

The favorites and the underdogs
- a sermon on Jewish values and sporting championships
Rabbi Stephen Wise - Shaarei-Beth El Congregation – Sat. June 18th, 2011

After a tumultuous week of sports, with ups and downs, surprises and sure things, we are left with two champions – The Dallas Mavericks of the NBA and the Boston Bruins of the NHL. Thinking back to the beginning of the season, even going back a few weeks ago, one would have been hard pressed to pick these two teams as the champions within their respective leagues. Both are solid teams, but neither had won anything of significance in decades. Expectations were low, though each team had plenty of talent and drive, and each featured a superstar. The Mavericks feature 7 footer Dirk Nowitzki, a former NBA MVP who is a natural team leader. The Bruins feature the best goalie in the NHL this season, Tim Thomas, the eventual MVP of the playoffs and most likely the eventual Vezina trophy for best goalie during the regular season. The Bruins also feature one of the most dominant defensemen in the game, the 6' 9" Zdeno Chara who happens to hold the title of hardest shot from the NHL skills competition.

So while these two teams were both underdogs, they were able to overcome great odds and win it all; how did they do it? The Mavericks were facing the Miami Heat who featured the “big 3”. In the last offseason the 3 best free agents all signed with one team in south Florida. They held onto Dwayne Wade, grabbed Chris Bosh from us here in Toronto and more significantly attracted LeBron James from Cleveland, possibly the greatest player in basketball today. In his ego driven nationally televised decision, LeBron invited the world to watch a one hour special where he told the world he was going to the Heat. The way the team presented the 3 players as though they had already won a championship and the way they ditched their former teams to get together, made them the most talented and most hated team. With high expectations, the team gathered steam through the regular season and steamrolled the competition through the playoffs, and won the first game of the series so convincingly, it seemed the Heat would fulfill their top dog status.

The Bruins faced the Vancouver Canucks, who owned the best record in the NHL this past season winning the president's trophy. The Canucks have arguably one of the best goaltenders in the league, who won the gold medal for Canada at last year's Olympics. Their top forwards twin brothers Daniel and Henrik Sedin each led the league in scoring respectively over the past 2 years, and Henrik was league MVP last year and Daniel will likely win this year. With secondary scoring from such heavyweights such as Ryan Kessler and Alex Burrows, and great defense, the Canucks gelled in the playoffs squeezing by the

rival Blackhawks in 7 but then racing by the Sharks and Predators and taking the first 2 against the Bruins and the cup was in sight.

So these two underdogs, the Mavs and Bruins, had something special that led them to the championship. What was the secret to their success? Let's look at the classic Jewish story of an underdog overcoming all odds, David vs. Goliath. The account of the battle between David and Goliath is given in first Samuel, chapter 17. Saul and the Israelites are facing the Philistines at the Valley of Elah. Twice a day for 40 days, Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, comes out between the lines and challenges the Israelites to send out their MVP of their own to decide the outcome in single hand to hand combat. However, Saul and all the other Israelites are afraid of him.

Young David is present, having brought food for his elder brothers. Told that Saul has promised to reward any man who defeats Goliath, David accepts the challenge. Saul reluctantly agrees and offers his armor, which David declines, taking only his sling and five stones chosen from a nearby brook.

David and Goliath confront each other, Goliath with his armor and shield, David with his staff and sling. David hurls a stone with all his might, and hits Goliath in the center of his forehead. The Philistine falls on his face to the ground; David takes his sword and cuts off his head and a new champion is crowned.

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Here are David's strategies:

One he was brave and didn't back down. Sure Goliath was the greatest warrior of the time, but if you don't enter the battle you certainly can't win. David believed in himself and went into the battle mentally prepared to fight and win. The Mavs and Bruins similarly didn't see their opponents as any better than them. In the rhetoric and preparation for the games, they held on to their own style of play and never backed down. The Mavericks lost game 1, but continued to play their game, shooting well from the 3-point line, excellent defense and clutch scoring down the stretch. The Bruins continued their hardnosed play, concentrating on scoring spread among their 4 lines and smart, simple defense, letting Thomas make the big stops. Even after losing the first two, they had only given up a total of 3 goals; they continued their style and believe their pucks would eventually go in, especially returning to their home rink in Beantown.

Second David saw the goal at the end. He realized there would be a reward from King Saul, but David had the greater purpose in mind of freeing the Israelites from Philistine rule. Yes there are individual battles, but there is a larger war. David was doing his one small part to defeat Goliath and send a

message to everyone. Eventually David would become king, using this victory as his calling card. By showing he could defeat the great Goliath, when he led his men into battle they were given great confidence as well to follow someone who led by example. Following David meant they were following a champion and this gave the whole army confidence. No one wonder David's armies were so successful in establishing the greatest Israelite kingdom.

The Bruins and Mavs also focused on the end goal. The Mavs played with heart and soul. They fought down to the final minute in each game. Even when they were down by a lot, they didn't let up and twice came from behind to win in the 4th quarter. There was no individual, it was a team effort. They played the emotions of Nowitzki who is quiet, unassuming and plays hard. Contrast to the Big 3 who yell, gesture, make faces and style their way to the basket but come up short at crucial moments. And Jason Kidd, nearing 40, a wily veteran who had come close twice before, they wanted him to finally get the big trophy.

The Bruins played hard as a team too, seemingly none of their players are all stars, but as a group they are cohesive. They never dive, they hit hard and they never back down. When one of their best players, Nathan Horton, was knocked out by a late hit, he came back a few nights later to cheer on the team from the bench. They also had two wily veterans in Thomas and Rechi, the latter had already said this was his last game and they wanted to win it for him. You of course could say the same about Vancouver, who were playing at times for a city and an entire country, but unfortunately they weren't able to put it all together on the ice when it mattered the most.

Finally David spoke truth to power. When they faced each other, "The Philistine cursed David by his gods." But David replies: "This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down, and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that God saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is God's, and he will give you into our hand." David speaks with great confidence and sets the tone for the battle simply through his words. David states the fact, that he will win, and not just that but particular details of the outcome. Surely even Goliath was struck by the ferocity and clarity of the words.

In sports, there are always words spoken before and after the games, sometimes cliches sometimes real feelings, and it can affect the game. After Lebron James was called out for his lack of ability to finish games strongly, he countered with an observation that all those that hate will have to go back to work the next day, while he continues to play basketball and get paid tons of money. He belittled

the whole premise of sports, that we buy a ticket to support a team, even if these athletes make millions more than us, the owners too. We give our loyalty and love to a team because of the collective, because it's an escape from our job (whether we have one or not), our lives, our reality. It's a time to embrace something beyond our simple lives and that is what we all buy into. Buy calling us out on it LeBron further lowered in our standards and is actually biting the hand that feeds him. It's not confidence, or a challenge to win the final goal, it's a slide out the back door for someone who didn't have the desire or determination to win.

In the hockey final, there were many words exchanged about the goalies. A writer asked Thomas if he would change his style after he got faked out and scored upon in game 2. Thomas said, no he wasn't going to change; he's been playing goalie for quite a while and been successful. He knew exactly what he was doing and had the confidence in himself to win it all, his way. Luongo on the other hand got flustered at one point when asked about a particular goal that Thomas let in again in game 5 with his aggressive style. Luongo said he probably would have made the save, and then quickly went on to say Thomas was a great goalie, but he never got compliments from him. Thomas quickly went on the offensive. He's supposed to compliment the opponent? Did David compliment Goliath for his size and battle skills? No, he described how he would cut his head off. Then he went out and did it, which is the way you demoralize your opponent and set the tone for victory.

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Of course sports are just games. We cheer and hope for our teams, but ultimately it's not life and death. When David faced Goliath he did face a real existential battle. And when David talked about God on his side, that was truly when he needed God's help. When athletes point to God to thank them for scoring a basket or saving a goal, it's not a life and death situation. Perhaps they can thank God for giving them the talent to compete so well in games. They can thank God for their health and their ability to sustain play at such a high level, especially when we see serious career threatening injuries all the time. They can thank God for the chance to play on a great team, to earn money for playing games. But it's not appropriate, I think, to thank god for winning or scoring, God has better things to do.

I am a big sports fan as you can tell. I was stunned this week when two underachieving teams, facing great odds, came up big to win championships. I'm a sucker for the underdog and I love the finals, watching teams raise the trophy, the tears from huge strong men, the emotions flying out. There was a great advertisement for the Stanley Cup that strung together a bunch of interviews where each player was asked what it was like to win the cup, and their

eyes get misty and they can't even get the words out. The tag line is, "There are no words". I have to admit; even I teared up just watching the commercial. There is something about sports that brings out certain emotions. And when a team overcomes obstacles, senses the goal, works as a team, voices their commitment, and wins, it's great to watch. I just hope, one day, that it will be a Toronto Maple Leaf that hoists that cup and I'll be there to witness it. On that day, there will be no words.