

God's Olympics

Exodus 20:27-30-10
Haftarah: Ezekiel 43:10-27

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This past week, I've been completely engrossed in the winter Olympics. My favorite sport is figure skating. I marvel at the grace, skill and artistry of the skaters as they perform their intricate spins and jumps. I love the choreography as the Olympians tell stories with their bodies in harmony with the music. I'm particularly impressed because I can barely skate around the rink a few times without falling on my tush (not to mention trying to jump or spin)!

However, I don't enjoy listening to the commentators. Here I am marveling at the skaters and they're kvetching about it. They'll say things like: "That was only a double Lutz, and it should have been a triple." If a skater had a bad landing early in the performance and five minutes later, he or she is flying through the air, the commentator would say, "She's doing great now, but it's too bad that she didn't nail the landing on that first jump!"

I understand that skaters need to be evaluated in a competitive sport, and scrutiny motivates them to strive for excellence, but the commentators were interfering with my enjoyment of the program. Still, I couldn't press the mute button because then I would miss the music.

While experiencing this conflict, I suddenly thought: "God must feel this way." If God were watching both the video and audio tracks of our lives – complete with our thoughts and the reactions of people around us – God would surely have a similar reaction. Often we're growing, learning, and accomplishing good things, and yet we're dwelling on small mistakes.

As the Olympians strive for their gold medals, this week's portion is also focused on gold metal. Rather than earning medals, the people donate and craft gold into intricate garments for priests to wear when officiating in the tabernacle. The *parasha* then describes the ritual for preparing Aaron and his sons for their priestly service. This ceremony was understood by the *midrash* as helping Aaron atone for his role in the sin of the Golden Calf. The tabernacle ritual represented that even though the people made mistakes, God would still be with them always.

Like the Olympians, each of us has our own set of commentators, evaluating our performance in life against a certain standard. These expectations may be external or more often they may be ideas we've internalized from our parents or from society of how we should be. Likewise, these demands may be driven by our own goals and timeframes we've set for ourselves to accomplish our ambitions.

We can't eliminate our internal commentators entirely because their feedback helps us improve our technique. And yet, we have to turn their volume down and make time to turn them off. Shabbat and holidays aren't merely times for rest, but also occasions to release ourselves from the chain of internal critique.

As we strive for excellence, our tradition reminds of God's forgiving nature. By muting criticism, we can listen more closely to the music and enjoy the dance of life. In this way, we can truly go for the gold.

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