Sports and Sportsmanship: Thoughts on Parashat Mishpatim, February 18, 2012

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By

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At a basketball game between two yeshiva day schools, a parent of one of the players behaved very badly. He shouted abusive comments at members of the opposing team. He screamed a threat against one of the players.

This parent is a well known rabbi in his community; but he obviously was unable to control his rage and his overbearing competitiveness. Like so many other parents, he allowed his unbridled emotions to interfere with basic decency, good sportsmanship, and proper interpersonal relationships. His behavior shamed his son, shamed himself, and shamed the Torah.

Sports can and should be a framework for developing good values—teamwork, self-improvement, physical fitness. If managed properly, gym classes and athletic programs can be a tremendous boost in the moral and physical development of children.

Too often, though, these programs allow—and even encourage—the wrong values. They permit a few aggressive players to dominate play, and don't focus on developing the skills and self-confidence of all the students. They are more concerned with winning games than with making all players feel like winners. They overlook rough play and egregious fouls if they think that will help the team win games.

Too many parents, who should know better, encourage these negative features. They invest so much emotion into winning games that they seem to forget that much more important issues are at stake. They set exactly the wrong example for their children. They put exactly the wrong kind of pressure on gym teachers and coaches. Their egotistical drive to win games should not be allowed to undermine the values of good sportsmanship, teamwork, and respect for all players.

I attended Franklin High School in Seattle (there was no Jewish high school there in those days), and was blessed to have outstanding teachers—including gym teachers. I recall Mr. Luft, the school's football coach, and a man who produced a lot of winning teams.

In gym class, he set strict rules. For example, when we played basketball no shot could be made until at least three players on the team handled the ball first. No one was allowed to dribble more than twice. A third dribble meant the ball had to be turned over to the other team. We all abided by these rules, and all of us got a chance to be included in the game, to handle the ball, to shoot baskets.

The goal wasn't to "win at all costs"—but rather to help each player gain skills, experience, and self-confidence. This framework taught the need for teamwork, for inclusivity.
Mr. Luft understood that an athletic program was intended to help each student reach his potential. He taught not only sports, but—even more importantly—sportsmanship.

This week’s Torah portion reminds us that we are all responsible for one another. We need to be sure that we do not ignore or oppress those who are in positions of weakness, that we foster an inclusive and compassionate worldview. We need to think beyond competitiveness and beyond “winning at all costs”—and we need to focus on the development of morality and decency.

Since children generally enjoy physical activity, gym classes and athletic programs can and should be a tremendous asset for religious education. Children can receive life lessons in ethical behavior, sportsmanlike conduct, and consideration for the feelings of others—all while having a wonderful time playing in the gym. If Mr. Luft could instill these values in our public high school gym classes, surely our yeshivot and day schools should be able to instill these values in our children in their gym classes. And surely the school administrations and faculties—and parent bodies—should set the proper tone for their schools and communities.

Sports aren’t just about games; they are about life. Good sportsmanship isn’t just an extra frill; it is the essence of sports education. Middot aren’t only to be learned in the classroom; they are to be learned in the gym and on the basketball court.

And parents should be cheering—not jeering—from the sidelines.

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Angel for Shabbat