

Of Olympus and Jerusalem

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Two days ago, the following opinion piece appeared in the Israeli daily edition of the Jerusalem Post. Written by Stan Goodenough, a Christian journalist living in Jerusalem, I quote it verbatim: What a victory for Israel's enemies. On July 18, 1972, Arabs demanding international recognition of "Palestine"—a state that never existed—murder 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich "games of peace and joy." Twenty-four years later, two-thirds of the planet watches as the US President and 28,000 spectators applaud Arab athletes marching into the Olympic Stadium under the flag of "Palestine." All mankind may have appeared to be celebrating the opening of the Atlanta Games; but many Christians burned silently with shame at their nations' persistence in trampling on the Jewish people's feelings while crusading for the illegitimate claims of their foes. No doubt the cheers greeting "Palestine's" finest were, for most of the Arab world, a vindication of the Munich massacre. That the "goyim" applauded the emergence of this "new member"—not even the Israeli press balked at referring to the 197 "nations"—drove home again the success of the PLO's bloody strategy in winning universal recognition and endorsement. Global support for this perversion of justice should speak volumes. The breast-beating since the Holocaust, the loud and frequent condemnations of antisemitism, haven't changed the fact that "reasons" and "rationalizations" can still be found to justify turning a blind eye to the killing of Jews and sweeping it under the carpet of history. It is difficult to understand why Jews who cherish their heritage would agree to participate in an event to which the things they hold sacred have fallen victim time and again. For the spirit of Olympia has militated against Israel's God, faith and lifestyle ever since the Greek world set its heart on assimilating the Jewish one. The Olympics may be the ultimate in competition, but from the lighting of the torch at the site of Zeus' temple to the glorification of physical human achievement it remains at its heart a pagan event. In a sense that flame, resurrected for the first time in the modern Olympic era for the Berlin Games, lit the ovens in which a third of world Jewry was to perish. Hitler used the 1936 event to parade his sick brand of nationalism before the world. But Hitler and Hellenism failed to wipe out the Jews. Out of the ashes of genocide, their homeland was reborn. Israel: You marched proudly in Atlanta, and with reason, but did you even have to go? Is being one with the family of nations so important to you? After all, your nation has a legacy which many gentiles long to share in, for it holds the promise of hope largely absent in an unhappy world. There was a time when you were probably the most powerful nation on earth. Your towns and cities flourished; your fields produced abundantly; peace reigned throughout the Middle East; world leaders called to pay their respects and marvel at the Temple where you worshiped your God. The Bible — yours and ours — foretold your eventual restoration to your land and predicted an era when, as in the days of Solomon, every Jew would "sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid." For the last 150 years we Christians have watched this miracle unfold. For us it is no coincidence that your return was foretold by your prophets millennia ago. It may go virtually ignored by the world's media, but it is a phenomenon unparalleled in human history. The same prophets wrote that after you returned to your land, you would return as a nation to your God. And they said that when this happens — and only then — would real peace come to Israel, and to the world. Tonight, as the Atlanta Games continue, you will commemorate Tisha

Be'av. Doubtless your sense of aloneness in this largely anti-Jewish world will be heightened again. But you may be surprised to know that many Christians will join with you in reading Jeremiah's Lament. Together with you we will pray for the time when your days will be "renewed as of old." That time, we believe, will finally mark the end of gentile abuse of the Jews.

I can confide in you, that I read this article, taken off the Internet, with tears in my eyes. To see so powerful and insightful a statement, from so unexpected a source, in so timely a fashion, was that rare experience, namely, a breath of fresh air and inspiration at a moment of gloom and doom, in this case Erev Tisha Be'Av. I know that some will react with skepticism, and say that Christians who support Israel always have ulterior motives involving the ultimate conversion of the Jews. But that is not how I read this piece, or the motivation of its author. I see in it, rather, a genuine admiration and love of the Jews and of Israel, not for what we might become, but for what we already are, and already possess, namely, what Goodenough calls "a legacy which many gentiles long to share in, for it holds the promise of hope largely absent in an unhappy world," and a recognition that, again in his words, "there will indeed come the time when your days will be "renewed as of old," and the end of gentile abuse of the Jews will occur."

But motivation aside, the truth is its own witness. That the Olympic committee should see fit to allow representatives of a non-existent country called Palestine, is indeed a contemptible attack not just on Israel but on Zionists everywhere. That it should come after those self-same Palestinians murdered 11 Israeli Olympians at the Munich Olympic Games 24 years earlier, compounds the complicity of its organizers and supporters. And what raises the Olympian hypocrisy to apex, is the refusal by the Olympic committee to even mention at the opening ceremonies, the cold-blooded murder of the 11 Israeli athletes, when other similar atrocities and injustices were in fact mentioned. Fifty years after Hitler's Berlin Games, which sought to use that event to promote German racial and political purposes, and which excluded Germans of the Jewish faith because they were considered sub-human, the Olympic spirit is still hostage to antisemitic manipulation and cynicism, except that this time, the despicable occurs on American soil, and with the blessing of the United States.

Please don't get me wrong. I, like everyone else, thoroughly enjoy the spectacle of watching the competitors from around the world, to see them as they strain to their utmost, pushing the limits of human physical exertion almost beyond belief. How thrilling it is to share vicariously their moments of triumph, and to commiserate with them in the agony of defeat. But we are naive if we think that that is all that the modern day Olympics are all about. Unlike the ancient Games where Greek competed one on one, the modern Olympics are an opportunity for the nations and cultures of the world to parade themselves and their accomplishments in the arena of international competition. Therefore the abundance of national flags, national anthems, government sponsorships, and scarcely-disguised chauvinistic display. Individual athletes notwithstanding, the Olympics, like politics, are in large part war by other means.

In this connection, the Olympic organizers would have been well-advised to read this morning's parshah, at least as interpreted by Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, author of the Ozneyim la-Torah. For where is there a great nation which has just statutes and ordinances like those throughout this Torah which I place before you today. Devarim 4:8

Says Rabbi Sorotzkin, it is natural for oppressed minorities and enslaved people to cry out in righteous indignation, and principled anguish, expressing outrage at the absence of democratic ideals of equality and self-determination. It is, after all, very much in their national and group interest to be so upright. The true test of national character, however, occurs when such groups achieve sovereignty or power, and become what the Torah here calls a *goy gadol*, or great nation. How quickly the once oppressed become themselves oppressors and exploiters, excluding those not fortunate enough to be part of their new order! This verse teaches us that there is no people like Israel that is so sensitive to such minorities, even when it has achieved the status of a “great, sovereign, nation.” For it is thanks to the “just statutes and ordinances” in God’s Torah which have been internalized by the Jewish people over the generations, that other nations can find their own place in the sun, side by side with a Jewish Commonwealth.

How right he is, has surely been attested to over these past weeks. Witness the recent reports, emanating from the Palestinian people themselves, including some of those who complained loudest against the Israeli occupation. One of them, a physician named Serraj, just released from Palestinian prison, reportedly proclaimed that he and his people were 10 times more secure under Israeli occupation than under Palestinian! And the more honest among western journalists have already noted the oppressive nature of the Palestinian authority, with its often corrupt and exploitative public policies, including an arbitrary and capricious administration of justice. And when we consider the Olympic Games, representing as it does the so-called great nations of the world, how contemptible that they should so arrogate to themselves the right to create and extend recognition to a “Palestinian nation,” with all the appurtenances of national sovereignty, especially after the terrorist representatives of that very people so murderously violated the most fundamental statutes and ordinances of civilized behavior, not just at the Olympics themselves, but over the course of many years, and in many venues, on buses and planes, in airports and cruise ships, World Trade Centers and Jewish Community Centers, on all 5 Continents. Shame on the Palestinians, and, even more, shame on the Olympics.

But with God’s help there will yet come a time, soon we hope, when the nations of the world, the Olympics included, will echo the words that precede the ones we have quoted, when they will proclaim *le’einei ha-amim asher yishme’un et kol ha-chukim ha-eleh ve’amru, rak am chacham ve’navon ha-goy ha-gadol ha-zeh!* To proclaim “before the very eyes of the nations, who will witness all these ordinances and statutes and say of Israel, ‘how wise and understanding is this truly great nation.’” Let us Jews therefore, proudly, yet humbly, affirm the wisdom and beauty of our Torah, its laws and its statutes, so that not only the precious few Stan Goodenoughs in this world, but decent men and women all the world over, will witness the renewal of the Jewish people as of old, each of us to “sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with none to make us afraid,” or for that matter, ashamed, not even at the Olympic Games.