

Running with Hope

I am not sure when it started, but I could feel my legs getting tired. And then, stiff. Really stiff.

Around mile 17 of the Boston Marathon, I ran over to the left side of Washington Street to grab some energy gels from the Clif Bar Energy Zone station.



A man held out the gel pack and somehow, I missed the grab as I ran by. I stopped and turned around to pick it up (even on a day filled with littering, that's just not my style!) But when I bent over to pick it up, I realized that my

body had become too stiff. I could barely bend over.

Anxiety rose. Was I going to be able to finish this? I had trained, even trained somewhat intensely, but I had never run more than 19.5 miles, and now, the frigid, driving rain, the 39 degree cold, the strong headwind, were all taking their toll on me.

There were moments when I thought I couldn't continue. Heartbreak Hill. My Emunah running partners – Dave Geller and Brian Cutler – and I walked up a good chunk of that. And then the last six miles. We were in pain; we were cold. We wanted to stop. For the first 16 miles, we talked non-stop – we picked an interesting topic: the dumbest things we had ever done in our lives!

But at the end, we could not say a word. We just ran. Through the pain.

After we completed the marathon, we received our medals, drank our water, got our picture taken, ate our bananas and energy bars, and started walking another mile to the Boston Common Visitor Center where our dry clothes were stored in a runners' tent.





We started walking, we started shivering; we were suffering from hypothermia.

Our pace slowed to a turtle-like crawl. Seemingly impossibly, we made it halfway to Charles Street. While there was no way we could cross in the time the signal gave us, we inched across the intersection. Dave's legs had had enough and just at that moment, a volunteer showed up with a wheelchair. She swooped in and took Dave to the tent and Brian went along to make sure he was OK. I stood there, shivering in the thin rain

shield I was given at the finish line – not sure if I could make it to the runners' tent.

It was kind of an absurd situation. I had just run 26.2 miles, but I could not even walk a few hundred feet up a little hill.

The pain and discomfort were disorienting. I felt cold, frozen, stuck, helpless, unable to move forward....

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Looking back on this past year, are you able to identify a moment when you had trouble moving forward? When you stumbled? When you felt threatened or not in control? Did you have difficulty managing your fear or anxiety? Did you ever feel overwhelmed? Maybe you even felt hopeless, unable to go on?

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I share these tales from the Marathon not to boast (although I am proud of the accomplishment), but to share some basic ideas about hopelessness and hope.

When we stood here a year ago, none of us could have imagined all the events that would unfold over the year. Let us think back to times of joy, to satisfying accomplishments, to celebrations, to moments of genuine

connection. Yet to be perfectly honest, at this moment in time, as we stand before God, vulnerable and exposed, the memories of the negative seem to rise to the surface – the disappointments, the regrets, the shame.

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Our tradition knows a great deal about coping with disappointments, about hopelessness and hope – perhaps it is because of our long and challenging history, perhaps it is because of our keen psychological insights (see our laws of mourning, for example), perhaps it is because hope is so intrinsic to life, but whatever the reasons, Jews and Judaism have understood the concept of hope – quite well – for millennia.

Hope is woven into the very fabric of Jewish life and the Jewish year. Each year, we journey into the depths of sadness in the middle of the summer. We read three *haftarot*, the *t'lata d'puranuta* – the three prophecies of destruction, of despair and hopelessness as we lead into the saddest day on the Jewish calendar – *Tish'ah B'av* – the ninth day of the month of Av, when we recall the calamities of the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem and the Expulsion from Spain among many other terrible moments.

We revisit the hopelessness each year. We relive some measure of the sadness and loss.

But we do not stop there. We practice hopelessness and HOPE. We must move from those mournful remembrances toward desperately needed healing. Thus, the next seven *haftarot* are called the *shiva d'nehemata* – the seven prophecies of consolation.

In them, Second Isaiah offers us words of comfort and hope. As he famously wrote in the first of these messages: “*Nahamu, Nahamu Ami, yomar Eloheikhem* – Be consoled, be consoled, my people, that is what your God declares.” (Isaiah 40:1) As the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra teaches, the doubling of the word consolation indicates “that comfort will occur swiftly or repeatedly.”

While we do not know much about the anonymous Second Isaiah, it is thought that he lived during the time of the Babylonian exile from 586 to 537 BCE – this was a time of great despair. The Northern Kingdom had been wiped out two centuries earlier by the Assyrian Empire and now, the Southern Kingdom had fallen to the Babylonian Empire. But it was not just that – many, many Jews had been killed in the war and Jerusalem, the

capital, and its Temple lay in ruins and to top it all off, the leaders, the top 10% of Israelite society who survived, were sent into exile in Babylonia.

It was enough to make even the greatest optimist lose hope. But Second Isaiah understood this predicament and knew what was needed: hope. Hope can transform any moment. Even if there is only just a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel, we can latch onto that. That glimmer allows us to see a new tomorrow, a new possibility.

Speak to Holocaust survivors and while they will describe untold horrors, most of them will also narrate how hope played a role in their survival. They held it in their hearts and it helped them overcome the terrors of the Shoah.

Even with hope, some did not survive. But all who did survive, had hope.

Hope – *tikvah* – has carried our people through the generations. It is embedded in Zionism, in Israel's national anthem, in Herzl's famous words uttered half a century before the modern State of Israel was born: "*Im Tirtzu, ein zo agaddah* – if you dream it, it is no fiction." If you hope for it, anything can happen. Hold onto hope because it can transform you and the world.



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Like many of yours, my year was filled with disappointments and wondrous hope. Just a month or so after the holidays last fall, I wound up in the hospital with a GI blockage caused by a flare-up of my Crohn's disease.

It was frightening, it was debilitating; I had never experienced such a complication over all the years that I have had this illness. I am grateful to Sharon and my family for their care and love. I also thank Rabbi Fel and the entire *shul* for all your support that helped me get through a challenging

time. That hospitalization caused me to miss the Hazon/Arava Institute Israel Bike Ride which occurred the following week.

While you might say that a fun bike ride in Israel should have been the least of my concerns (and you would be right on some level), there was an acute sense for me. I had planned for this ride for four years and trained hard. We had recruited nine riders including my



friend who could not join us because of his cancer. And now, sitting in the hospital, after going through the stages of denial and bargaining, I realized I was going to miss this ride. In the scheme of things, I knew this was not a huge deal, but emotionally, I felt overwhelmingly disappointed.

I needed to channel my training and energy somewhere. I needed something else to look forward to and to work towards. I had been running

each Shabbat morning with our “Running with the Rabbis” group three or four miles; running a marathon was on my proverbial bucket list. The truth was I had thought about training for the marathon the year before, the year after the Marathon bombing. I had wanted to run as a statement of solidarity and strength, but the run in 2014 was during a *yontif* (holy day) during *Pesah* so I shelved it.



It became clear to me that now, in the fall of 2014, running the marathon was the challenge I needed. It would prove to me that my life did not need to be limited or defined by my Crohn's disease. The goal of the marathon would help me recover from the loss of the Israel Ride, a time

when I felt like my body betrayed me, when I was helpless to use my energy or mind to change the situation.

The Marathon was just the right goal to help me recover a sense of control over my life, to give me hope.

As soon as I got stronger, I started training. I was blessed to have so many of you join me on runs, and Dave Geller and I trained assiduously each Monday. Those Mondays were filled with long runs throughout January, February, and March. In case you forgot last winter, it was not easy to train during those months. We ran in blizzards, on tracks, on treadmills, on the bike path – even when it was icy.

That was one of the best parts of the experience. To have a running *hevruta* – a study partner, or training partner, allowed each of us time to get to know



each other better as we trained. It was a first marathon for both of us, and

then Brian, who did a little training and still ran the marathon with us, joined us. By training together, I felt supported in my ability to overcome the challenges that lay ahead of us. The great support of the *shul* – helping us raise \$15,000 for some wonderful charities was also a great boon. Thank you.

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Perhaps that is the first and most basic lesson of hope. While one can work to bring hope to one's self, it is so much more powerful when it comes from someone else. When I was in the hospital, I felt stronger when someone was there to cheer me on. Their support rubbed off on me. Hope emerges out of the caring connection between ourselves and one another.

It is amazing how much that connection with others affected me during the Marathon. Each time we passed someone from Emunah or other people we knew, it brought us strength. It never failed. When we turned onto Commonwealth Avenue and passed the Newton Fire Station, we saw the Geller family, and Dave's wife, Jen, who has run dozens of marathons, jumped into our pack of three and ran with us. She checked in with us to see how we were doing physically and, most importantly, she

gave us encouragement. That half mile she ran with us gave us a great uplift. Shortly thereafter, Brian and I saw our families and their smiling faces, their signs and their cheers. Seeing my wife Sharon and our kids who waited in the rain to support me was pure joy.

After I gave my family a few quick hugs, I started running and I must have stepped on my shoelace. I stopped to tie my shoes and much to my dismay, I could not bend over far enough to tie them. When I finally coaxed my body into bending over that far, my fingers could not grip the laces. They were too cold.

I was stuck: I could not tie my shoes. I panicked – I had run 20 miles and now, I feared I would not finish. I did not know what to do. It was just too absurd.

I realized I needed assistance so I called “help.” But no one understood what I needed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Talya come running up and said, “Talya, do you remember all the times I tied your shoelaces when you were little?” She smiled and set right to work making sure I would not have this problem any more. Sharon, Ari, and Matan all ran up as well and we took a great family photo.



Their love sustained me then and through so many challenging moments this year.

Sometimes help is not there. Sometimes we are forced to reach out to others. Sometimes we need to override our fear of not receiving a response, or being given a negative response that will just make us feel more alone. Sometimes we need to call, and call, and continue to call out – never losing hope that eventually our call will be heard.

The Psalmist understood this so well. Among many instances in the book of Psalms, there is a verse in Psalm 30 that comes to mind: “*Ba’erev yaleen bekhi u’la’voker rina* – in the evening tears may linger, but joy comes in the morning.” There must be renewal or else we could not survive.

The Jerusalem Talmud sums this up well: “*Kol zman she’adam hai, yeish lo tikvah; meit – avdah tikvato* – so long as a person is alive, we can have hope; when one dies, we lose our hope,” meaning, that life and hope go hand in hand.

“When there is life, there is hope!”

To live is to hope.

* * *

Hope can lift us and it is always worth the energy we spend cultivating it. For the last few miles of the run, our pace slowed and the pain in our legs intensified. It seemed like my



quads were yelling at me: “Stop this insanity. What are you doing to us? We will never be your friends again!”

I tried to reassure my legs, but I was running out of gas.

During those miles, crowds lined Beacon Street and they were packed in on Boylston Street. I was running between Dave and Brian and we could not speak. I saw some friends in the crowd and that lifted me, but I was running on empty.

I used some of my remaining energy to lift my arms; as the crowds



saw that, they cheered louder and their cheers pushed me. They filled me with encouragement and hope. And I ran like that for a while – my eyes closed, my arms pumping and the cheering carrying me to the finish line.

That was hope

carrying me home.

* * *

Today is a similar moment. Rosh Hashanah is supposed to be a day fraught with anxiety, with uncertainty. We come before the Almighty to be judged. How did we do this year? What will be our sentence in the new year? Will we really be able to change?

Sometimes, we give up hope. We fear that we will not be able to change, that we will be stuck in our ways. I know that I lose hope when I realize that I have not been able to make the changes in my life that I wanted.

But today is a day filled with hope. We may have work to do, but we do not throw in the towel or drop out of the race.

Today we imagine the world as being created anew. *Hayom harat olam* – today is the birthday of the world, today is pregnant with eternity. Specifically, the rabbis teach that today is the anniversary of the birth of human beings. Imagine the birth of a child – a child is all potential energy; a new child fills us with hope. As our tradition teaches, each new baby could be the Messiah, could bring us closer to a perfected world. Every newborn is filled with unlimited possibilities, with unlimited hope.

This idea is echoed in our reading this morning. Our Torah reading is about looking anew at a situation. Hagar experiences a moment of hopelessness – she has been sent out of her home by her husband, she is lost. She and her child, Yishmael have run out of water and will die of dehydration in the desert. Hagar gives up, stating: “let me not look on as the child dies.” She bursts into tears.

God hears the cry of the boy and opens Hagar’s eyes to a well of water that was there all along. The Midrash explains that sometimes things are right there before us, but we must be open to them. Sometimes we miss something right before our eyes. We become stuck in an old pattern, an old way of dealing with something. We need to open our eyes; we need hope.

Hope can save our lives.

This also resonates in the *haftarah* as Hannah desperately yearns for a child. She prays and has an intense conversation with Eli, the *Kohein*. At the end, he consoles her by telling her that she will have a child. He gives her hope.

Listen carefully to the text that states: “*U’faneha lo hayu lah od* – and her face was no longer this way.” (1 Samuel 1:18) What does this mean

that her face was no longer this way? Well, it means that the expression she once wore, she no longer wore. Presumably, the sadness, the hopelessness had lifted.

Significantly, she has not yet conceived, but she has been blessed with hope. Eli has given Hannah hope and that changes her facial appearance. Perhaps she smiled. She was filled with hope.

These texts about Hagar and Hannah – about hopelessness and then hope were not chosen by accident. Our rabbis wanted us to be filled with a sense of optimism today. Yes, the task is great and change is challenging, but we cannot run away from it. This is a moment of hope – of limitless possibility.

This is the beginning of the new year – yes, there are challenges – in the world, in and around Israel, in our country, in our community, in our families and in ourselves, but this must be a moment of hope.

When running a marathon or living our lives, we must allow for setbacks. You can end up in the hospital, you can endure illness or losses, you could lose the use of your shoulder, but, as hard as it is, we need to hold onto to our hope.

Often, we will be the ones who will make a mess of things. But we cannot let others or ourselves discourage us.

Let us think of this moment as a moment of renewal. This is a moment of unlimited potential energy. Take a moment to think about what your hope is. What is your light? Your goals for this new year? What is the new vision of yourself that will propel you forward?

* * *

Oh, and yes, as I am wont to do, I have left the end of the story for the end. I left you – and myself – on the corner of Charles and Boylston Streets all alone. What did I do? I started to walk slowly. I was cold and shivering and feeling a bit despondent.

Just then, a woman approached me. A stranger. She asked me, “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” I said with my teeth chattering a bit.

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right, I’m not.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m just trying to get up to the runners’ tent over there.”

“OK, I’ll walk with you.”

“Thank you.”

And so, this total stranger, as I found out, a woman named Jamie from Lake Tahoe who was visiting her niece who attends Tufts took my arm and helped me walk. It was such a simple, but wondrous act of *hesed*, a random act of kindness that has remained with me.

That stranger gave me hope on that cold April day. I will never forget that act of *hesed*, that helped me walk across Boston Common, just as I will never forget that run.

Running with hope can change our lives – and we don't even need sneakers (that was for Brian who ran without sneakers!)

May we all find the hope that can help us make this a year of blessing, joy and fulfillment.