

THE REAL WINNER

By Leah Dolinger
for Olomeinu Magazine

Every year, on Lag B'Omer, Yeshivas Tiferes Zion had a Field Day. The whole school took part in the festivities that started with davening (praying) in the Willow Picnic Grounds at Meadowland park. After breakfast there was a half-hour shiur (Torah lecture) down near the pond, and then—on to the whole day's sunny, athletic activities.

Baseball, basketball, and treasure hunts; hopping, running, and three-legged races; all kinds of tag games; volley-ball, punchball, and nature walks—not a thing was left out. Yes-siree, it was a gala event! Mothers and sisters baked, fathers umpired and coached, big brothers lent their bats and gloves; it was truly a day the whole school looked forward to!

When Lag B'Omer came—the day everyone waited for—all the boys arrived in the yeshiva school yard in plenty of time.

“Hey, Yossie, let's practice that curve ball!”

“Nutti, watch this!”

“Where'd ya get that fancy canteen, Eliezer? It's sharp!”

At 7:30 a.m. exactly, eight busloads of lustily singing boys from Yeshivas Tiferes Zion slowly moved out of the school yard and swung onto the street, off to Meadowland Park. When they arrived at the park, everyone piled out and the task of setting up began.

“Chaim, you're in charge of bringing out the siddurim,” said Rabbi Neuman, the principal.

“Avraham,” called Rabbi Greenbaum, “Bring over the carton of seforim for the shiurim.”

“Shimon, you and Yehudah Tzvi unload the cases of milk, and set them up near the picnic benches,” ordered Rabbi Zeigler.

“Where are the Sofer twins, Yaakov and Arye?” asked Rabbi Kreismore. “Tell them that I want them to bring out the eggs and the rolls and to start setting up the tables.”

Soon everything was unloaded, order restored, and all the boys were in their right groups, davening under the drooping branches of the willow trees. After davening there was a breakfast of roll, hard-boiled eggs, orange juice and milk. Then

it was shiur time and the boys divided up according to their classes. And then—it was time for the games to begin.

Rabbi Neuman announced the order of the games and the competing groups.

“. . . and by 3:30,” he concluded, “we will all meet at the eastern foot of Big Tup Hill, for the yearly Mishnayos Marathon. As you all know, the winner will get a deluxe set of Mishnayos. Everyone who finishes the marathon will get a prize, too. Okay boys, off you go!”

He blew his whistle and Field Day was on!

Yossie and Shloime Fogel were brothers. They had the same last name, and they both went to Yeshivas Tiferes Zion—but there the resemblance stopped. Yossie was tall and slim, and in the seventh grade. He was the most popular boy in the yeshiva. Even the eighth-graders chose him into their games. He could out-hit and out-run anyone. Yossie was the class president and the best student in his class, in both Hebrew and English. Make no mistake, though—Yossie was not a showoff or arrogant. He knew that to be trusted, he had to be trustworthy, and to have friends he had to be a good friend to others. That’s the way he was.

Then there was Shloime. He was a short, quiet, chubby sixth-grader with thick glasses. He never seemed to be chosen into any games no matter how many times he asked. He was the kind of boy nobody wanted to play with; and when he wasn’t around the other kids would call him “Tubby”. He tried to make friends with the others, but somehow it didn’t work for him as it did for his brother, Yossie. His teachers never called on him to recite the Mishnah at the Tu B’Shevat Fruit Party, or make up (let alone sing) the grammen (chanted rhymes) for Latke Night on Chanukah, at the rebbe’s house. As much as Shloime tried, he couldn’t keep up with Yossie; he just seemed out of step. Still he loved his big brother Yossie very much, and Yossie took care of his younger brother and never let anyone hurt his feelings.

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The morning had been exciting and lunch was delicious; 3:30 was drawing near. In the center of the park was a great big grassy hill. The highlight of the annual Field Day games was the Mishnayos Marathon Race. Everyone in the school, from the youngest boy in Rabbi Atkin’s first-grade class, to the oldest one in Rabbi Goldblatt’s shiur took part in this race. Most of them knew they had no chance to win, but they all wanted to prove that they were strong enough and brave enough to finish the long run.

Everyone knew that Yossie Fogel was going to win. There was no doubt about that, but everyone was determined to try his best. It was the moment of the day of the year! At the bottom of one side of the huge slope, all the boys lined up for the

race up the hill and around the long course. All ears waited for the whistle. “TWEEEEEEEEEE!” They’re off!

One by one, the younger boys and even some of the older boys began dropping out, exhausted. It was getting hotter and hotter, and the climb seemed more and more steep. No one thought it was so hard when they started out, but now it felt like Mount Everest, that’s for sure. Slowly even the leaders began to pull back. It was as if their legs were mired in thick sticky molasses, and the running got slower.

Even Yossie felt the heat and the heaviness in his legs, but slowly, as he knew he would, he was gaining the lead. There were fewer boys around him now; much fewer. There were less than fifty boys chugging up near the crest of the hill, with Yossie clearly in the lead. And now—they were over the top! Their legs were so tired they felt they couldn’t lift them another inch, but from somewhere came a second wind. The breeze coming up to greet the tiring marathon runners rushed up to welcome them. It took less effort, only will and a drive to finish, and the boys gathered momentum as the downward force of the race made them run faster and faster—faster than they thought possible.

Yossie felt the cool wind in his face, and the freshness enveloped him as he stretched out his arms in happy anticipation of a triumphant end.

Then—suddenly!—a rock jutting out of nowhere caught Yossie’s foot and sent him sprawling, his ankle painfully twisted. The pain! The agony! He couldn’t move. Bodies ran past him and shouts flew at him from all sides.

“Hey, get out of the way!”

“Hey, Yossie, what happ. . . “ The words trailed away as the runners ran along, unable to stop because the hill was so steep and they were so anxious to finish the race.

“Move over! Move over!” shouted another boy, and, unable to move aside in time, he tripped over Yossie. “Whyncha fall down someplace else?” howled the fallen runner, picking himself up and continuing downhill.

Tears filled Yossie’s eyes. He was humiliated. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. It was bad enough losing—but this was worse; he wouldn’t even be able to finish the race! As a matter of fact, he thought to himself, he couldn’t even walk! The pain was excruciating. He was crying by now, alone, in shame and in pain. And then he realized there were no more runners. He looked down to the foot of the hill, and strangely the crowd there was quiet. They seemed to be looking at him. No . . . wait a minute. They seemed to be looking past him. Past him? Yossie looked up at the crest of the hill. Shloime, huffing and puffing with exertion, red and hot, Shloime his brother who always tried but

never seemed to make it had topped the hill and was coming down. Yossie thought, “I can’t lose any worse than coming in after Shloime. Even he’ll beat me.”

But Shloime, seeing his brother, stopped in his tracks. Then he slowly ran over to him.

“Hey, Yossie, what happened? Did you trip on something?” Shloime’s face was full of concern for his older brother.

“Nah, I’m okay; it’s nothing,” said Yossie, turning his face away so that his younger brother wouldn’t see his tears. “You run on down and finish the race with everybody. I’m just resting here ’til I get my breath.”

“Run down? Finish the race? You kidding, Yossie??” Shloime was incredulous. “I’m not gonna leave you here alone. You’re my brother; I gotta take care of you. I wanna take care of you. This is more important than any old race!”

Saying this, Shloime bent down and helped his older brother up, gently. “You can lean on me, Yossie,” said Shloime with a smile. “Don’t worry; I got enough weight to support the two of us.” Yossie put his arm around the shoulder of his younger brother, and as the tears ran down his cheeks, the two of them slowly made their way down the hill, one boy filled with love, and the other with embarrassment.

As they reached the finish line, a great cheer arose from everyone and the crowd enveloped the two boys. After everything had quieted down, and it was determined that Yossie’s sprain had been painful, but not serious, the prizes were announced.

“. . . but the real prize,” Rabbi Neuman was saying, “goes to a boy who has given US a prize; a prize lesson in how to treat another person—a living example of a person who lives the words, ‘V’ohavta l’rayacha kamocho (love your friend like yourself)’. Sometimes it’s even harder to treat our closest relatives as we do our friends. We slight them and make them feel bad in a way that we would probably be ashamed to treat friends or even strangers. When you know someone well, sometimes you’re not too careful about stepping on his toes.”

“It takes a big heart to care—really care about someone, especially a close relative like a sister or brother, or parents. In my eyes, that kind of person is a real winner. And Shloime Fogel is a real, real winner!” Shloime remembered the cheers for a long, long time. He still does.

