

From the Rabbi's Desk
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The Small Stories of Life

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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Growing up, I wasn't too interested in the Olympic Games. Perhaps because Argentina didn't have too many medal winners to celebrate, or perhaps because soccer (futbol for the rest of the world) was just one more sport and not the only one.

Starting a few years ago, already in the United States, I became a little more interested in the Olympic Games, especially in swimming and gymnastics. I guess, like many of you, I have a fascination with records, and as an additional bonus, the United States of America consistently wins more medals than Argentina.

As you know, this year the Olympic Games took place in Tokyo, and because of COVID-19, the focus was not so much in the opening and closing ceremonies, but more on little stories surrounding the games.

In the Torah, like in life, we have big stories. And then, again, we have small stories.

As you know, usually the small stories don't get too much press, even though the Torah and haftarah reading of the first day of Rosh Hashanah are actually small stories; stories about jealousy, suffering, and love.

What prompted the Sages to focus on small stories for some of the readings of the most important days in the Jewish calendar? Perhaps our Rabbis decided that small stories are the ones that have the potential to change our lives. After all, it is not so simple to identify ourselves with great warriors, mighty kings, or beautiful princesses.

However, everybody can sympathize with a jealous wife, a barren woman, or a loving husband.

Going back to the Olympic Games in Tokyo, they gave us a few new world records and big stories, but also a handful of small inspiring stories. These few stories are the ones I'd like to focus on this morning.

The first story is about Sifan Hassan from the Netherlands, stumbling and sprawling on the [track](#) during her heat of the women's 1,500 meters, then lifting herself up and striding from far behind to catch the other runners, passing them all to finish first.

There are many great athletes who win from start to finish. I celebrate them, but cannot find too much in common with them. However, like Sifan Hassan, many of us stumble and fall through life, and wounded, we lift ourselves up and keep running. Sometimes we are rewarded with victory. Most times with renewed energy. After all, what doesn't break you, makes you stronger.

Here is another small-big story of resilience.

Think of the weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz. She spent months stuck in Malaysia because of the pandemic, freelancing her training, building her own gym and working on weight sets she fashioned out of bamboo sticks and jugs of water. In Tokyo, Diaz became the first athlete to win a gold medal for the Philippines. She personified resilience, a description the International Olympic Committee has often applied to these Summer Games, as they went forward in a time of plague.

Simone Biles was again at the center of the news, but this time not because of her many gold medals.

Yes, the story of [Simone Biles](#) is a story of resilience as well, as she came back to the fray, winning a bronze medal on the balance beam days after pulling out of the team gymnastics competition.

However, Simone Biles' most important gift during these Olympic Games was a renewed awareness of the importance of guarding our mental and emotional health. The big story of Simone Biles winning a total of 32 Olympic and World Championship medals, becoming the most decorated gymnast in her generation and one of the greatest and most dominant gymnasts of all time, is not one I can relate to since

only once in my life have I won a third position medal, and I believe it was because the competition had only three participants.

However, Simone Biles' story of burnout, a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress, is something that hits close to home. Perhaps many of us too, at times, like Simone Biles, feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands.

We can only hope that Michael Phelps' struggle with addiction and Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka's endeavor to preserve their mental health, will bring down the barriers and stigma surrounding mental illness in our community, and will encourage those who need help, to seek and find it.

And here is yet another small story, one that you probably missed, but one I watched over and over again for inspiration.

At the center of this story there are two high jumpers, Mutaz Essa Barshim of Qatar and Gianmarco Tamberi of Italy. They chose to forgo a jump-off that could have decided the competition, but decided to share Olympic gold instead. They knew full well they would be blasted by those who claim that there must always be a single winner, that sharing is weak and — even worse — unmanly.

But Barshim and Tamberi embraced their tie and each other. They showed no doubt about what they valued most.

In a world that wishes to remind us too often that there are winners and losers, Barshim and Tamberi taught us that it doesn't have to always be the case. You don't have to lose for me to be a winner; the success of your children shouldn't preclude my children's success; and you don't have to win the largest turkey competition to enjoy a meaningful Thanksgiving with your loved ones. The "mine is better than yours" game leaves everybody participating in it anxious, fearful, and sad.

Small stories, like the ones I shared with you today, can become big stories if we can use them to transform our lives. Two high jumpers nobody heard of, a short Torah reading, a clip from the newspaper, a rabbi's dvar Torah on the first day of Rosh

Hashanah, they all have the potential to help us move from where we are to where we ought to be.

In one of the most beautiful biblical stories, Hashem says to Elijah the Prophet: "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still small voice. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:11-13).

Indeed, we can find Hashem's presence in the still small voice, and find meaning, courage, and inspiration to change and to grow in the small stories.

We all need to grow; we all can change. Like Abraham and Sarah, we must learn to communicate better; like Hagar and Ishmael our lives are many times a journey through a parched wilderness; like Elkana and Hannah, we must transform ourselves into givers, understanding that the greatest demonstration of love is to recognize what the other person needs.

And so we pray:

Master of the Universe, may the small stories out there help us with our own small stories of life.

The great shofar is sounded, but a still small voice is heard. May we hear Your still small voice calling us to become the best version of ourselves.

In this coming year, may we learn to be less competitive and more resilient, less resentful, and more caring, less anxious and more aware of our limitations and strengths.

And in your kindness, bless all of us and our loved ones with a year of courage and determination, with a year of peace and joy, with a good and sweet year.