



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Vaetchanan

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August 20, 2016  
Vaetchanan/Nachamu

**Nachamu and The Olympics**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Vaetchanan/Nachamu >  
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## **ABSTRACT**

We are taught that everything one sees or hears contains a lesson for us in our divine service. What can the Olympics, now in progress in Rio, teach us about *Shabbat Nachamu*, about consolation, about our relationship with humanity, about our relationship with G-d?

What can a gold medal teach us about a gold standard?

The theme of *Shabbat Nachamu* is comfort and consolation after pain and destruction. And the gold standard in comforting someone is genuine caring.

Genuine care is far less common than its opposite: pretending to care, putting on a mask of concern, plating over a base metal with gold. Genuine caring is connecting with the source of gold and working toward being gold through and through.

Going for the gold in the Olympics serves to teach us three lessons: 1) pure, not plated, gold, is the standard; 2) it takes a lifetime of practice to perform for a few minutes; 3) a millisecond can make the difference between winning gold and going home empty-handed.

**THE OLYMPICS:  
LESSONS FROM THE GOLD STANDARD**

**1. Jewish Olympic Categories (Humor)**

DECATHLON

In the Olympics, the decathlon consists of ten field-and-track events. The Jewish version consists of a *minyán* of ten *daveners*. Each member of the group must begin davening with ten volumes of Mishnah on his back. Every passing minute, another volume is added until a team member can no longer angle the body enough for a complete *shuckle*. While yeshiva *bucherim* in Jerusalem are favored to win this event, other teams have promised not to bow down to the opposition – which could be a problem for this particular event.

SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING

Taking place in an Olympic-sized *mikvah*, this event is sure to make a splash. The person to dunk nine times the fastest wins.

BALANCE BEAM

The accountant or bookkeeper that balances this synagogue's books in the shortest amount of time – or the generous benefactor that covers the shortfall – will be declared winner.

DREAM TEAM

This year's Dream Team will not consist of the USA's highly favored men's basketball team, but rather, an overpriced team of psychoanalysts that will analyze and interpret the dreams of this year's Olympic hopefuls.

MOHEL MARATHON

Each certified *mohel* must run a marathon and perform a *bris* at each kilometer mark. This is the only event that allows alcohol – for the babies of course. There is also a version of this event with hurdles.

## NACHAS RELAY

Designed for Bubbies and Zaydies, the proud grandparents will have two minutes to relay glowing stories about their grandchildren. Whoever boasts the most about their *einiklach*, wins gold.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Current Events: The Olympics

Hosted in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the 2016 Summer Olympics are coming to a close.

One would not be vilified for assuming that Jews are not best known for their athletic achievements. But one might be a tad misinformed. Fact is that “between 1896 and 2014, Jewish athletes have won at least 345 medals in Olympic Games competition.”<sup>2</sup> This, of course is not counting this year’s Olympics where, so far, United States gymnast, Alexandra Rosa “Aly” Raisman has won a silver medal in gymnastics and a team gold all around.

Aly is a legend. In the 2012 Summer Games in London, she won gold in the floor exercise to the tune of *Hava Nagila*.<sup>3</sup> And let’s not forget Yarden Gerbi, who this year took home the bronze medal in the women’s judo.<sup>4</sup>

As we all know, the top three finishers in an Olympic competition receive medals. The first place winner receives gold, second place winner goes home with silver, and the third with bronze.

So it’s interesting that this week’s Haftorah mentions gold and silver...

And that brings us to this question:

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.haruth.com/jhumor/Jhumor13.html#Jewish Olympics](http://www.haruth.com/jhumor/Jhumor13.html#Jewish%20Olympics).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/jewishmedalists.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://religionnews.com/2016/08/06/gymnast-aly-raisman-is-one-of-top-jewish-athletes-to-watch/>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-judoka-yarden-gerbi-takes-home-bronze-at-rio/>

We are taught that everything one sees or hears contains a lesson for us in our divine service.

What can we, as Jews, learn from the Olympics?<sup>5</sup> What can the gold medal teach us about the gold standard of living, and on this *Shabbat Nachamu* (the “Shabbat of Consolation”) about bringing solace to others?

### 3. Haftorah from Isaiah

After three weeks of mourning and sadness, we now begin seven weeks of consolation. For the next seven weeks, starting with this Shabbat, every Haftorah focuses on this theme.

Today, we read the following words from the Prophet Isaiah:

*“Be comforted, be comforted, My people,” says your G-d. Bid Jerusalem take heart and proclaim to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned...<sup>6</sup>*

After the destruction of the Temple on *Tisha B’Av* comes the consolation of Israel. Yes, you have been hurt, says Isaiah, but now be comforted and empowered. Know that it is time to pick yourself up and rebuild. Then he proceeds to discuss various ways to transcend pain and ensure that nothing is ever broken again.

Let us now focus on one segment of the Haftorah which discusses falsehood, fake deities, and idol worship:

*And to whom then, will you liken G-d? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? An idol? The craftsman casts it, the goldsmith plates it with gold, the silversmith casts for it silver chains. A tree is set apart, he [the idolater] chooses one that will not rot; he seeks a skillful craftsman, to set up an image that will not be moved.*

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<sup>5</sup> See here for a comprehensive take on sports and soul here: <http://www.meaning-fulllife.com/shoftim-olympic-thoughts/>.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:1-2.

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? Have you not been told from the beginning? Do you not understand the foundations of the earth?*

*He is the One who sits above the vault of the earth, [whose] inhabitants are like grass hoppers. [He is the One] who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in, who brings princes to naught and makes rulers of the earth like nothing. They are scarcely planted and scarcely sown; their stock has barely taken root in the ground. When He blows on them, they wither, and the wind carries them away like straw.*

*“To whom, then, will you liken Me that I should be like him?” says the Holy One.<sup>7</sup>*

The Prophet Isaiah cannot understand how it could be possible to compare anything in existence to the Creator of the Universe. Knowing truth, how could one ever presume that something fleeting and false is even remotely comparable to G-d?

How can one logically compare the Creator of All Existence and everything therein, to a mere material that G-d created? It is illogical, even without factoring in faith.

Thus, Isaiah is saying, the key to redemption and rebuilding, to consolation and comfort, is remembering the truth we have embedded within us and seeing everything else – from gold, to silver, to wood – for what it is: created matter, not eternal spirit.

#### **4. The Natures of Falsity and Idolatry**

An obvious question arises: Why does Isaiah describe false deities in such a complex manner – metal melted down then plated over in gold and adorned with silver chains? Or, carved out of hardwood that does not rot? Why this convoluted way of describing idols? Why not simply say a graven image, or a golden idol, or a wooden idol? We all know, and the Golden Calf is a good example, that idols can be forged from solid gold as well, so why all this detail of idol engineering?

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 40:18-25.

Perhaps the Prophet Isaiah is trying to teach us something about the nature of falsity and the essence of idolatry. Truth is through-and-through; falsehood is one material covering another. Truth reveals. Deceit conceals.

Idolatry, in addition to an issue of faith, is also an issue of logic. Believing in one G-d as the source and creator of all makes more rational sense than believing that elements of life have power in and of themselves.

And this is Isaiah's message: The essence of idolatry is thinking or believing that an element of creation is an entity unto itself.<sup>8</sup> But an idol is an element of creation that belies its core, the same way gold-plate belies what is underneath – a baser metal. We look at it and, at first glance, we assume that what we see is what we get. We think that this thing is self-sustaining and independent of all else. But when we look a little deeper, we discover that there is a lot more going on. The harder we look and the deeper we dig, the more layers we find and the more we realize what we don't know.

What we thought was pure gold is not.

Idol worship is worshipping the surface and ignoring the inner truth.

G-d, through His prophet, is teaching us this lesson: When you have G-d, the Creator of Universe, the core of it all, pure gold, how can you compare Him to anything so base as a graven image?

## 5. Maimonides on Monotheism

The great 13th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, stresses that this logical principle of monotheism has been handed down from parent to child, generation to generation, since Abraham. As Maimonides states:

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<sup>8</sup> This seems to be implied by the Rambam, beg. Laws of Idolatry. See at length Likkutei Sichot, vol. 30, pp. 13-24.

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve... Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one G-d who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other G-d among all the other entities.<sup>9</sup>

[As an aside: Interesting to note how Maimonides named this section of laws, *Avodat Kochavim*, literally, "Service of the Stars."<sup>10</sup> People worship stars, star athletes, Hollywood stars, star celebrities. It is like gold-plating human beings. There is nothing wrong with admiring people of course, and, if they are righteous, wishing to emulate and learn from them. But we should train ourselves to be the stars, and above the stars, not worship them.]

The idea of recognizing G-d was passed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob passed it on to his children, who passed it on to theirs, on and on in an unbroken chain until this very day.<sup>11</sup>

This means, that every single Jew, from the greatest rabbi to the tiniest baby, from the most learned Torah scholar to the most ardent skeptic is imbued from birth with the faith, certainly, but also the logic that there is one G-d and only one gold standard worth striving for.

The only question is: What steps do we take to bring this gold home?

Here are three practical suggestions.

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<sup>9</sup> Laws of Idolatry, 1:3.

<sup>10</sup> See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 20, p. 14, fn. #28 for a discussion on the name of these laws.

<sup>11</sup> Laws of Idolatry 1:3.



## 6. Personal Lesson #1: Gold Standard

Isolate one element of your life – it could be the work you do, the food you eat, your social (online or offline) network, the things you strive for – and, contemplating that element, ask yourself this question: Is this something plated in gold and silver, or is it *inherently* valuable?

Take your job, for example. Surely there are many elements of your job that you love, just as there are some you do not like so much (or even despise). Do you worship your work as an end unto itself, as your gold standard, or is it just a means to an end? What can you do to make your work *inherently* valuable? Might you invite your coworkers to your office once a week for coffee and wisdom? Might you sincerely ask your co-workers (say three a day) how they are feeling? What else can you do?

Much of life is not gold, but gold-plate. [Indeed, the Kabbalistic word for the material matter of this world is *kelipah*, which means husk or shell. Because like a shell, materialism conceals the fruit within]. We all have relationships (and other elements) that, at their core, are a cheap metal – or not a metal altogether, but just wood. And, either because we are comfortable or because we don't want to face reality, we tend to gild them over.

What can you do to turn those relationships into actual gold? How can you make them a genuine asset in your life?

This applies, of course, also to the challenges of our lives: Not to see any setback or destruction as an end to itself, but as a means to building something greater, as the Haftorah indicates.

And this is how we comfort each other, *nachamu nachamu ami*: With genuine, not gold plated, concern.

## 7. Personal Lesson #2: Olympic Trials

Leading up to the Olympics, every nation selects its best athletes in each field through a process of trials, until the best are chosen for the team.

The Olympics provide a powerful lesson in bettering our day-to-day lives, enhancing our relationships, as well as elevating our relationship with G-d: it takes a lifetime of practice to perform for a few minutes.

Life is obviously a little more complex than a race or a gymnastics routine. The lesson however is clear: the more we practice, the harder we study, the better we perfect our performance.

## 8. Personal Lesson #3: Milliseconds

In the Olympics, races are usually won not by minutes or even seconds, but by the decibels of tenths or even hundreds of seconds.

Every millisecond of time is invaluable, priceless. Never tell yourself that you have all the time in the world. Every second, every millisecond, every nanosecond that passes can never be recouped. Crossing the finish line is contingent on making the most of your time.

## 9. Messianic Vision (Conclusion)

In addition to speaking of gold and silver, our Haftorah describes some profound Messianic visions:

*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 4:5.

And it concludes on this high note:

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name through the greatness of His might and the force of His power. Not one is missing.*<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, may we stand on the winners' podium, lift up our eyes on high, and see an entire world in which *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind shall see it together...* Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 40:26.