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“Berlin, Boycotts and the Politics of Sports”

by Gabe Zimmerman
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For my major paper, my parents and I were trying to think of something that would interest me, and something that would be relevant to Jews or Jewish history. As we were packing to move, my dad had to go through the 30 years of weekly SPORTS ILLUSTRATED issues he had collected. My mother refused to move them all to the new apartment. Luckily, one issue was worthy of saving. There was one with the Olympic Rings about boycotting the 1980 Russian Olympics. The article mentioned the issues surrounding the 1936 Olympics about whether those Olympics should have been boycotted because of rising anti-Semitism in Germany. I also knew a little about Jesse Owens and the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, but not much.

So I began to research the 1936 Olympics and the U. S. debate and ultimate decision not to boycott them. Little did I realize it would be so relevant to the Olympics this past summer. As I worked on this paper there were daily articles about whether we should boycott Beijing. Some felt that China’s economic involvement with the Sudanese government, who were involved in the horrible treatment of people in Darfur, could be stopped by boycotting Beijing. There were also articles about excluding Tibet and Iran from the Olympics.

By draft 4, this paper read like a syllabus for a college seminar called “*20-21st Century Politics and Sports, the Athlete as Political Player.*” Rabbi Peter and Alan had the good sense to acknowledge that I had learned a lot, and remind me to keep this paper shorter. So that’s what I tried to do.

I would like to believe that sports competition can be politics free, but they cannot. This summer there was an article in the New York Times that discussed how in 1976 the Taiwanese Olympians were excluded from the Montreal Olympics at the demand of the Chinese government. The article talked about how the “messy collision of sports and politics derailed the aspirations of athletes.” This quote described so clearly what I wanted to research. I could not say it better.

In reality, politics invades every aspect of sports, from the US investigation of steroid use in baseball, to government-sponsored training of Olympic athletes. If sports and politics cannot avoid being intertwined, the question becomes should we use boycotts in sports to try to influence political events? I think “Yes.”

If we disapprove of a country’s actions we should boycott. Boycotts can make a difference whether by changing events or just by making a statement that brings more attention to the issue. Boycotts are an important tool that sends a clear message that the conduct that is being boycotted is intolerable. Later, I will discuss briefly how boycotts have been used in recent times. But I do believe that the United States should have boycotted the 1936 Olympics and any Olympics where another country’s conduct is so offensive and destructive, that participation in the Olympics is intolerable. Winning a gold medal helps serve the individual, but a boycott supports and helps more people. If a boycott is going to help so many people we should do it; there will be other events for an individual athlete to win.

I learned that there are other ways to protest and still participate in the Olympics. One example happened at the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico City. Tommie Smith and John Carlos were American athletes who ascended the winner's podium, barefooted. They bowed their heads and raised their fists wearing black gloves, to protest (1) black poverty, (2) lynching in America, and (3) the stripping of Mohammed Ali's boxing title for protesting the War in Vietnam. Although Smith and Carlos were expelled from the Olympic Village and stripped of their medals, their protest statement did not ultimately have the same impact as a boycott. As an aside, it is interesting that South Africa and Rhodesia were banned from those same 1968 Olympics for their apartheid practices. There is that "messy collision" again.

Also, I support boycotts knowing that there is more at stake than just the gold medal. Athletes may lose lucrative product endorsements. But I still think that when necessary the boycott should occur. Boycotts send the greatest and most resounding message with a ripple effect heard throughout the world. Because of what I learned about the 1936 and 1980 Olympics, I think we should have boycotted the 2008 Summer Olympics.

The selection of Berlin, Germany to host the 1936 Olympics was political. That decision, made in 1931 was partly made to recognize Germany's return as a world power after its defeat in WWI. Germany was supposed to host the 1916 Olympics that were cancelled because of the war. As war reparations for its part in WWI, Germany was banned from participating in 1920 and 1924 Olympics. Allowing them to host the Olympics in 1936 was recognition that the world forgave Germany. In 1933, however, Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Among Hitler's discriminatory policies, was to systematically exclude Jewish and even "partial Jewish" athletes from training gyms. Their opportunities to compete became more and more limited and they were expelled from sporting events.

If these discriminatory practices did not alert the world to Hitler's discriminatory beliefs, the passage of the Nuremberg laws, should have. The Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935 were made up of two main laws. The first prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. The second law stripped Jews of German citizenship.

Hitler however knew that if continued his racist practices and laws, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) might decide to move the Olympics from Germany. So to try and "mask" his plan he invited Jewish athletes like Rudi Ball and Helen Meyer to come back to compete for the German Olympic teams. He also realized that the Olympics could serve to "showcase" Germany. Hitler was politically aware "that the whole world was watching."

Notwithstanding these attempts by Hitler, people in the United States and other western countries began to consider boycotting the 1936 Olympics. The American Amateur Athletic Union headed by Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, wanted to boycott the Olympics. He believed that participation would be a sign of approval of the Nazis discriminatory and anti-Semitic policies. Governmental leaders such as Mayor La Guardia and Governor Smith both of New York supported the boycott.

Avery Brundage was then the president of the American Olympic Committee (AOC). In 1934, facing political pressures, Brundage went to "inspect" German sports facilities to be used for the Olympics. Brundage came back to the United States supporting the US participation in the Olympics, after being "*shown*" that the Germans would treat the Jews fairly. In 1935 Brundage, continued to support participation in the Olympics stating that "Olympics belonged to the athletes not the politicians". Brundage carefully "orchestrated" a vote by the AOC that favored participation.

Avery Brundage's successful campaign to have the U.S. participate in the Olympics, and not boycott them, was part of a consistent pattern of anti-Semitic, racist and sexist positions Brundage held throughout his life. For example: Brundage strongly opposed women participating in the Olympics. Brundage's building company was awarded a building contract in 1938 to build the German Embassy in

the United States. Also, he made a speech at a rally in Madison Square Garden in 1941 where he praised the Nazi regime. Also it was Brundage that stripped Tommie Smith and John Carlos of their medals at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. Finally, Brundage was president of the IOC in 1972 and he permitted the Olympic games to continue after only a one-day memorial service to honor the Israeli Olympic team that had been massacred there. In fact Brundage and the IOC never fully acknowledged the horrific event.

Although Brundage was successful in preventing a United States boycott of the Olympics, there were individual athletes who chose to boycott them. For example, Herman Neugass, an American Jewish track sprinter and student at Tulane University decided not to participate in the 1936 Olympics. Milton Green and Norman Cahners, Jewish track stars from Harvard University, chose to boycott the Olympic final trials.

Our own Brooklyn L.I.U. basketball team, which had won 32 consecutive games and was viewed as one of the country's most outstanding college teams, was comprised largely of Jewish players. They chose to boycott the 1936 Olympics because of the Nazis practices.

International Olympiads that chose to boycott the Olympics included Judith Deutsch one of three people chosen to compete on the Austrian swim team, and Sammy Luftspring the top ranked lightweight boxer from Canada. Countries that considered boycotting the Olympics included Great Britain, France, Sweden and the Netherlands. However, once the United States decided TO participate in the 1936 Olympics, other international opposition stopped. The only country that did boycott them was Ireland.

During the 1936 Olympic games, continued discrimination was widespread. Hitler's views were as you might guess. He only wanted Germans to win. Jesse Owens, the great track star and an African American, who had set many records, and won all his heats, won 4 gold medals including the 100-meter dash competing, amongst others, against a German athlete. It greatly upset Hitler, who had attempted to denounce African Americans and other non-Aryans. Hitler was so disgusted he refused to shake hands with Owens, and would not even congratulate him. It is believed that to appease Hitler, Avery Brundage pressured the United States Olympic track coach Dean Cromwell, to remove Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller.

The Olympics in Berlin were just foreshadowing of the horrible atrocities that occurred during the Holocaust. It made me think, What would have been the impact if the us and other countries had boycotted the 1936 Olympics? Maybe if the United States and other countries boycotted the Olympics, Hitler and the Nazis would have been more isolated. Also, even if boycotting would not outwardly stop Hitler, it would have sent a message that the world is watching and will not tolerate such actions. Sending an urgent message that the intolerable acts and beliefs of Hitler's Germany were outrageous, would have greatly outweighed the "cost" to any individual athlete in terms of sacrificing a chance at a gold medal.

To support the theory that a boycott in 1936 would have been useful, I decided to look at the impact of the US boycott of the 1980 Olympics held in Russia. Although the circumstances in 1980 and 1936 were different, it was instructive to see what effect the 1980 boycott had.

The United States and other countries boycotted the 1980 Olympics held in Russia because the Russians were treating the Afghanis so poorly. The United States believed that a boycott of the Olympics would send a message that such treatment of other people would not be tolerated. I think that the US boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Russia was effective because it made the Olympics smaller and because it was such a "public" act, it highlighted what Russia was doing to the Afghanis. It served to embarrass the Russians. Further, it lessened the great economic boon that is usually gained by the country hosting the Olympics.

I learned that there have been other types of successful boycotts. There were the famous boycotts in the south in the United States where people boycotted to protest restrictive laws against African Americans that required them to ride in the back of the bus or defer a seat to a white person. It is estimated that on the first day of the Montgomery boycott there was 100% participation.

Another well-known example of a successful boycott was Cesar Chavez' organizing a national boycott of grapes grown in the United States to help the plight of migrant workers by highlighting the migrant workers poor working conditions, including the use of pesticides that were harmful to workers and consumers. At the height of the grape boycott 14 million Americans were not buying grapes.

It is obvious to me that the success of these boycotts would have been paralleled had there been a boycott of the 1936 Olympics. And the need for the boycott in 1936 was magnified by the "broadcasting message" that would have resulted, had the boycott occurred. A boycott would have been the 1936 telegraph or "YouTube" way to alert the world to Hitler's behavior and philosophy. But maybe most importantly, it would have demonstrated to Hitler and the Nazis that there is a strong, cohesive worldwide "army", ready to battle him. This may have averted the murder of millions of people.

As I watched the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, I was struck by the beauty and magnitude of the event. As the participants entered wearing clothing representative of their country, it also demonstrated how diverse the world is and how countries could all seemingly get along for the sake of sports. However, each commentary about the participants and countries somehow reinforced that beneath this majestic event, sports is political, and politics affects sports. I was particularly struck by the commentators, who talked about how important it was for China to show the world that it was able to host the Olympics, and take it's place as a world economic and sports power. Sound familiar. While Beijing in 2008 was not Berlin in 1936, for each country the Olympics was politically very important. So I think that had we boycotted Beijing, maybe Darfur and Tibet would be better off today. So for good and bad, under the appropriate circumstances boycotts of sports events is necessary.