



## OLYMPIC DREAMS THROUGH UNITY

### **Introduction**

In 1967, just weeks before the Six Day War, I came to Israel for the first time. I was six years old. I was filled with wonder. I did not understand what Israel was, what she was about, what she meant to me, my family and to others. My mother, may she rest in peace, told me that during the trip I constantly asked: "where is the Wall?"

I could not wait to put my little 'tsetel' between the boulders at the Wall that meant so much to the Jewish People around the World. When I did that, it became special to me.

Since then I returned to Israel almost every summer. I was Bar Mitzvah'd at that same Wall where I so enthusiastically embraced Israel a few years before that.

What effect did it have on me? My world. My life. My Family, and their future.

That is why I made Aliyah. At age 13. By myself. Why I still live here and love this land, and why I will help shape it for generations to come.

When I was five I started playing baseball. When I arrived in Israel, I quickly adjusted to the sports of the country and, within two years, became the Israeli Junior Champion in the javelin. I represented Israel in International Competitions and at the height my athletic career had a shot to represent Israel in the 1984 Olympics. I missed the mark by 6ft and my Olympic dream faded. However, I did not stop. I continued my involvement in Israeli Track and Field, becoming one of the top coaches with athletes from all over Israel who were also top ranking throwers.

I started to play softball. I went with my team to the 16<sup>th</sup> World Championships. I have played in many tournaments. I am proud to say that I have represented Israel in nine Maccabiah Games, helping others realise their dreams.

My story is the introduction to a concept of belief that through sports, our Jewish American and Canadian Youth can finally find the connection to their true heritage and destiny and can accomplish their dreams which would be almost impossible in the environment they live in today.

## **The Concept**

I begin with an explanation of what I had in mind from the onset of this project, and finish with the meaning this has for the American , Canadian and World Jewish Community and the significance that it would have for Israel.

At first glance, it would seem that sports, Israel and Aliyah have little in common.

Far from it. Sport can make a difference. My experience and that of others in developing softball in Israel helps prove what this concept is about.

Israel Softball began in 1979, mainly as a men's event. It has developed with a women's league and junior teams. Israel softball was accepted into the European Federation in 1994. The Men's National Team participated in the European Championship for the first time in 1995 and, in 1996, the World Championships. The Junior Men's team participated in their World Championships in 2000 and several European Championships. Our Junior Girl's participated for the first time in 2007 at their European Championship in Germany which in itself held special significance.

Women's softball in Israel had a slow start until the Aliyah of a young Jewish Girl, Shyella Mayk. Shyella was born in Israel, but her parents moved to America returning in Shyella's high school years. She played for Quinipiac University (NCAA Division 1) and was a pitcher. Her dedication to Israel and softball was so contagious that we decided to launch women's softball in Israel.

The 2004 Olympics were held in Athens. The Greeks, who had no softball team, were encouraged by the International Softball Federation to establish a team that would be able to compete against the best. (The home country is allowed to have a team in each sport without qualifying.) The Greeks, as did many other countries, enlisted American women/girls who played softball and had some Greek background to qualify and play for the National Team. Most teams use this method in order to be able to compete at the level needed in the world scene.

Our plans were to participate in the Olympic qualifying tournament in 2007. We started this process, but a number of difficulties prevented us from entering the competition. We identified some top Jewish players in the United States, and it was at that time that our plans for the 2007 qualifier for the 2008 Olympics began to form. We worked hard to enter a team and were on the threshold of fielding what would have been one of the strongest women's team ever assembled. Fate, and the sudden, unforeseen withdrawal of funds, dealt us a setback.

Our goal was to compete Olympics. As a *Jewish* team. From Israel, as a *Jewish* country. Our goal may be dimmed by the politics that so cruelly denied us funds and, recently, saw softball voted out of the 2012 Olympics. Israel has not had a Team sport in the Olympics since 1976 and has struggled not only in the Team sports but also in the individual events.

There are hundreds of American and Canadian Jewish youth who are athletes of Olympic caliber but do not get the chance to represent the country in which they were born for reasons that can not really be explained, although there has been reference to politics in each sport.

In order to try and put a Team together in 2006 for the Qualifier for the 2008 Games in Beijing, I contacted many players and found more than 60 top-level Jewish women who were willing to play for Israel. They were told that they must become Israelis by process of naturalization thus acquiring Israeli citizenship.

All of the players indicated their willingness to accept the obligations to become Israeli citizens. As mentioned above, the harsh winds of fate prevented us from achieving our goal.

Our goal is to bring together, and to unite, the American , Canadian Jewish Community (and any other Jewish communities throught the World) and Israeli Jewish Youth, in sport. This will give the players the chance of becoming a part of Israel, *to be Israeli*.

This is a concept that, if done properly, these youth and their families will not only be the Jewish donators of resources different organizations in Israel, but will be a part of the development of the youth of Israel through sports and become Israelis in heart and soul, whether or not in the end they make that final step an live here permanently.

Each will do everything that they can to fulfill their obligations. Each will, at a minimum, be in Israel during their summers and vacations to promote actively the development of Israeli youth by participating in clinics, camps and whatever other activities needed to enhance the sport and finally bring the Israeli-born athletes level of play to that Olympic caliber. Many, in all probability, will marry and remain in Israel, building families and fostering friendships in the next generations.

Although our goal of playing in the 2008 Olympics did not come about, this project can be the catalyst for future projects with other sports. We can use sport to bring other Jewish people/athletes from around the world to realize their Jewish heritage and their connection to Israel, a connection that Israel so dearly needs.

There are over 600,000 Israelis living outside Israel . Here, we have a chance to bring the youth of America into our Israeli homes, onto our “field of dreams” and begin the process of a huge homecoming to Israel.

We cannot confirm that each of our athletes will make that final step and live “permanently” in Israel. We firmly believe that this fact should not be the main concern, through this process; many **will** take that final step to marry and set up families here in Israel. Others will become our ambassadors around the world with their hearts truly and “permanently” belonging to Israel.

In 2001, days before the Maccabiahs, a bomber blew himself up at a disco in Tel Aviv. Many Jewish athletes were concerned about their safety at the Games. The US Maccabiah Organization decided not to show because of this, mainly because of the concerns of parents and out of fear of other terrorist attacks. I wrote a letter to all of

my friends and family in sport. In my letter, I expressed my feelings and this is one of the excerpts from that letter that I believe has relevance here.

*“Now is the time to show the world that we are unified. 23 kids died at that disco, we have to show the world that for every Jew that is killed there are 100 more out there willing to be part of Israel when needed. Now is the time to show them our "true" numbers, not the small number in Israel but the numbers all over the world who are saying "Never Again"!!!!”*

When preparing the plan for the Jewish Softball Girls for the Beijing Olympics, I did not double the number of the murdered children from that Disco tragedy but we reached 40 and that was our ultimate goal without having to haggle over if they are going to stay now or when they finish school or whenever. They wanted to be Israelis, they wanted to be part of us and they understand the consequences of being Israeli and Jewish. They knew about the Disco, they hear about the tragedies and yet they still wanted to get on that plane and be a part of us. Their dream sleeps, and will return.

We are ready to do this again. We have a chance of changing the tide and bring a National Softball Team together in order to wave the Israeli Flag at the Olympics. We are going to this for all those who cannot. We are going to stand with our heads held up high , sing "Hatikva" and whatc the Star of David blow in the wind wheer everone can see it.

I cry when I write this. Not because of all that has happened to me since my first trip and what it has done to me, but because many others may never experience what I have come to discover, love and defend. A Jewish way of life. A Jewish homeland. A Jewish future for my children, and their children’s children’s children.

Help us help them share – *our* – dream. Let’s work to fulfill it. Now. *Together*.

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