



Going for Spiritual Gold

Rabbi Andrew Shaw

Every four years, we get to see the most talented athletes in the world compete against each other. This year, though it was five years since the last Olympics, was no different.

Although I didn't have the chance to watch the competitions live, I saw plenty of the highlights and interviews with the winners. By and large, the athletes shared the same message: how the hours, days, weeks and months of training paid off, and how a strict regimen of diet, exercise and training honed their body to achieve peak performance.

However, no matter how much effort an athlete invests in preparation, and at a certain point, there is a limit to what can be done. Eventually, age creeps up and regardless of the training one puts in, it will not be enough.

Sir Steve Redgrave achieved the incredible feat of winning five successive gold medals between the ages of 22 to 38. When interviewed after his fourth gold in 1996, he famously said, "If anyone sees me go near a boat, you've got my permission to shoot me." He knew the tremendous sacrifice and pain he would have to go through at age 34 to be able to compete four years later. In the end, he put himself through the

brutal regimen and came out a gold medallist for the fifth and final time.

We hear the starting gun and watch a race for a few minutes, curious as to who will win. We don't think about the years of grueling preparation beforehand, without which nobody can succeed.

Each year, we run our own spiritual Olympics race from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. We pass before Hashem, together with the whole human race, to be judged not by how fast we can run or throw but by how kind we are, how devoted we are to the Torah and how we spiritually perform.

We speak about Ellul as the start of our "training" and Yom Kippur as the "finish line." But in truth, we must dedicate ourselves to spiritual training all year round. Ellul is simply an annual 'wake-up call' which has the power to arouse even the most spiritually distant to begin the *teshuvah* process.

Ellul is also the start of the new Yeshiva and Seminary year, when hundreds of young men and women begin their full-time Torah learning journey in Israel. For me, one of the highlights of those times, all those years ago, was the opportunity to be in the presence

of individuals who were dedicated to striving for spiritual perfection. Some of my most powerful moments were observing these people davening, teaching or just simply learning. They understood, just as our Olympians do, that to succeed in any meaningful endeavor, and particularly spiritual growth, requires years and years of devotion, immersion and application.

We may never find ourselves at that level, but that is not an excuse for us to not involve ourselves in the same discipline - bettering ourselves spiritually, connecting ourselves to Hashem and becoming more aware of our Divine soul.

Ellul and the Yamim Noraim are part of the training regimen that we should all commit ourselves to become worthy competitors in the race of life, whose prize is not a gold medal but rather a deeply meaningful life dedicated to the Divine.

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