# GOING FOR THE GOLD GETTING THE BRONZE

**Rabbi Dan Moskovitz**

**August 15, 2008**

I've been watching a bit of the Olympics like many of you. I haven't been able to see much, a few minutes each night before I fall asleep. Two things have stood out for me in watching the competitions. One Michael Phelps is the Lance Armstrong, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods of swimming. God may have created every human being in the image of God – and in Michael Phelps' case that image was part man and part fish. I saw the other night – some very CSI like analysis of his body size and flexibility as it relates to swimming. Phelps the report explained has double jointed at the elbows and knees, 14" feet and dinner plat size hands that together act as paddles and flippers under water, his legs are short for his body size and his torso is long – the man was quite literally born to swim. It's truly amazing.

The second observation that I have made while watching the Olympics is, Michael Phelps' 6 gold medals aside the most exiting competition is not the race for the Gold, but the battle for the Bronze. In my opinion while it is wonderful to see who will win, I am always drawn to cheer for the one who doesn't lose.

In 1995, a study was carried out by social psychologists Victoria Medvec, Scott Madey and Thomas Gilovich on psychology of Olympic medal winners. The study showed that athletes who won the bronze medal were significantly happier with their winning than those athletes who won the silver medal. The silver medalists were more frustrated because they had missed the gold medal, while the bronze medalists were simply happy to have received any honors at all (instead of a fourth place) [1]. This is more even pronounced in knockout competitions, such as the soccer World Cup, or the NCAA Final Four where the bronze medals are achieved by winning a playoff, whereas silver medals are awarded after a defeat in the final.

The truth of the mater is that without a 3rd place finisher, without a bronze medal the competitions would seem incomplete. Imagine if they only gave out a Gold medal no silver, no bronze. It would be all about one person, too ego centric and too exclusive. For that matter two is really not much better than one in this instance. The silver medalist is merely the guy who didn't win, with no bronze behind him he or she can't even say, "well at least I didn't come in third." No the number three has a sense of fullness to it, of completion. Like the old saying, three is a crowd – everyone is represented; or maybe better put like the old TV show, three is company.

We know this in our own colloquialisms as well of course. Three is the predominant way to categorize things.

What do we call the alphabet? *The ABCs*

What do you tell your kids when they are trying something and can't get it right – *Third times' the charm – unless it takes more than that of course*

What does the starter say for a race? *On your mark, get set, go*

You tell a joke it has to be, *A priest, a Minister and a Rabbi* – leave one out and you risk offending by not including in your offending humor.

Nobody stands up at a wedding and shouts two cheers for the bride and groom

You go to Starbucks – its Tall, Vente and Grande – even made up words have a hierarchy.

And in those cases when the expanse of society has necessitated a fourth category; as in small, medium, large and extra large. It has the clear

connotation of outside the norm, beyond the scope of what is necessary. It just doesn't fit – pun intended.

Our rabbis of course knew this as well – in the Mishnah – Rabbi Shimon the Righteous proclaims, *al shosha d'varim ha olam omed*. The world stands solidly upon three legs Torah, Prayer and Deeds of loving kindness. The image is leave any one of those out and the world collapses in disarray. The Vahavtah gives the same message love God with all your heart, soul and might – miss one of these and you have not loved God completely – or put more positively – do all three of these and you can feel a closeness to God that would otherwise escape you if you just did two or one.

Three is a very Jewish number, three patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was three days journey from Egypt when the Israelites encountered God in the desert. Traditional Jews prayer morning, noon and night, Hebrew verbs have three letter roots which serve as the foundation for the whole lexicon of Jewish expression - the list could go on. One of the most powerful and often asked about instances of three in Jewish tradition is the custom of placing three shovels of earth on a grave at a funeral. I am frequently asked, Rabbi why three shovels of earth – they usually say dirt – but in rabbinical school Rabbi Wolli Kaelter taught us to say earth. He used to say Herr Moskovitz (Wolli was from Germany) – one does not invite the mourners to throw dirt on the dead.

We place three shovels of earth for the same reasons that have been mentioned because three is complete it shows intention and a fullness of action. One could be inadvertent, two is somehow just not enough, but three and you have fulfilled the mitzvah – you have done your part – you have been the gentle hands that pull the covers of earth around a love one and tuck them in.

One of my favorite stories from the Talmud is about the mezuzah and why it rests on an angle on your doorposts. Hillel said it should be

upright, Shamai said it should lie flat. And in a rare moment of understanding between these two completing schools of thought they came to a third way, a compromise position. It rests on an angle because the key to a peaceful home to *Shalom Bayit* is compromise – finding a third way. A third way is by the way the slogan for the centrist political party in Israel founded by Ariel Sharon – when left and right could not agree he created a new path - a third way. And without him and that third way – modern Israel is some what lost on the road to peace.

The world stands on three legs, re-arrange them however you want but without at least three – life becomes unstable and teeters precariously toward disaster. What are the three pillars of your life, what are the three things that make your world complete. It may be easy to name the one thing, and we may feel more inclusive by being able to pick two; but if you had to limit your list to only three what would your three legs of stability be?

Tonight when you watch the Olympics I hope that you will join me in rooting for those competing for the bronze – because they give meaning to the achievements of all the others, they place it all in perspective – without them something would indeed be missing. They are not to be forgotten as last of the best, or even remember as first of the worst – no rather they are the essential pillar of the competition the bridge between just making it and not making it at all. We live most of the moments of our lives on that bridge – balanced precariously between success and failure – celebrate the bronze medals and moments in your life they are hard fought and hard won – for those times when we make it across the finish line of life just in time – for those for sure we deserve a medal and congratulations.