

# COMPETITION: WHEN IS IT HEALTHY AND WHEN IS IT NOT?

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*This packet is designed to initiate meaningful conversation at your Shabbat table. We hope that children as well as adults can benefit from the conversation. We invite you to read this packet ahead of the discussion to determine which parts of the discussion are relevant to your audience.*

## On April 26, 2008,

Sara Tucholsky, a senior at Western Oregon University was playing one of her last games for her school's softball team. She had never hit a homerun her entire life, so when she hit the ball over the fence in a game against Central Washington University, she was very excited. Unfortunately, as she was rounding the bases, she injured her knee and was stuck on first base, unable to walk. After consulting with the umpires, the coaches were told that no player, coach or trainer from Western Oregon was allowed to help her around the bases and if she could not make it past first base, she would be credited with a single, not a home run. Mallory Holtman, a star player for Central Washington ran to the umpire and asked if someone from the other team is allowed to assist the player. The umpires ruled that it would be legal. Holtman and a teammate, Liz Wallace lifted Tucholsky around the bases, gently lowering her at each base so that she can touch the base. When Holtman was interviewed after the game, she said "She hit it over the fence. She deserved it ... winning is not everything." (Source: New York Times, April 30, 2008)



### PLEASE CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

*Please note: The questions are arranged in order of sophistication so that those with younger children can focus on the first few questions.*

1. What are some good and bad things that happen when people compete?
2. Is it more important to win or to have fun?
3. When choosing teams, should we always choose the best players or should we also consider the feelings of those who are usually chosen at the end?
4. Do we ever use competition to motivate ourselves? Does it work?
5. When we compete, does it help us build self-esteem or does it contribute to haughtiness? How do we balance the two?
6. Have you ever seen someone lose control when things weren't going their way? Why do you think that happens?
7. When can competition lead to jealousy and hatred? Have you ever seen people who are more motivated by trying to make the competition lose than they are in their own success?

# We encounter many different forms of competition.



Some competitions are organized such as sports competitions, games and academic competitions (e.g. spelling bees). Other competitions are more informal. Students may feel that they are competing with their classmates over grades. A person may try to achieve a certain feat that was accomplished by a friend. For example, Sarah may feel a need to take art classes simply because Shoshanah is a better artist.

There are people who spend money on things that they don't need and only purchase them to "compete" with their neighbors and friends. This is known as "keeping up with the Joneses."

**Competition has been around since the beginning of time.** Let's look at the Torah's very first recorded competition:

<p>And again she gave birth to his brother Hevel. Hevel was a shepherd and Kayin raised crops. And it came to pass, and Kayin brought of the fruit of the land, an offering to G-d. And Hevel also brought the first of his flock and of their fat. And G-d turned to Hevel and to his offering; but to Kayin and to his offering He did not turn. And Kayin was very angry, and he was embarrassed. And G-d said to Kayin: 'Why are you angry and why are you embarrassed? If you improve your ways, they will be lifted up and if you don't improve your ways, sin is waiting at the door and you will desire it, but you can rule over it.' And Kayin spoke to Hevel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother, and smote him.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Bereishit 4:2-8 (adapted from JPS Translation)</p>	<p>וַתֵּשֶׁבַע לְלֵדָתוֹ, אֶת-אָחִיו אֶת-הֵבֶל; וַיְהִי-הֶבֶל, רֹעֵה צֹאן, וְקַיִן, הָיָה עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה. וַיְהִי, מִקְטָן יָמִים; וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה, מִנְחָה-- לַיהוָה. וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם-הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאֲנוֹ, וּמִחֲלֵבָהּ; וַיִּשַׁע ה', אֶל-הֶבֶל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ. וְאֶל-קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ, לֹא שָׁעָה; וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד, וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו. וַיֹּאמֶר ה', אֶל-קַיִן: לָמָּה חָרָה לְךָ, וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָּנֶיךָ. הֲלוֹא אִם-תֵּיטִיב, שְׂאֵת, וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב, לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ; וְאֵלֶיךָ, תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ, וְאַתָּה, תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן, אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו; וַיְהִי בֵּהֵיטֵם בְּשָׂדֵה, וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">בראשית ד: ב-ח</p>
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According to R. Yitzchak Abarbanel, the offerings of Kayin and Hevel were part of a competition to see who was a better person. Kayin thought that Hevel cheated by bringing a better sacrifice. G-d responded to Kayin that he should focus on improving himself. Nevertheless, G-d's words did not appease Kayin and he ended up striking Hevel.

## How would you relate the opening discussion points to the two stories?

### ☞ HERE ARE SOME IDEAS YOU MIGHT WANT TO HIGHLIGHT:

1. Competition is very powerful and has the potential of bringing out the best and worst in people.
2. Competition can be vehicle for self improvement. Sometimes the greatest benefits of competition come from losing. One has the ability to learn from one's mistakes and use it as motivation for one to improve.
3. In competition, your positive interaction with others and your sportsmanship are crucial.
4. Competition doesn't define you as a person and the outcome is not a final evaluation of your abilities.

# COMPETITION: WHEN IS IT HEALTHY AND WHEN IS IT NOT?

## A SOURCE-BASED DISCUSSION

Let's look at the following Torah sources and how they relate to our discussion:

### 🔗 SOURCE #1

<p>Haughtiness and pride are two different character traits. Although haughtiness is a terrible character trait, pride is different as it states "G-d rules, he is clothed with pride etc." It seems that this is a good trait and one can even say that just as He (G-d) [is clothed with pride] you should also [be clothed with pride] because <b>each individual must recognize one's own importance and not be humiliated in one's own eyes</b> because [everyone was] created in the image of G-d ... <b>There is a terrible type of honor where people who seek honor from others and are constantly concerned about what other people are saying about them</b> and only see themselves through the eyes of others and all of the decisions in their lives are dependent on what other people will say. However, <b>there is a positive type of honor where people recognize their own importance and try to impact others</b> ... not for the purpose of others liking them, but [they would do the same] even if they will be despised [for it], as long as they will make an impression on others who see their abilities, good character traits and ability to be creative and produce.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Nefesh HaRav, pp. 64-65</p>	<p>כי ב' מדות שונות הן, גאווה וגאות, ואף שהגאווה מדה רעה היא למאוד, מכל מקום גאות מדה אחרת היא וכדכתיב- ד' מלך גאות לבש וכו', וכנראה שהיא מדה טובה, ואף לגבי מדה זו נמי אית לן למימר- דמה הוא אף אתה, שכל אדם צריך להכיר את חשיבות עצמו, ושלא יהיה שפל בעיניו, שכלול ג"כ בצלם אלוקים ... בודאי נראה שצריכים לחלק בין שני אופני הכבוד, שהאדם המחפש כבוד אצל אחרים, ותמיד חושש למה יאמרו אחרים עליו, ותמיד רואת את עצמו באספקלריה של אחרים, והמכריע בחייו הוא תמיד- מה שהבריות חושבים ואומרים עליו, זהו הכבוד המגונה. אך הכבוד החיובי, היינו שירגיש בעצמו את חשיבותו, ויראה להשאיר רושם על אחרים ... ולא דוקא שישתדל לנהוג באופן שכזה שיאהבוהו, אלא אפילו ישנאוהו, אך שישאיר עליהם הרושם שלו בזה שיראה כשרונותיו ומדותיו הטובות וכוחות החידוש והיצירה שלו.</p> <p>נפש הרב עמ' סד-סח</p>
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The paragraph you just read is based on a collection of ideas from R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993). R. Soloveitchik presents two positive character traits:

1. Recognizing one's own importance.
2. Trying to impact others positively through one's own talents and abilities.

By contrast, there are two negative character traits:

1. Haughtiness.
2. A constant concern for what others think.

- **How can competition bring out the positive character traits?**
- **How can it bring out the negative character traits?**
- **How would you relate the term "team player" to this discussion?**

## 🔗 SOURCE #2

<p>Regarding jealousy, there are two ideas... <b>The first idea is [applied] when a person sees one's friend performing good deeds and it is bad in his eyes</b> ... There is a positive type of jealousy as the rabbis stated that <b>jealousy of scholars increases wisdom because when people see friends who are holy and wise, they also wants to be like them</b> and because of this jealousy, people study more and work harder to perform good deeds and follow a righteous path. It is nevertheless preferable if one can achieve this without jealousy ... because if one does what is proper voluntarily with truth and integrity, it is better than doing so out of jealousy.</p> <p>Commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah to Avot 4:21</p>	<p>בענין הקנאה יש שני דברים ... ענין הראשון כי יראה חבירו טוב ורע בעיניו וכאשר עוסק בתורה ובמצות והולך בדרך טובה מקנא בו כי הוא שונא אוהבי השם ועושי רצונו המדה הזאת מוציאו מן העולם והיא הרע הגדולה בקנאות ... ויש דרך טובה בקנאה ואם אחרת טובה ממנה מה שאחז"ל קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה כי על ידי שרואה חביריו קדושים וחכמים גם הוא חפץ להיות כמותם ומפני הקנאה מרבה על חכמתו וטורח ומוסיף לעשות טובה וללכת בדרך ישרה. אך יותר היא שזה בלא קנאה חפץ באלה כי יראי ה' הם וזאת מלאכת האדם ... כי עושה הראוי מנדבת לבו הולך באמת ובלבב שלם וחשוב מן העושהו מקנאת אדם.</p> <p>פירוש רבינו יונה לאבות ד:כא</p>
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According to Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1263) there are two types of jealousy:

1. Being jealous of another person's achievements because he does not like to see the success of others, especially in areas where he himself cannot succeed.
2. Being motivated to be more successful by another person's success.

A 2003 study of adolescent boys in the southwestern U.S. attempted to resolve an apparent contradiction in studies relating to youth participation in sports. Some studies showed that participation produced **positive outcomes such as self-concept, self-esteem, achievement attitudes and good general mental health**. Other studies show that it produced **negative outcomes such as lack of altruism, lack of moral development, and lack of sportsmanship**. The 2003 study showed that those who are involved in competitions for intrinsic reasons such as improving their self-esteem and task mastery displayed higher levels of sportsmanship as opposed to those involved for extrinsic reasons such as obtaining a higher social status or career status.<sup>1</sup>

**How does this relate to Rabbeinu Yonah's idea?**

## 🔗 SOURCE #3

<p>For every type of hatred there is hope. If one hates his friend because his friend stole from him, the hatred can be removed when the item is returned. The same applies to other types of hatred that are a result of an event. When the cause of the hatred is fixed, the hatred will dissipate. The one exception to this rule is hatred caused by jealousy.</p> <p>Orchot Tzadikim, Sha'ar HaKinah</p>	<p>לכל שנאה יש תקוה שאם ישנא חברו עבור שגזל ממנו, תסור השנאה ששייב לו אותו דבר. כן כל שנאה התלויה בדבר אחר שיתקן הדבר ההוא תבטל השנאה- חוץ מן השנאה מחמת הקנאה. ארחות צדיקים שער הקנאה</p>
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Jealousy can lead to the type of hatred that is very difficult to reverse. When a competition is rooted in jealousy, the competition can get personal. What was supposed to be a friendly game can quickly turn into a bout filled with anger and hate.

<sup>1</sup>Todd Ryska, "Sportsmanship in Young Athletes: The Role of Competitiveness, Motivational Orientation and Perceived Purposes of Sport," *The Journal of Psychology* 137 (2003):273-293. [Click here](#) to read the abstract.

 SOURCE #4

<p>The idea is that people cannot destroy their ways, meaning the tendencies that they were born with ... A person is given the choice to use those tendencies for whatever one chooses, to be a righteous person an evil person or a mediocre person. This is what the verse states "Train a child based on his ways," based on the ways of his tendencies and nature, one should train him to perform mitzvot. Then "when he grows older, he won't stray from it." However, when one tries to challenge a child's tendencies, now (as a child) he will listen to you out of fear, but afterwards, when your yoke is removed from his neck, he will stray from it because it is impossible to destroy one's tendencies.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Commentary of the Vilna Gaon to Mishlei 22:6</p>	<p>כלומר מזלו שנולד בו ... ניתנה הבחירה ביד האדם שיוכל לאחוז במזלו לאיזה דבר שירצה להיות או צדיק או רשע או בינוני ... וז"ש חנוך לנער ע"פ דרכו דרך מזלו וטבעו כן תחנכהו לעשות מצות ואז גם כשיזקין לא יסור ממנה אבל כאשר תעבירה על מזלו עתה ישמע לך מיראתו אותך אבל אח"כ בעת יוסר עולך מעל צוארו יסור מזה כי א"א לו לשבר מזלו. פירוש הגר"א למשלי כב:ו</p>
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Every person has their own set of tendencies and those tendencies can be harnessed positively or negatively. Some people are very competitive and some are not competitive at all. Competitive people should not be told to restrain their competitiveness. Rather, they should be shown ways to harness their competitive nature for the positive. Similarly, one should not try to motivate a person who is not competitive through competitions. This will prove to be ineffective and one must find other methods of motivation.

**COMPILED BY RABBI JOSHUA FLUG** - DIRECTOR OF TORAH RESEARCH, CENTER FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED**

**R. Yitzchak Abarbanel** (1437-1508) is well known for his commentary on the Torah as well as his books on Jewish Philosophy. He was also a wealthy businessman and had a lot of influence on the King of Spain. He was almost successful in preventing the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and even offered much of his own wealth for the cause.

**R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik** (1903-1993) was born in Pruzhan, Poland, the son of Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, and grandson of Rabbi Chaim HaLevi. In 1932, he moved to America and settled in Boston. He founded Yeshivat Rambam—the Maimonides School—and delivered weekly shiurim there for many years. In 1941, he succeeded his father, upon the latter's passing, as rosh yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (Yeshiva University), commuting from Boston to New York each week for over four decades. His shiurim in halachah and aggadah, which reached to the ends of the Jewish world, made a profound impact on Torah learning in our times. He was known by many as "The Rav" to connote that he was his generation's quintessential teacher of Torah, ordaining more rabbis than any other in his generation.

**Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona** (d. 1263) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well known for his ethical works such as *Sha'arei Teshuva* and his *Commentary on Pirkei Avot*. He originally opposed the philosophical works of Rambam, but he viewed the burning of the Talmud in 1242 as a sign that he was incorrect in opposing Rambam's philosophical works.

**Orchot Tzaddikim** was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. The author is unknown. The book discusses many different character traits and is often quoted in discussions on ethics and values.

**R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman** (also known as the Vilna Gaon, 1720-1797) is considered one of the greatest rabbinic authorities in the last five hundred years. His proficiency and insights in all areas of Jewish scholarship earned him the title of "Gaon," genius. His rulings and traditions play a major role among Ashkenazi Jews. Despite a profound desire to settle in the Land of Israel, he was never able to do so.