

Between the Olympics and the presidential race, not to mention the other significant election year contests, 2012 is shaping up to be a year of competition. Often, winning and losing is binary - you either win or you lose. You win, and are henceforth known as Mr. President, or you lose, and you are either a historical footnote or an inglorious one-termer. While we might commend someone's effort, the second place finisher in an election, even one who received 45% of the vote, is not likely to be consulted by the winner. That's the way life often works. It sets up binary outcomes. Success or failure, nothing in between. When you apply for a job, you get it or you don't. You can't be just a little bit pregnant.

But there are times when outcomes are not binary, when you can win even if you don't come in first place, or you can lose while winning. Today, I'm going to tell you about a baseball team which teaches us how to lose gracefully, to learn and to have fun and to win in important ways while losing. I'm also going to tell you a story about three winners who lose while winning. Winners who forgot how they won, forgot how to show gratitude, and learned no lessons on their way to reaching the highest of achievements.

What I want you keep in mind is this: The central lesson of the Yizkor memorial service, a centerpiece of Yom Kippur and other Festivals, is that we are here today but may be gone tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then one of the following days. We are mortal, our lives are limited and precious, and the way we live our lives, how we handle life's moments of triumph and moments of loss, is how we will ultimately be remembered and judged.

The book *Third Base for Life* by Josh Berkowitz is the story of perhaps the worst team ever to be invited to an invitational tournament in Cooperstown, NY. The Rashi Rams, a Jewish day school team from Massachusetts, might only have been invited because the coach wrote a stirring letter about their desire to be the first all-Jewish team to play in the tournament. They finished dead last out of 96 teams. They were the Jewish Bad News Bears, only with more losing. They did not win a single game. Most of the parents didn't want their kids to go, worried about self-esteem, public humiliation, injury, and finding kosher food. The kids, however, learned great lessons from playing in the tournament. They learned how to lose and how to get up and play again the next day. They learned how to be teammates, to help each other, to simply enjoy the experience of playing in Cooperstown. They learned to appreciate the little things: A good catch. A good pitch. A good throw to first base. One stolen base. One strikeout of one of the best players in the game. As the losses piled up, sticking to the program was itself an achievement. They met and became friends with kids who might never have spoken to a Jew before. When they grow up and lose a job, and spend a year, two years, applying and being rejected again and again, they will remember the lesson they learned from playing baseball.¹

Parents who try to protect their children from failure are doing their children a disservice. Mature adults need to know how to lose, how to learn from the experience, and how to recover and bounce back. Parents need to let their kids fail, so they will learn how to pick themselves up and try again.

1. Forget the Olympics and going for the gold. Books about baseball show kids why it's OK—even good—not to win. By Marjorie Ingall, Tablet Magazine, July 31, 2012

The columnist Jeff Jacoby wrote a powerful column about several winning olympic athletes² and how they responded to their victories. He wrote about Michael Phelps, Usian Bolt, and Carli Lloyd:

Michael Phelps is the first person in history ever to win 22 medals at the Olympics. After his final victory, he said, "I am now the best swimmer of all time. I am the Michael Jordan of my generation - and more. I did everything that I set out to do, and I did it perfectly."

Notice that he had not a word of thanks or appreciation to his coach, or to his parents, or to his teammates, and not a word of tribute to the swimmers whom he defeated.

Usian Bolt is the Jamaican sprinter who became the first person ever to win Olympic gold in the 100 meter, 200 meter sprints, and 4X100 meter relay sprint in two consecutive olympics. He is widely regarded as the fastest person ever. After his victories, he said, "I came here to London to become a legend, and I am a legend," and "I am now the greatest athlete who has ever lived. I am a living legend."

Not a word of thanks to those who ran with him in the relay races. Not a word of thanks to those who trained him, not a word of thanks to those who financed him, not a word of thanks to his parents.

Carli Lloyd is a tremendous athlete who scored both goals that gave the United States Women's Soccer Team a 2-1 victory over Japan. As the Olympics began, she was not even on the starting lineup but she stepped in when one of her teammates was injured. She said: "When someone tells me that I can't do something, I decide that I am going to do it. That is what being a champion is all about. And that is what I am. Have no doubt about it: I am a champion!"

Didn't the rest of the players on her team have something to do with the victory? Compare her words to those of her teammate Abby Wambach:

"This was a year's worth of work and the sacrifices all of us have had to make for our friends and families, for the players that didn't make the roster, this goes out to all of our fans that cheered us on last summer and were equally as heartbroken as we were [when we lost]. This year has been trials and tribulations, we lost to Japan a few times, and this win feels like everything has come full circle. I'm so proud of this team for never giving up. It was a team effort for this entire tournament and it shows what it takes to win championships -- it's teamwork and loyalty and trusting in each other."

The Yizkor memorial service begins, "Adonai, what are human beings that you take account of them, mortals, that you care for them. Humans are as a breath, their days like a passing shadow. In the morning they flourish anew, in the evening they shrivel and die." We are mortal, our lives are limited. But Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*, said, "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself. It means thinking of yourself less."

Sergeant 1st Class Leroy Petry, a US Army Ranger, was not thinking of himself when, already wounded in both legs, he picked up a grenade which had landed near two of his fellow Rangers, lying wounded on the ground. As he threw the grenade it exploded, destroying his right hand, riddling his body with shrapnel, but his action saved the lives of his comrades. He is only the second living soldier since the Vietnam War to receive the Medal of Honor.

2. I am grateful to my colleague Rabbi Jack Reimer for sharing a sermon based on Jacoby's column, which can be found at <http://www.jeffjacoby.com/12129/after-the-olympics-where-the-humility>.

Yet Petry doesn't brag about his accomplishment. "It's not courage," he says. "It was love. I looked at the two men next to me that day and they were no different than my own children or my wife. I did what anyone would have done." We need more humility like that of Sgt. Petry in the world.

Our lives are precious, and we ask of God, "Teach us to count each day, that we may acquire a heart of wisdom." May we live lives of humility, modeled after Sgt. Petry. May we learn from our losses and have the strength and courage to try again the next day. Let us live our lives wisely, taking the best of the qualities and lessons that those around us and those who preceded us can teach us. Let us live our lives with humility and gratitude, remembering those upon whose shoulders we stand, those who supported us and taught us. Let us remember that we are loved, by God, by those closest to us, by those who gave us life, who nurtured us, raised us, supported us, and that we in turn can share that love with those who surround us today.

May we be strengthened by the blessings of love, and may we spread the light of our love and God's divine love on all whose lives touch ours.