BACHARTA BACHAYIM – CHOOSE LIFE
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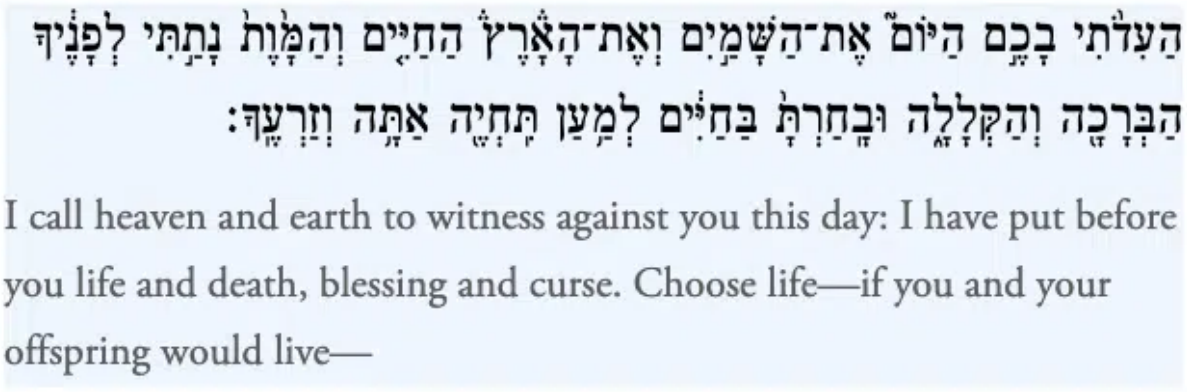
If you have been following the Olympics or you have been living on planet earth this an active internet connection for the last week then you are most likely aware of the great debate over perhaps the least debateable thing to happen in the 2020 Olympics (yes we all know its 2021 but they didn't change the signage so Ill use their nomenclature.

This week Olympic gymnast Simone Biles the most decorated American gymnast of all time followed tennis star Naomi Osaka in prioritizing her mental health and well-being over her pursuit of an Olympic medal. Both Simone and Naomi defied expectations, societal pressures, and humbly and bravely listened to their heart. In doing so both athletes taught all of us one of the most important lessons in Torah, one of the most important lessons in life.


הַעִדֹתִי בָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ
הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ׃

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—

Choose life our Torah and now Naomi and Simone teach us.

We often miss the lessons in the Torah, buried as they are in ancient story, obscured at times by language and metaphor, so who better than an Olympian athlete to teach us what our tradition has been espousing for generations. Well maybe rabbis and cantors and Jewish educators are better to teach torah than athletes but as a back-up gold medal winners are not a bad stand in for the rabbi. I mean hagbah, lifting the torah could almost be an Olympic event, the stakes, 40 days of fasting if you drop it are nearly as high.

Im kidding of course but the lesson of this moment calls out from our ancient text as it does from the Olympic stage.

Rarely are there things in life that ought to be practiced at all costs. In fact only three commandments meet that standard in Jewish law; the prohibition against murder, sexual crimes and idolatry. All others, all other mitzvot are to be set aside to for you mental and

physical health. B'hay B'chem live by the words of torah our tradition teaches, do not die by them

Dedication is admirable. But knowing when there comes a time to pull out, since otherwise the costs will be too steep, is one of life's wisdom moments. No one can know it other than each person herself or himself.

Everyone reaches a breaking point, and honoring it, or rather honoring the prevention of it, is vital.

Only each person can really know the difference between growth that comes from great discomfort and actual crisis.

Simone Biles seems to have arrived at her moment where she knew, despite the prospective gold medals, she'd reached her near breaking point.

It takes a special strength of character to do what Simone Biles did.

At the same time, I hope it's not the pressure for perfectionism that triggered Simone's choice to pull out after a rough week. Perfectionism is so debilitating. It should not be the barometer by which choices are made. Yet, in the world of Olympics, that's precisely the metric. Once an Olympian reaches the summit of his or her sport, the pressures that weigh on them can become unbearable.

Most of us are not Olympic athletes and these types of struggles we cannot relate to.

Yet we all wrestle with our own personal tug-of-wars, of push and pull, knowing the right balance. Simone Biles demonstrated a real maturity, that the real gold is in listening to our own hearts. The answer lies within each of us and if we can't find it or hear it there, the answer lies in Torah and Jewish tradition. In fact I would argue we need to consult but heart and Torah when confronted with a dilemma on the scale of what these athletes faced this past week. Maybe the Tokyo Chabad house was extra busy this week?

To be clear neither Torah or character says that we should simply walk away when faced with great fear or discomfort. The words of Reb Nachman ring on my ears, *Kol Haloma Kulo Gesher Tzar m'od, vhaikar, lo'lifached kla*l. The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is not give in to fear.

The Jewish people have in our history and present tense countless examples of perseverance and resilience in the face of great obstacles – we draw strength from those examples, but we would be wise to also note the many, many times that Judaism and emotional intelligence counselled us to pull back, to stop before the breaking point.

God rested on the 7th day. Moses ultimately took his father in law's advice and shared the burden of judgement and leadership. In Devarim, 4:9, God commands us the following: " רַ֤ק הִשָּׁ֣מֶר לְךָ֩ וּשְׁמֹ֨ר נַפְשְׁךָ֜ מְאֹ֗ד", meaning "But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously." Many commentators take this to mean that we must take care of our health, physical and mental. This is our responsibility and our mission.

Judaism reinforces this essential teaching with systems and rituals that require us to step away from the pressures of the day to day (Shabbat), with daily blessing that serve as both a gratitude list and a mental health check list. We are commanded to acknowledge sadness, to mourn with intention and also to leave the house of mourning, to re-enter the world when the time to weep, the time to mourn is done.

What I admire most about Naomi and Simone in not only that they stepped back to care for their souls, but that they could do it with all the lights and cameras and attention of the world shining so brightly upon them.

Thank God most of us never face such intense pressures, though no doubt in our own world and minds it can feel like we do.

But even with all of that pushing them to keep going, like a bride or groom that steps back from the chuppah at the last moment (its happened half a dozen times in my 20+ years as a rabbi) in that moment of great self-care and courage we all learn a valuable lesson.

Not everything justifies the means, and Simone Biles was saying, my mental health does not justify the means.

Olympians or not, we all struggle with our vulnerabilities. No one else can make the calculations.

True, becoming an Olympic athlete is an elective process, not a coercive one. Yet, within the world of the Olympics, at times the goal of the effort to get the gold medal is not to disappoint the dream of millions of fans, or to secure a financial deal, or to bring glory to one's country. All this creates a certain degree of coercion.

Simone Biles has been an incredible athlete and should be proud of her accomplishments. Now she has taught the rest of us who only watch the Olympics some torah about where, when, and how lines can be drawn in our own lives, which may feel like gruelling Olympic events at times.

BACHARTA BACHAYIM – CHOOSE LIFE – each and every moment, each and every time. It's as simple and incredibly hard as that.