

Jewish gold medalist Raisman is an athlete with a conscience

Rafael Medoff/JNS.org

The gutsy Massachusetts teen followed her stunning gymnastic achievements at the London games, including two gold medals and one bronze, with a moving tribute to the Israeli athletes murdered by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Olympics—a tribute that the Olympic Games leadership refused to authorize, despite a worldwide outcry.

JNS.org spoke with Shuli Eshel, the Israeli-American director of the critically acclaimed 2007 documentary, “Jewish Women in American Sport: Settlement Houses to the Olympics,” about Raisman’s triumph—on the gym floor and beyond.

JNS.org: What were you thinking when you heard Aly Raisman, moments after her victory, paying tribute to the Munich massacre victims?

Eshel: I thought about how tens of thousands of people around the world petitioned the International Olympic Committee to have a moment of silence



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Shuli Eshel

In the early 1900s, in Jewish neighborhoods in cities like New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia, there were institu-

tions called “settlement houses,” kind of like JCCs—they provided social services to immigrants and city girls. And they had sports facilities, but women were not allowed to use them. The general attitude was that women should stay in the home, or in the sweatshops, but should not be involved in “men’s activities” like athletics. It was considered un-feminine.

JNS.org: How did that finally change?

Eshel: Brave individual women broke down the barriers one by one. Bella Uttenberg founded the Young Women’s Hebrew Association in 1902 in order to start giving women access to those facilities. Swimming coach Charlotte Epstein, the only woman member of the American Olympic Committee, lobbied relentlessly to allow women to take part in the Olympic swimming competition, which was finally achieved in 1920.

By the way, these breakthroughs helped non-Jewish women athletes, too. For example, Gertrude Adderly, who was not Jewish, swam the English Channel as part of the 1926 Olympic games, which was an astounding accomplishment. She reached that level because she had been a member of Charlotte Epstein’s swimming team.

Some were. In my film, Prof. Linda Borish, the leading historian of Jewish women in sports, describes how Epstein fought for women’s rights and staged women’s swimming meets to raise money for the campaign to give women the right to vote. She, together with swimmer Janice Lifson-Stuart and track and



PHOTO CREDIT: ALY RAISMAN FACEBOOK PAGE

Aly Raisman

field stars Lillian Copeland and Syd Koff, were among the very few American athletes who refused to take part in the 1936 Berlin Olympics because of the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews.

JNS.org: That was not an easy position to take.

Eshel: For athletes who devote the best years of their lives to training for the Olympics, to then boycott the games as a matter of conscience—that’s a remarkable thing to do. Very few have that kind of courage.

JNS.org: Which brings up back to Aly Raisman.

Eshel: Yes. For starters, she’s a proud Jew. That’s a thrilling thing to see. The music she chose to have played in the background was the best-known Jewish song in the world, “Hava Nagila.” And then to stand up there, after winning the gold medal, and to talk about how it

was the 40th anniversary of the Munich massacre, and to speak about those athletes who were killed. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who had tears in their eyes. But for me it has a special feeling because I know that she stands on the shoulders of other brave young women, over the years, who had the courage to speak out—to speak out as women, and to speak out as Jews.

JNS.org: Did you hear that she will be visiting Israel soon?

Eshel: I know Israelis will be very excited to see her. And that too is part of a strong tradition of Jewish women athletes with

ties to Israel—Lillian Copeland, Syd Koff and other Olympic athletes from the 1930s took part in the Maccabiah Games. There’s a sweet story about how Syd used to wear a beret, and she was so admired that when she came to the Maccabiah games, Tel Aviv was full of little girls wearing berets in imitation of her.

JNS.org: Maybe Aly Raisman will follow in her footsteps. Aly did an interview with the Boston Globe a few months ago in which she was asked about the new designs for the American Olympic team members, and she replied, “I love fashion, so it’s cool to be sponsored by Ralph Lauren.”

Eshel: Which proves that while she’s an amazing athlete and a proud Jew and Zionist, she’s also still a girl! ■