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HIGH HOLY DAYS 5763
"Run For Your Life"
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

One is a Catholic Youth minister from a parish in Redondo Beach, another a devout Muslim who drives Vanpool for UCLA. Still another, an African-American grandmother of four living in South Central. Two are post-college/present day yuppies, who decided to do this together, until one got relocated to Atlanta by a popular restaurant chain (that is trying desperately not to be thought of as a restaurant chain). And still another is a gay man in his mid-twenties, into herbal remedies, vitamin supplements and the North Hollywood club scene. And then there's me, thirty-something rabbi…

It sounds like the beginning of a joke, a rabbi, a Catholic, a Muslim, a gay man, you fill in the rest. But in fact its no joke, we all met about 3 months ago, on a Sunday morning at 7am as we were matched up as a running group for a marathon we would be training to run together. Yes, I am training to run the AIDS Marathon in December, me running 26.2 miles, and maybe that sounds like the joke.

By some strange calculus of fate and physique, we are all actually meant to be together. Despite our perceived social, religious and even philosophical differences, we 5 women and 2 men have two very important things in common: we can't run very fast or very far without gasping for breath, or at least we couldn't back in June. In marathon running, as in much of life, I have learned you are grouped together by your weaknesses and not your strengths. I add it to my mental list of lessons learned while running 26.2 miles.

The point-two, in the 26.2 miles, is also important, at least I am told. It was those last 385 yards that were added to the Marathon of 1908 so that when a runner finished the

race, they would do so in front of the royal viewing box occupied by King Edward the 7th. I guess it was easier to move the finish line than it was to move the King.

On Rosh Hashanah the finish line is extended as well, as we are given 10 more days to improve how our souls will finish what is really the race of our life. Our tradition reminds us that all of Israel, the people and the nation, pass under the watchful eye of God seated as a King upon his throne. Without that last little bit of effort at the end, which I am told is no little bit coming as it does 26 miles into the run, God would never see us, and we would think we've finished before we really had. It's not enough just to reflect on our past year, Judaism teaches that we have to do something about what we have learned in our reflection. Beginnings are important, but so are endings. How we finish is maybe even more important than how we start, for it shows that we have learned and grown along the way. As for me, I keep running, one foot in front of the other; sometimes that's all you can do, and sometimes that alone is the hardest thing.

And so there was our strange amalgam of a group, on mile 12 of a 14 mile run, our longest run up to that point in time. Shorter than most of us drove from our respective communities to get there, and farther than any of us had ever run, or even walked continuously, in our lives. We were somewhere headed north along PCH, on the bike path along the beach. Surrounded by sand, baking in the rising heat of the day, like the Israelites in the dessert, though in more comfortable shoes. And like the Israelites we were k'vetching, complaining like people who didn't want to run another foot, much less two more miles. "My feet hurt!", "When's the next walk break?", "Its hot!", "I'm hungry!" We sounded like children cooped up in a car on a cross country drive, all we

were missing was an open box of cereal in the back and someone fighting over the radio station.

In fact a car was just what I needed at this point in the run, perhaps something in the shape of an ambulance. When you train for a marathon, such as we are, you train in groups, the logic being, that if one among you is having a bad run, a rough day, the others are there to pull you through it. It makes a lot of sense; I recall an exchange we had on a previous run, again struggling in the last few miles. One of us said the only thing that was keeping her running was the thought of food at the end, and other said it was the recollection that their was a bathroom near the finish-line, to which I intoned from my position far in the rear of the group, the only thing that was keeping me running was the two of them. That too is true, and not only about marathons. I add it to the mental list, as it's hard to write while jogging.

I've learned in marathons, just as in life, you can support those running along the road with you, but you can't run it for them. At mile 12, as at mile 1, no matter our bond to one another we each still had to run every step of the way ourselves. Every step, every stride, though perhaps inspired by another, even taken for the sake of another, must in the end be your own. You can walk in the foot steps of others, you can even stand in their shoes, but walking or standing you still have to use your own feet. There is a life lesson in that as well.

Though waxing philosophical for the first 3 hours of the run, by mile 12 it wasn't life lessons that were running through my head, pun only slightly intended, rather it was matters of life and death. Struggling as each of us were, in our own private deserts, the finish line nowhere in sight, not on the horizon or even our mind's eye, the question

became, "Could I really do this, or was I just kidding myself?" I mean, I don't look much like a marathon runner, if you haven't noticed.

Maybe there are things about ourselves that we can't change even if we want to? Maybe God just meant us to be a certain way? Overweight, unlucky in business, unlucky in love, not good in relationships, not good out of relationships, workaholics, alcoholics, poor students, poor parents, skeptical, egotistical, bullies, push-overs. Can we ever really change? Or is it fate that we are who we are, even if we don't want to be?

As our group of 7 dispersed more and more, privately confronting our own limitations and destinies, the words of the *Unataneh Tokef* prayer that we read on these high holy days came to mind. OY! When a Rabbi's mind starts to wander. In those profound and dreadful verses I heard the awesome questions of that awesome prayer, *b'rosh Hashanah yicateyvun ob'yom tzom kippur yi ca teymun,… me yehyeh oo me yamoot.* On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed… who shall live and who shall die, who shall see ripe old age and who shall not; who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who shall be secure and who shall be driven; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled; who shall be poor and who shall be rich; who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted.

You ask a lot of questions when you run, they seem to multiply by some factor of the mileage you are running, and by mile 12 I was beyond the, "why am I doing this?"variety, and into the "what is this doing to me, how will I survive this, can I do this?" line of questioning. You know, the kind we ask of ourselves even when we are not running marathons. Whenever we confront, by choice or by force, the seemingly

insurmountable obstacles in our lives, it is never the question of why, but always the questions of how that bog us down. We know the why, why is always easy, Why? Because it will make you a better person. Why? Because you'll live longer, be happier, be a better parent, a better spouse. Why? Because your life depends on it, your doctor demands it, your mother told you so. We can always find an answer for why, but an answer for how, well, how do we figure that out?

Max Artz, a Jewish scholar and philosopher wrote of the Unataneh Tokef prayer, "God determines the quantity of our life, but we determine the quality." Another way perhaps of looking at it is that the God determines why we live, we determine how we live, and what we do with the gift of life given to us by God. That is the meaning of that awesome prayer.

There is a popular gift on the Bar Mitzvah circuit these days, it's called the Jewish Book of Why, it sells pretty well, and many of us have the two volume set at home. Imagine how well it would sell if it was titled the Jewish Book of How, imagine the volumes that would require.

Standing at a cemetery one afternoon, (Rabbis do that a lot), a mourner observed that when looking at a tombstone what is most significant is not the date of birth nor the date of death, but the dash, the hyphen between them. That dash is the life line, the mourner remarked; it is along that dash that people live and experience life. The dash is the how!

I see a lot of tombstones, and it is interesting I think to note, that no matter the span in years between one date and the other, the length of that dash is always the same. It is the only lie on a tombstone. Our life line is not one uniform dash from this to that,

but rather I think that it's more like a graph of the stock market, with peaks and valleys, representing the highs and lows of our journey; the moments when we rose to the occasion, and the times when life knocked us down. An ancient Hebrew prayer, translated from the Yiddish, now into English, says, "May we may we all be so blessed so as to live in bull markets, not bear."

When I sit with a family to learn of their loved one after he or she has gone, they never talk about the why's of the person's life. But about the how's. I'll ask why their father moved to California, and the story will be about the famed cross country drive, cereal box and radio station fights and all. I'll ask why they became this or that in business, and the answer will invariably be how they managed to build that business, support the family, and overcome obstacles blocking their path. I'll ask why they think of their loved one as a good parent, and the answer is to enumerate in great detail how they parented, how they showed their love for their children, their spouse, their friends. It's never only about why. Looking at the peaks and valleys of our own life, when we move beyond the "why did this happen to me?" questions, aren't the more important ones, the more telling ones, the more transformative questions, "how did my life go from such a high to such a low? How will I pull out of this slump and climb to that impossible height?" Listen, then, to the familiar words of the Psalmist, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23)

It may be true indeed that the date to the right of that dash has already been determined. But our tradition teaches that even that is not yet set in stone. For the last line of the Unataneh Tokef prayer instructs us, *o-tshuvah, oo-tephilah, o-tezdakkah,*

mayavayreen, et roah ha-gezayrah. But turning, prayer and acts of justice temper God's sever decree. We can change the outcome, by changing 'how' we live, we change the why, by changing the 'how', we can change ourselves, even those things we thought of ourselves impossible to change.

Did I mention I am running a marathon in three months?

A man once asked a great Rabbi, "If you are going along one path all the days of your life, how far do you have to go till you are headed in the right direction?" To which the rabbi responded, "To change the direction of your life all you have to do is turn around."

Friends, in these uncertain times, when buildings built to last a thousand years are turned to dust and rubble; when fortunes and companies vanish in the haze of cyber space, or grey accounting; when children are taken from their bedrooms and front yards and we read about it on freeway signs; when lives and families are torn asunder in pizza parlors and at Passover seders; when we speak of global warming and rising tides in the same year we speak of killer winters and incomprehensible droughts, is it not incumbent upon us to move beyond the why and get to the how, if not about the problems of our nation and our planet which are so large, then about the challenges of our bodies, our soul, our relationships, which in comparison to those of the rest of the world are so small? Let us look deep into our souls, examine the dash that is our life thus far and find there those things that need attention, and then make peaks where there are valleys. In runner's terms, if we want to get out of the valley of the shadow of death, we are going to need to do the hard thing, to put peaks in our life where there are valleys we are going to need to

run uphill. Yeah, though I find myself in the shadow of the valley of death, with rod and staff, I can climb the hills of difficulty and reach the peaks of purpose in my life.

In each of your Machzorim, your prayer books is an envelope, a piece of paper and a pencil. Separate from the check you will write for the High Holy Day appeal, it is the most important paper in you life right now, it is a check you are going to write to yourselves, we are going to spend a little currency on our bodies, our souls, our relationships, our character. In this New Year we are writing a check to ourselves, one unlike our stocks and bonds is guaranteed to produce a big return a few months from now. You and I are going to make a promise to each other. In a world that is seemingly spinning out of control, we are going to pick one thing in our life that we have yet to control but know we can. We are going to pick a valley and make it into a peak. We are going to move beyond the why and focus at least for this one thing on the how. How can I be a better parent? How can I be a better spouse? How can I improve my physical health, my mental health, my relationship with others, my relationship with myself? Friends, look at me: if *I* can run a marathon, then surely *anything* is possible. Take a moment before the end of this service, or if you prefer not to write on Shabbat, in the next few days, and identify that valley in your life, write it on the piece of paper, and describe how you are going to turn it into a peak. Then seal it in your envelope, address it to yourself and drop it in the boxes as you leave this evening, or at the temple later this week. Sixth months from now, I will mail your valleys back to you so we can each see for ourselves how we have turned them into peaks.

Running up hill is never easy, it's not only the degree of the incline but also its length that makes it such a challenge. But think for a moment of Rocky Balboa, standing

on the top step of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, at the top of his personal mountain. "Yeah, though I find myself in the shadow of the valley of death, with rod and staff, I can climb the hills of difficulty and reach the peaks of purpose in my life." It feels great to be on top of the hill, it gives purpose to life when we focus on the how instead of the why, to come out from the shadows, up from the valley and into the light.

So back to my 14 mile run for a moment. When we last left I was on mile 12, putting one foot in front of the other soon enough mile twelve became mile 13, and then it was only one mile to go. It was then that I think the second most important life lesson occurred to me while running, long journeys are much shorter when you count the distance left behind rather than the distance left to go. At mile 13 I had already run 13 miles, look how far I had come from where I started, what was one more mile? It was just more of what I had already been doing ever since I started down this path. Once you start, you're closer to your goal than you have ever been, even at just two-tenths of a mile.

And the most important lesson learned about life while running: always wear comfortable shoes! If you are going to make a great journey, the most important thing is to take good care of what is going to move you from one place to the next. If your feet are comfortable along the path you've chosen even uphills feel like downhills.