

Rosh Hashanah I
September 17, 2012

I'm sure many of you watched the Olympics in London this summer. If you watched gymnastics or diving, as my family did, you probably experienced the awe of the amazing feats which occurred off the diving board or on the vault or balance beam. This was followed by listening to the commentator explain everything the person did wrong: they moved their foot too much, or they missed an element, or they made too much of a splash hitting the water. After watching a few routines, you yourself could confidently serve as an armchair referee: Oh yeah, she definitely wasn't straight enough when she went into the water; that'll be a deduction. In a few moments, you may forget that what the athlete on the screen just did was one of the most incredible things you've ever seen.

That's the way it goes in the world of top-level competitive sports, especially those which involve judges giving you a number, and a razor thin fraction can be the difference between winning the gold

and coming in fourth. It is easy to get sucked in to a world where perfection is within your grasp. But it is important to remind ourselves that real life should not be like that. We can be grateful on this Yom Ha-Din that God is not an Olympics gymnastics judge. I know this because of what Jewish tradition tells us about the Book of Life. Most of us have been told that God has a book before Him, and on Rosh Hashanah He writes a decree of life or death in the coming year for each one of us, and then that decree is sealed at the time of the Neilah service on Yom Kippur. But that is not exactly what the Talmud says:

R. Kruspedai said in the name of R. Johanan: Three books are opened [in heaven] on New Year, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of death; the doom of the intermediate is suspended from New Year till the Day of Atonement; if they deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of

life; if they do not deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of death.

Now, regardless of how literally we take this description, it makes clear that not everybody's judgment hangs in the balance during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, just those of the beinonim, the intermediate or average ones. But that is the only tradition you hear about, because each one of us is to look at him or herself as one of the beinonim. The image used is that of a scale or a balance -- in fact, Libra, is the sign of the Zodiac for Tishre -- where mitzvot are on one side and transgressions on the other. Maimonides says: "...Throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself. [On the other hand] if he performs one mitzvah, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others." This serves as a reminder

that the perfection demanded in the rarified atmosphere of Olympic competition is not a guide for life.

For many of us, there is a lot of pressure for the pursuit of perfection. In a world with so much advice in magazines or on the internet telling us how to be the perfect parent, with Martha Stewart showing us how easy it is to make the perfect cupcake or holiday decoration, with every embarrassing celebrity moment or political gaffe analyzed endlessly on television, with each of us worrying if we are not phenomenal in our professions we will be replaced, it is quite natural to feel we are never good enough. That is the fear which makes it so funny on “The Simpsons” that Homer Simpson lives next to Ned Flanders. We all feel that way! Many of us identify with the poor shlub who is convinced his neighbor has it together infinitely more than he or she does. But the truth is we are all beinonim, at the intermediate level.

We all know people, even perhaps ourselves, who think of themselves as wholly righteous. If you ask them, of course, they will tell you that they have faults, but in practice they are

constantly critical of those around them. Gosh, so-and-so has really let herself go. My children would never do that. They are my way or the highway kind of people, assuming that doing something differently could not possibly have a good result. It is up to all of us to combat this tendency towards arrogance in ourselves. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin suggests in his guide to ethics that upon leaving a friend's home, we force ourselves to say positive things about them. This is because it is so common for people to get in the car and make critical comments to their spouse about the people they have just seen. On the other hand, there are those who view themselves constantly in a negative light, never feeling they are as good or as competent as others. How many of us have berated ourselves constantly for mistakes we have made in the past, instead of finding a way to forgive ourselves, to have compassion upon ourselves. A few months ago I read a Dear Abby where the writer felt she should quit her job because a reception of which she had been in charge turned out a disaster. Dear Abby writes, "Before you throw away a perfectly good career

over one regrettable error, consider this: nobody bats 1000.”

None of us is completely righteous or completely wicked. We are all given the opportunity to repent and change during these Aseret Yeme Teshuvah, 10 days of repentance.

And what is our goal? Our goal cannot be to become total tzaddikim. Neither should we sit on our hands and resign ourselves to fate. Our goal is to tip the balance with even one more Mitzvah, one more righteous act. Rambam says that even someone who has put on tefillin once in his life is in a category different from one who has never done so. We are to believe that doing just one more Mitzvah could tip the scales of judgment not only for us, but for the entire world! God does not want us to be Ali Raisman or McKayla Maroney, worrying that if we fall on our tush once our dreams will come to naught. Instead of seeking after perfection, we must seek after our personal best. The most impressive gymnast at the Olympics to me was Oksana Chusovitina. Almost every one of the gymnasts were 16, 18, 20. Chusovitina is 37. She won a gold medal on vault for the USSR in 1992 and a silver for

Germany in 2008. In London she finished fifth. She was unlikely to medal against those so much younger, but compared to other 37 year olds her feat was absolutely amazing. Likewise we have our own personal moments to pursue greatness, but greatness in God's eyes is not a bunch of judges attesting to your near-perfection but rather you yourself and those around you knowing you worked hard for something that was difficult *for you* and did a terrific job.

Rabbi Harold Kushner says that he was disturbed by the treatment of the Buffalo Bills. You may remember that they lost four Super bowls within a short period of time. So they got tagged as losers by comedians and in the press. But R. Kushner points out that their sin was they were the second greatest football team in the United States for a long span of time. Throughout the year we see in the public domain an accounting that demands perfection, where if you lose, it means you're a loser. In the Olympics, one foot out of line can make all the difference. But when we come to Rosh Hashanah we must try to judge ourselves as God judges us. All of us are beinonim, at an intermediate level. We need to imagine our

scale in heaven equally balanced between mitzvot and averot.

Every one of us is in the same boat this Rosh Hashanah, t'luim v'omdim, left hanging, waiting with trepidation for what the year will bring. May we fight the tendency towards the extremes of arrogance or harsh self-criticism within ourselves. Let us see every mitzvah we do as possibly changing the balance of the whole world for the good. Then you and I can admit that we are not tzaddikim gemurim or reshaim gemurim, but that even so we have a divinely-given power to change our lives and change the world.