

A Tale of Two Cities

Returning from Jerusalem for a brief visit to Atlanta, I discovered that the city had been transmuted into a giant Olympic feeding frenzy. A full year before the beginning of the Event, everything was an official Olympic something or other. On a huge billboard astride the expressway in the midst of the city is a ticking clock which, in a secularized apotheosis of the sacred counting of *sefirat haomer*, counts the days to the Olympics. On the day I arrived it pronounced in bright, digital letters five feet high: "313 days to go."

At the minyan, a congregant approached me with the inevitable joke: "Rabbi, let's designate ourselves as 'Beth Jacob, the official synagogue of the 1996 Olympics.' There are official everything else. Why not an official synagogue?"

I responded diplomatically that while his idea had a certain cachet to it, I thought I would beg off.

He was perceptive: "Aren't you at all excited that the Olympics are coming to Atlanta?"

"Well, since you ask," I replied, allowing the diplomatic immunity to fall away, "the truth is that the Olympics contain bad memories for me."

He was so shocked by my response that I feel obligated to spell out to him, and to all others who might not understand, why a forty-year resident of Atlanta can be less than enthusiastic about his city's moment in glory.

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Atlanta is my favorite Galut city, and I am happy that the delightful town to which I came a generation ago has now metamorphosed into a major, but still delightful, international city. But I must shamelessly confess that, having just left Jerusalem a few hours earlier, I found the pervasive Olympomania somewhat unsettling.

Unsettling, because deep within me there was bestirred an ancient spiritual conflict. The Olympics, after all, are not just another sporting event. In every way, they are redolent of Hellenism, which represents an approach to life diametrically opposed to Judaism: paganism, etc., polytheism, the deification of the physical. This Hellenism was a powerful ideological force that posed a major challenge to the integrity of ancient (and, let it be said, modern) Jewry.

When the Greeks captured Jerusalem, the torch-bearing runners brought with them a culture which rocked the classic faith of the Jews to its very foundations. The conquerors attempted to transform Jerusalem into a Greek *polis*. They constructed gymnasias and placed busts of their deities throughout the city. The picture is desolating: the wellspring of pure monotheism, the source of the Invisible God of Israel, the very antithesis of paganism—Jerusalem was now decorated with idolatrous images.

Greek culture was insidiously attractive. Inevitably, many Jews assimilated unto Hellenistic ways. They participated proudly in Greek games, and wrestled naked with the Greeks in amphitheaters built by Herod. The body, which in Judaism was important only as the handmaiden of the soul, was glorified, while the soul itself was relegated to obscurity.

Thus began the classic confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism, the struggle between the historic Jerusalem and the historic Athens. This titanic battle against the great anti-spiritual cultures of the ancient world (see the comments in *Avoda Zara* 18b about stadiums, theaters and circuses) never really came to a resolution. It continues to this day.

Granted, today's Olympics no longer represent Greek civilization, nor, for that matter, do they even represent amateur athletics at their best and for their own sake. They have become transmogrified into a professionalized multinational business whose primary purpose is international prestige and pecuniary gain—which are the most hallowed pagan practices of today. Nevertheless, it was disconcerting to leap, in a few hours, from the seat of ancient Jerusalem to a modern town which was buried in the unmistakable detritus of ancient Hellas and all that it represents for Jewish history. Athens is alive and well in 1996 Atlanta.

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But there was more to my Olympic unease than what occurred twenty centuries ago. It was also what occurred just over twenty years ago.

The Olympic committee would rather not talk about it, and in the eyes of many I will be guilty of unsportsmanlike conduct for bringing it up, but I think a Jew needs to remember it. I refer to the 1972 Munich Olympics, the one in which eleven athletes were

murdered by Arab terrorists. They were killed for only one reason: they were Jews.

The civilized world was aggrieved and stunned. There were calls for the Olympics to be cancelled or postponed—some serious gesture to mark the cold-blooded murder of eleven athletes who were participating in the quadrennial symbol of what the Olympics supposedly stand for: decency, sportsmanship, the brotherhood of man.

But the Games (as in God, the “g” is always reverentially capitalized) continued. To be sure, there were expressions of regret by the Olympic committee (chairman Avery Brundage, in an egregiously insensitive memorial statement, equated the murders with a threatened earlier walkout of black athletes because of racist Rhodesia’s participation) and there was even a twenty-four hour suspension of the Games. But to cancel them would give a victory to terrorism; the Games must go on. And so forth. (We have since then heard the same justifications many times over, in different circumstances. Substitute “peace process” for “Games” and, in a painful historic irony, the Israeli government now dutifully mumbles the identical mantra after each terrorist atrocity in Israel.)

Thus the decathlons continued, and the 1,000 meter races, and the gymnastics, and the diving events, and the water polo. While eleven Israeli Olympic athletes were buried and eleven families grieved, it all went on, in grotesque fulfillment of the will of the cold-eyed Olympic masterminds whose singular devotion to the Games would not be deterred.

All of which should not have been surprising, for it was the same Olympic steering committee that had caved in to Hitler’s racist demands in the 1936 Munich Olympics.

The Games will be good for Atlanta, the region’s economy and its international image. It couldn’t have happened to a finer town, and certainly I am proud of what Atlanta has achieved.

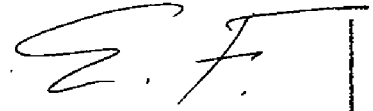
But the Olympic Committee will have to forgive this one person for not getting overly excited about it. It is not only the fateful ancient visions that the Olympic torch conjures up, but also the depressing twentieth century Olympic memories that it invokes.

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It is estimated that throughout the world, some three and one half

billion—billion!—people will be watching the Olympic events. The committee will surely not take offense if that number is reduced by one.

Nor will they mind, I am sure, if henceforth I will be spelling Olympic games with a lower case “g.”

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'E. F.', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

EMANUEL FELDMAN