. And therein lies the crux of the dilemma. Michael Phelps and the young women on the American Gymnastics team - they understand that what you get out is in direct proportion to what you put in. All that work, all that effort – for the chance of success. Down deep even our politicians know that the solutions to the problems that confront us as a nation are going to cost us – in time, effort and sacrifice – with no guarantee for success – even if they are unwilling to state it publically.

Judaism has never been a something for nothing tradition. Nowadays there are a lot of religions that promise something for nothing. Major enlightenment with minimal effort is the promise of some of the most popular forms of contemporary religion. Tell me rabbi that I am the center of the universe. Tie a red string around my wrist and tell me that everything will be ok. Tell me the God loves me, God is with me, in everything that I do, that God approves of me unconditionally. Give me revelation that confirms what I already believe. But whatever you do, don't trouble me, don't disturb me or judge me or try and change me – that takes much too much effort. All that effort and discipline and I *might* gain something? Rabbi, why should I embrace what you are offering when others offer me instant enlightenment?

Well I am sorry – the truth is – if America wants to work out its problems it is going to cost us – a lot of time, effort, and money. And we still might fail. If you want to be an athlete – it is going to cost you – a lot of time and enormous effort – and you still might not win a medal. If you want to make a lot of money – it is going to cost you – time,

effort and discipline and you still might not be rich and if you want to become a good person – there is no magical pill, no red string I can wrap around your arm – no magical incantation that will take the place of a lot of hard work, effort, and disciplined behavior for a chance at becoming a *mentsch*.

When did we become so entitled as a generation and as a nation that we came to believe that success was our birthright, that a comfortable life was due us, that happiness was not something we had a right to pursue but a state we were guaranteed to achieve?

Sebastian Coe and Olympic athlete from England made the following comment after loosing his bid for the gold: "To anyone who has started out on a long campaign believing that the gold medal was destined for him, the feeling when, all of a sudden, the medal has gone somewhere else is quite indescribable."

It is in the very opening words of today's torah portion that *Moshe Rabeinu* realizes he will not win the Gold. He had spent most of his life working for one goal, he had worked tirelessly day and night to lead his people into the Promised Land and in our *parasha* he has to come to terms with the brutal fact that this achievement will not be his. Joshua will lead them into the Promised Land – or as Olympian Sebastian Coe put it: "To anyone who has started out on a long campaign believing that the gold medal was destined for him, the feeling when, all of a sudden, the medal has gone somewhere else is quite indescribable."

*Ve-etchanan el adonai ba-yet ha-hi laymor... I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, "O Lord God, You who let your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon."*

This is one of the most poignant moments in the entire torah – for thousands of years, people have read the Bible and felt the pain of Moshe's disappointment. We identify with this incredible moment because Moshe is us – everyone of us who have hoped and prayed and worked for something in life and then been disappointed when things did not work out the way they should have; - everyone of us who have said – "Hey wait – I'm a good person – I did not kill anyone, harm anyone – I deserve better! – This is not fair!"

*Ve-etchanan el adonai ba-yet ha-hi laymor... I pleaded with the Lord at that time – Why did MY business fail? Why did I get cancer? Why does my child have to suffer? Why didn't I get what I want, what I need, what I deserve?* Yes, to anyone who has started out on a long campaign believing that the gold medal was destined for him, the feeling when, all of a sudden, the medal has gone somewhere else is quite indescribable."

That is why the rabbis studied this particular torah portion very closely. There must be more here than just Moshe's disappointment - -there has to be some truth here, some buried treasure to help us deal with this kind of existential disappointment that is inevitable in every human journey to the Promised Land of fulfillment, success and

happiness. And sure enough in Deuteronomy Rabbah (2:1) the collection of Rabbinic *midrashim* on the book of Deuteronomy – there is a comment on the unusual opening word of today's *parasha*: *Ve-etchanan*. I invite you to look with me at the note on the bottom of page 1005 on our *Eytz Chayim Humash*. The word *Ve-etchanan* - is translated in our text as: "I pleaded", but it is a very unusual form of the verb *hitchanen* – it is in the reflexive form – meaning – "to throw oneself on the mercy of the other, to plead with no grounds to justify one's request." The use of this unusual word - *Ve-etchanan*, according to the rabbis, implies that Moshe understood – that his request was not a demand for justice but a plea for mercy.

And then comes the line I want you to mentally underline, memorize, take to heart: "A truly righteous person never assumes God owes anyone a favorable response."

A truly righteous person NEVER assumes God owes anyone a favorable response.

It is ok to *want* a Gold Medal. It is ok to *want* to make it to the Promised Land. It is ok to *want* health and happiness and success – for you and for your loved ones. It is most natural to want these things – to work for these things – to pray for them and to hope for them and to live for them – it is just NOT ok to believe *magia lecha* – *that you deserve them, that you have earned them – that God owes you anything!*

*Ve-etchanan*: When Moshe pleads for God's mercy – he reveals not only his longing but also his awareness of the true nature of life. That life is about the pursuit – and achievement – but it is also about failure and disappointment. That it is ok to go for the gold – in fact that is what we should all strive for, but few of us will have the privilege to make it to the Promised Land or to stand on the winner's podium. Moshe comes to learn what we all need to learn - -that life is about the journey not the destination. Life is about *going* for the gold, even if we don't get it. Life is about the *pursuit* of happiness – even if it is not always and every day achieved.

God owes us nothing. And then when we can say that, when we can believe that, when we can feel that, then we discover, God has already given us more than we deserve. And Moshe accepted God's decree.