

The well-known quotation "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" is attributed to UCLA Bruins football coach Henry Russell ("Red") Sanders, although it is also associated with Green Bay Packers coaching legend Vince Lombardi. My friend Rabbi Shaina Bacharach observed that while it may be a motto for sports, it is important to note that it is not, or should not be, a motto for life.

Consider this sports shoe commercial¹ from this summer's olympic games. I am not mentioning the brand because I don't want to give them the publicity.

Picture a series of images of some of the world's greatest athletes with faces of absolute concentration, and hear in your mind the voice of Willem Dafoe. The Green Goblin Willem Dafoe. He says:

Am I a bad person? Tell me. Am I?

I'm single minded. I'm deceptive. I'm obsessive. I'm selfish.

Does that make me a bad person? Am I a bad person? Am I?

I have no empathy. I don't respect you. I'm never satisfied. I have an obsession with power. I'm irrational. I have zero remorse. I have no sense of compassion. I'm delusional. I'm maniacal.

You think I'm a bad person? Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Am I?

I think I'm better than everyone else. I want to take what's yours and never give it back.

What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine.

[On the screen at this point, we see: Winning isn't for everyone.]

Narration continues: Am I a bad person? Tell me. Am I? Does that make me a bad person? Tell me. Does it?

The commercial wants us to acknowledge that to be a winner means to be selfish, maniacal, single-minded, obsessive, arrogant, and to have no empathy or respect for others. And it wants us to conclude that using one particular sports shoe, which I will not name, is the best way to develop those qualities and be a winner.

The current CEO of this company is being replaced because of tumbling stock prices and record losses, as well as a decline in the brand. I wish it was the case that consumer's didn't like the hard core tone of commercials like this one, but the sad fact is that messages like "You don't win silver; you lose gold" have been part of their culture for decades.

The difference between gold and silver and bronze can be narrow. In the 2024 Olympics, Sha'carri Richardson came in second in the 100 meters by 15/100ths of a second. In 2012, 17/100th of a second was the difference between gold and bronze in the the women's 400 meter. Basketball games can be decided by a single point after playing 60 minutes and scoring more than 200 points between the two teams. Professional sports leagues like the NFL strive for parity among teams in order to increase the excitement of competition. They want every team to have a legitimate shot at winning. The Olympics have always honored the top three competitors in every event, perhaps to recognize that the competitors are all among the best in the world. They broaden the category of winning to recognize the achievement of being one of the three best in the world.

One of the quotations from the commercial is found in Pirke Avot [5:10], which clearly answers the question, "Am I a bad person?" Pirke Avot says, "One who says, "What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine" – is wicked." The Talmud would agree that if the perspective of

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwLergHG81c>

the commercial is what it takes to successfully engage in competitive sports, that a Jew should decline to participate. The Talmud tends to look on doing mitzvot and learning Torah with favor and anything else, including sports, with a bit of contempt, such as in this prayer:

"I give thanks to You, Adonai my God and God of my ancestors, that You have placed my portion among those who sit in the house of learning and the house of prayer, and did not cast my lot among those who frequent theaters and circuses." [Berakhot 28b]

Circuses, in the ancient Greek and Roman world, were places for competitions such as chariot races and gladiatorial combat. My message here, though, is not anti-competition. There is also a strand within Judaism that admires the human body as an image of God and considers taking care of it to be an obligation:

A story is told of Hillel the Elder, [Vayikra Rabbah 34:3]

He had just finished teaching and was walking away. His students followed after him, asking, "where are you going?" "To fulfill a mitzvah!" he replied. Ever curious, his students kept after him. "What mitzvah?" they asked. Hillel replied, "To wash in a bathhouse! Just as there are people that scour and wash the statues of kings so too we humans, created in the image of the Holy One, must care for and wash our bodies."

Judaism is a body positive tradition. We are embodied beings and our liturgy enumerates the ways that we can use our body to glorify God.

Therefore the organs that you set within us and the wind and the breath that you breathed into our nostrils, and the tongue that you placed in our mouth - all of them shall thank and bless and praise and glorify, exalt and revere, be devoted, sanctify and crown Your Name, our sovereign. Let every mouth thank You; every tongue pledge loyalty; every knee bend to You; every erect spine bow before You; all hearts shall be loyal to You; and every fiber of our being chant Your name, as it is written: "Every bone in my body cries out, Adonai who is like You?"

To care for the body, to wash at the bathhouse, says Hillel, is a mitzvah. To move our bodies in prayer in any way that we are able is an expression of our devotion. Maimonides the physician understood the importance of physical exercise to keep our bodies healthy.

Blessed be Adonai our God who fashions the human body with wisdom, creating openings, arteries, glands, and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design Blessed be God, healer of flesh, who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways.

I want us to be well-rounded people, living full Jewish lives, and enjoying and appreciating the artistry of people who have devoted themselves to demonstrating the wonders of the human body. The Talmudic distaste for arenas of competition had more to do with the level of cruelty exhibited, dedicated to idolatrous images and statues of gods. A circus was a theater of near certain death for at least one of the gladiators and for the unfortunate slaves or Jews or criminals thrown to the wild beasts, for the entertainment and amusement of the spectators. Our performance spaces and arenas contain musicians, dancers, and singers who have taken a natural ability, a gift of God, and spent tens of thousands of hours perfecting a craft.

Leaving aside the role of violence in contact sports like hockey or football, it can be joyful and exciting and beautiful to watch competition between individuals or teams, a group of people working in graceful coordination.

The Pirke Avot [5:10] that I referenced earlier concludes with, [One who says:] "what's mine is yours and what's yours is yours" is a pious person.

Do we want to raise the next generation in the model of the sports shoe commercial, in which greed, power and obsessive selfishness are acceptable in service of victory, the only thing that matters? Or do we prefer the model of the end of that passage from Pirke Avot, in which the highest mark of a human being is to be a kind and giving person?

Part of becoming a good person is learning how and when to compete. Not every human interaction should be competitive. Driving down the Beltline should not be a competition. Which child deserves the most love should not be a competition. What we're doing here today is not a competition.

We are here to help each other succeed. Atonement is a cooperative exercise. That's why the prayers of Vidui, confession, are all in the plural – Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu We help each other, we make each other better. The idea as I see it is that we all have shortcomings. Your good points make up for my mistakes, and my positive points make up for your shortcomings. So as a collective Israel, we make each other better.

Here's the kind of people we want to be²:

In 2012, Spanish athlete Iván Fernández Anaya was competing in a cross-country race in Burlada, Navarre. He was running second, some distance behind race leader Abel Mutai. As they entered the finishing straight, he saw Mutai mistakenly pull up about 10 meters before the finish, thinking he had already crossed the line. Fernández Anaya quickly caught up with him, but instead of exploiting Mutai's mistake to speed past and claim an unlikely victory, he stayed behind and, using gestures, guided the Kenyan to the line and let him cross first.

"I didn't deserve to win it," said Fernández Anaya. "I did what I had to do. He was the rightful winner. He created a gap that I couldn't have closed if he hadn't made a mistake. As soon as I saw he was stopping, I knew I wasn't going to pass him."

Fernández Anaya's coach, Martín Fiz said, "It was a very good gesture of honesty. A gesture of the kind that isn't made any more. Or rather, of the kind that has never been made. A gesture that I myself wouldn't have made. I certainly would have taken advantage of it to win."

Fiz says his pupil's actions do him credit in human if not athletic terms. "The gesture has made him a better person but not a better athlete. He has wasted an occasion. Winning always makes you more of an athlete. You have to go out to win."

Fernández Anaya responded, "But even if they had told me that winning would have earned me a place on the Spanish team for the European championships, I wouldn't have done it"

A journalist asked Ivan, "Why did you do that?" Ivan replied, "My dream is that someday we can have a kind of community life where we push and help each other to win."

The journalist insisted, "But why did you let the Kenyan win?" Ivan replied, "I didn't let him win, he was going to win. The race was his." The journalist insisted again, "But you could have won!" Ivan looked at him and replied, "But what would be the merit of my victory? What would be the honor in that medal? What would my mother think of that?"

Fernández Anaya's coach is wrong. Winning does not make you a better athlete if it comes at the expense of your soul. A great athlete is first and foremost a human being, reflecting the image of God.

2. <https://www.fairplayinternational.org/honesty-of-the-long-distance-runner>

I cannot summarize my message to you today better than Iván Fernández Anaya, who concluded:

“Values are passed on from generation to generation. What values are we teaching our children? Let us not teach our kids the wrong ways and means to win. Instead, let us pass on the beauty and humanity of a helping hand. Because honesty and ethics are winning!”
Amen, Iván Fernández Anaya, Amen.