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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

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This is How You Fix the Olympics

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

I haven't watched a minute of the Olympics this year. That is new for me. As a child, I couldn't wait for the Olympics to begin. Some of my most thrilling sports watching moments were spent watching the Olympics. Shira and I bought our first flat screen TV, something that we had put off even after flat screen TV's became "a thing" to better enjoy the 2012 Olympics in London. To this day, I still think the "miracle on ice," the US Olympic Hockey team's victory over the Russians at the 1980 games in Lake Placid was the greatest sports event I ever experienced. I used to love it.

That's all changed. I'm not the only one that feels this way either. Many media analysts have noted a steep drop in the number of Americans watching the Olympics this year. It's the lowest on record, and for good reasons. So many fans were appalled by the awarding of the Olympic games to China in 2008 and to Russia in 2014. And of course, we were further appalled by the awarding of the games to China again this year despite its horrific human rights record in general, and their well-documented persecution of the Uyghurs in particular.

Now I may not have been watching the games, but that doesn't mean that I am not aware of what's been going on. This Olympics have been mired in controversy from the very beginning, from the choice of China as a host, to the Biden Administration's diplomatic boycott of the games. But what has dominated Olympic news for the past several days is Russian figure skater phenom Kamila Valieva. By now, you have probably heard the story. Ms. Valieva may be the greatest figure skater of the modern era. And she is only 15 years old. She is the first to successfully land what is known as a quad jump in Olympic competition. Yet several days ago, a mandatory drug screening required of athletes in international competitions conducted in December found that Ms. Valieva tested positive for trimetazidine, a banned heart medication.

Trimetazidine is banned because it may increase endurance. Somehow, this was “discovered” after the team competition concluded, and just prior to the medal ceremony. The Russian team won that competition, but has yet to receive their gold medal (Americans took the silver medal), pending further rulings. The positive drug test cast a shadow over the far more important and popular individual skating event, one of the premier events of the games, which took place last night. The bottom line was that on Monday, the CAS (Court for Arbitration of Sport) ruled that though Ms. Valieva did test positive, she could still compete. It was a horrible decision on many levels. By the way, Ms. Valieva finished in fourth place.

I don't know how to restore the Olympics to its original (dare I say Olympic) glory. Perhaps like so many things ruined by the injection of politics into every area of our lives, the games are beyond hope. (By the way, that is the reason that I personally oppose the NFL's playing football games in Europe, or the NBA playing in China. Internationalizing American professional sports leagues may make money for the owners and the leagues, but will ruin them for the fans. The current Olympic model is proof of that.) But the religious message that I want to share this week is about the athletes. As you may imagine, I don't like the IOC, and I have lost respect for both the international and well as American committees and governing bodies that formulate the rules within which our athletes must compete. Since the current scandal emerged on Monday, I have paid close attention to the reactions of so many of the competitors, both in the current Olympics as well as those from the past who have weighed in on Ms. Valieva, her positive drug test, and the decision to allow her to compete. They know that the rules which normally govern such conduct were changed for her. It's as simple as that. And that's not fair.

This spring will be the 48th anniversary of my Bar Mitzvah. One of the lessons from that experience has stayed with me for my entire life. Towards the end of the Torah reading, we read the verse *You shall have one law for the stranger and the citizen alike: for I am the Lord your God.* (Leviticus 25:22) I have spent my entire adult life thinking about this lesson, it's power and its importance. How many times in my life have I been in a situation where trouble could have been averted, where once strong relationships between friends and neighbors might have been salvaged, where injustice could have been avoided had this essential Biblical teaching been practiced with greater intensity. *One law for everyone!* To the best of my abilities, I have tried to

live this principle in my personal life, and prioritize this principle in my religious leadership of the congregation. I have certainly failed and when I have, I have lived with the harsh consequences of ignoring this fundamental Jewish belief. Each time I see the pain and rage that people experience when this standard is ignored, I am reminded of its purpose and wisdom. Without it, we will not maintain faith in our great institutions, or to each other.

As I wrote earlier, many have weighed in on the decision to allow Ms. Valieva to skate. But the voices with whom I empathize most belong to those athletes who similarly failed drug tests, even for substances that are not performance enhancing ones, but were not allowed to compete. How could they not be angry that a new category of rules was created for this athlete, and not them. Why were “special circumstances” allowed to influence the decision in this Olympics, and not previous ones? The lack of an answer attests to the wisdom of this ancient teaching. It may have been revealed 3000 years ago. But as recent events have demonstrated, its wisdom is just as necessary today. Want to fix the Olympics? Start applying this lesson now!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur Weiner