



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Boy Who Thought He Shouldn't Run

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WHEN 21ST-CENTURY American Jewry is studied, historians will look back at the story of Oliver Ferber as a snapshot of the era: an inspiring and horrifying episode that tells us a great deal about the American Jewish experience. Oliver's tale, which occurred in 2021, was made known in an April 2023 article for ESPN by Sam Borden titled "A State Championship or His Faith? The Agonizing Choice of a Young Jewish Runner."

Oliver Ferber, Borden tells us, was like many students at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Maryland. His family found its Jewish identity important enough to send him to a Jewish educational institution, but much of the seventh day of the week was devoid of Sabbath observance, with a focus on athletics. "Saturday morning was sports," Oliver's mother told ESPN, "whatever they wanted to do and they were always busy." Oliver embraced running, and soon became a central member of his school's cross-country team. He excelled in his athletic activities, and the team succeeded with him.

Then came Covid-19. And in isolation, the then-

16-year-old Oliver found the faith of his forefathers. He "began praying more" and took "a stricter approach to the holiness of Shabbat." He came to believe that public athletic competition was inappropriate on the day of rest. Meanwhile, the Maryland cross-country championship had been scheduled for Saturday, with Oliver's team competing.

It is here that the story takes a horrifying turn. Did Oliver encounter understanding at this Jewish school? Did his classmates or community reflect respect for his newfound faith? Borden tells us that the opposite was the case:

His teammates formed a new group chat without him—for the "state racers"—and when Oliver suggested he'd still come to the race [to] support the others, one of his friends told him, perhaps only half-jokingly, "If you're not going to race, don't show up. No one wants to see your face."

Thus ESPN describes for its readers how Jewish students psychologically tortured a fellow Jew because of his adherence to traditional Judaism. Many adjectives exist to describe this bullying behavior, but perhaps one, above all, should be emphasized: un-American. It is worth pondering whether George

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Washington, echoing Newport's Jews when he celebrated America as a country that "gives to bigotry no sanction, persecution no assistance," could ever have imagined a day in which American Jews would be the bigots, giving persecution every assistance in order to pressure a classmate to cease his Judaic observance. Washington famously concluded his letter with the pluralistic prayer that Americans sit each "under his own vine and fig tree," so that "none shall make them afraid," and all will be "everlastingly happy." Oliver did not have vine or fig tree; but we are told that in the midst of this bullying he did sit inside his car, finding himself as anything but everlastingly happy: "I just sat there.' Then he burst into tears."

Did Oliver live in a home that was supportive of his journey? Did his parents thank their lucky stars that, when so many young people suffered psychological trauma during the pandemic, their own son found a source of inspiration and motivation? Let us let ESPN again answer this question for us:

At home, it was difficult, too. Oliver's mother told him he owed it to his teammates to run; that her family who lived in Israel said it was OK for him to run; that the officials at JDS [Jewish Day School] were good with him running.

"I cared because he was letting the team down, the school down, my family down," Karyn said. "It's a Jewish school that can win a state championship—I'm like, 'Do it for the Jewish people. You need to run.'"

There you have it: "Do it for the Jewish people." The logic may be difficult to discern, so let us try to work it out. Perhaps Oliver's mother believed that when the important moments in American Jewish history are remembered for posterity, historians will recall Washington's outreach to American Jewry, the nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court, and...the Saturday victory of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School cross-country running team? As strange as this argument may seem, it seems to have found purchase in the community. Oliver experienced "a lot of yelling and getting mad" from his "teammates, my coach, the school, my mom... Everyone was telling me to race." His coach, who also pressured Oliver, tells ESPN that Oliver "had the whole world against him in that situation."

To read this article is to think of the film *Chariots of Fire*, in which the real-life Christian runner Eric Liddell is asked by English aristocrats to compete in the 1924 Olympics on his Sabbath. In the film, however, Liddell finds support from his family, who told him,

"Don't compromise....Run in God's name, and let the world stand back in wonder." Here, though, Oliver's fellow Jews pressured him to run. Following Liddell's steadfast refusal, one aristocrat ruefully reflected that he was "a true man of principles and a true athlete. His speed is a mere extension of his life, its force. We sought to sever his running from himself." Oliver was told to separate his faith from himself, in the name of Jewish pride—even though, whatever one's own observance of the Sabbath might be, it is undeniable that Oliver's choice was one that would have made generations of his Jewish predecessors proud.

What are we to make of the way Oliver was treated? What would motivate the students and faculty and parent body of a *Jewish* day school to act in so un-American, and—it must be said—so illiberal a manner? The answer has been given to us by another individual who was seen as an oddball for his embrace of Orthodoxy, the writer Herman Wouk. In his *This Is My God*, Wouk imagines an assimilated Jew encountering Hasidim and resenting how they remind him "with their mere presence in the street that he is burying a part of his background that cannot be buried. They are skeletons out of his closet." That, in the end, is how Oliver may have been seen in his school. He was (pun intended) "a traitor to his class," a Jew who had the gall to summon the skeleton of Sabbath observance from the Jewish past, a skeleton that was thought permanently buried, but that had the unmitigated chutzpah to resurrect itself in 21st-century America.

Meanwhile, if Oliver's classmates were un-American, the Gentiles in his athletic circle were anything but. After Oliver adamantly refused to submit to the terrible pressure, his coach finally suggested that a request be sent to Greg Dunston, the director of the Maryland race, requesting that the race be moved. This Oliver did, telling Dunston that "it would mean the world to be able to both race and keep Shabbat." Dunston readily changed the date, showing respect for Oliver's faith in a way that Oliver's own community never did. He ran, and his team won; but as exceptional as Oliver has proved to be, it is hard to celebrate his team's victory. Never, perhaps, was a team less deserving.

That is why I suggest that hundreds of years from now, those seeking to understand faith in America will study this story. They will marvel at a country in which Gentiles readily changed a race date to accommodate Judaic observance, in an inspiring echo of George Washington's welcome. And they will realize that part and parcel of the story of America is the way in which Jews were allowed to practice their faith in freedom, and wonder at a Jewish community that chose to try and compel one of their own to spurn this gift. 