

## **Kol Nidre - Yom Kippour 5772**

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### **Judaism as Discipline**

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Last year, I received a wake-up call from my body telling me that I wasn't as young as I thought. You see, I have long labored under the illusion that I was still a young man. After all, as a child who had skipped a year during elementary school, I was used to being the youngest in my class. I finished high school in 1968 when I was still 16 and university four years later when I was still 20. And when I completed my studies for rabbinical ordination in 1978 and went out on interviews for a job as a congregational rabbi, I was always being told that I was such a young man to be a rabbi. And while many years have elapsed since then, in the back of my mind, I have remained a young man. After all, I still listen to rock and roll, the music of my youth, and still use the same expressions that were current back then.

But just last year, my body decided that it was time to wake me up from this illusion. So 18 months ago, I had a heart attack. Thankfully, it was a mild attack. Thankfully, I was able to walk myself into the emergency ward of the hospital and tell the doctors that I didn't feel good, and thankfully, they didn't need to perform open heart surgery – just stick in a couple of stents through an artery and after a few hours of rest and recovery, I was basically as good as new.

Of course, that wasn't the end of my recovery. I had to begin an exercise course for cardiac patients, an exercise program to put the heart at some strain in order to check how well it worked. I spent 12 sessions in this program, peddling on a stationary bicycle, walking on a treadmill and climbing on a step ladder. The first two exercises were not a problem, the third was a bit more difficult but more for the knees than for the heart. But as I was huffing and puffing during the 30 minute exercise program, I recalled a comment that a teacher of mine, my Talmud professor, had said back when I was a beginning student in rabbinical school at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.

Like the first year of law school or medical school, the first part of a rabbi's training is a real grind, with several hours of class a pay, plus hours of library study, all intended to provide us with familiarity with the basic volumes – the Bible and Talmud – that are the basic tools of a rabbi. Every day, the eight of us in the freshman class used to sit around the same long table in the same room of the same building, poring over some musty old text. Everyday, we would spend hours in this same position, developing a real good case of squinting eyes and hunched

over back. To try to break away from this daily regimen, several of my classmates joined the Hollywood YMCA, a well-known gym program which was located just around the corner from our school. There they would go after the morning Talmud class or before the afternoon Bible lesson to exercise or to jog.

During this particular year, our Talmud teacher was a middle aged-rabbi, a man of superior intellect, with great breadth of Talmud and great girth of stomach. On one particular day, as we ended another lesson, my athletic classmates started to make plans as to when they would be going over to the gym to work out. The rabbi, overhearing the conversation, suddenly made a long face when he realized what they were talking about. “Say, Rabbi, what don’t you join us?” asked one of the students. “The exercise could do you good!” The rabbi looked like he had just tasted something terrible and announced, “Schvitzing is for goyim!” (Sweating or perspiring is for non-Jews/Gentiles).

Of course, that was nearly 40 years ago. Today, everyone seems to be as concerned with body as with mind. I remember when I lived in Israel, more than 25 years ago, and worked as the Head of Visitor Relations at the Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. I would often chuckle when meeting with groups of American tourists. There they would arrive, each one in a different brand of athletic shoes. When we would order lunch for American donors to the school, we had to give special instructions to the caterer to prepare the special “American” menu, and not the standard Israeli one: no red meat, only chicken or fish, prepared either baked or grilled, not fried, with fresh salads and brown rice, not pan-fried potatoes and cooked vegetables in sauces, and for dessert, fruit and not cake, with freshly squeezed juices or mineral water, not coca cola. And the conversation would invariable flow to the visitor’s jogging route before breakfast, or the tennis match planned for the afternoon, or the lack of a weight room or other exercise facility in the Israeli hotel. My fellow Israeli colleagues would sit sheepishly quiet when the talk would come around to exercise and healthy diet; they didn’t know what to make of this phenomenon. They figured that the 3 years of basic army service that they had performed starting at the age of 18, and the 40 days a year they served in military reserves was enough to keep them healthy for a lifetime. They simply would not have been able to understand the situation that I had faced as a young rabbi in a small American suburban synagogue when our large multi-purpose room, which was used for religious services on Friday night and Saturday morning, would get transformed into an exercise room on Monday mornings for daily Aerobics training.

Every morning, my synagogue would be invaded by women in their shorts and exercise shoes for their daily dose of aerobic dancing. To the beat of the songs on the hit parade, the women would wiggle and jiggle, hop and bop, skip and dip, ump and bump their way into better health and slimmer waist lines. It was like that great scene from the classic American movie from the 1980’s, The Big Chill, when all the former campus radicals and hippies put on their running shoes, appropriately entitled “Running Dogs” in homage of China’s former dictator Chairman Mao, for a morning run. Why even your President Nicholas Sarkozy is an exercise aficionado,



although I understand that he had to cut back on his daily regimen a couple of years ago, a day after he had suffered a dizzy spell and had fallen to the ground while out running at his weekend retreat in Versailles.

Why this exercise revolution that has become so entrenched in our day? Why this rush to the gyms, the tennis and squash courts and jogging paths? Why is the family room or the bedroom now designed around the exercise bicycle and tread mill and other such equipment? For some people, the reason is quite straightforward: they like to exercise, plain and simple. They feel good when they're schvitzing; they get "high" on Gatorade and other exercise drinks; they look forward to aching muscles and "hitting the wall" and all that running jargon. We might call them "the happy masochists".

Of course, my terminology betrays my feelings and those, I believe, that most of us huffing and puffing around the lap course have. We don't exercise because it is fun. A good workout, a hard game of racket ball, a multi-lap swim, a long distance run, even a power walk on the way to work or during lunch – these activities are not intrinsically enjoyable. Yes, they have gotten better since the invention of the iPod so we can plug ourselves in and listen to our favorite music, but this doesn't change the basic fact – these exercise activities are not intrinsically enjoyable. Exercise is time consuming, can be tiring, and, if you are like me, there are always a million other things that one could do during the same time period that would be more enjoyable, like having another cup of coffee, reading e-mail or taking a nap.

But, despite the fact that it is not fun, we continue to run, walk, swim and move, right alongside the "Happy Masochists" not because we necessarily enjoy what we're doing, but because of the payoff we are looking for, the benefits we desire from the exercise. There are the more immediate payoffs – that fresh invigorated feeling after a good workout, the "high" of the blood being forcefully pumped throughout the body. And then there are the more graduate benefits – the slimmer waist, the tauter stomach, the more muscular chest, the better looking body. But most importantly are the long-term gains we hope to derive from all the hard work – better health and longer life. I never felt this way before until my own children got married and now are planning their own families. Suddenly, I want to do everything I can to insure that I will be around for a long time to know my future grandchildren. All of us have grown up under the threat of middle aged diseases, whether heart attack or cancer, that can be prevented through better diet and more exercise. All of us live lives that have too much stress and strain at work and at home. Exercise plays a vital role in decreasing the risks for disease and promoting better health. These are the reasons for donning our running shoes or doing those extra laps in the pool. We may not be happy masochists but we still share the gyms with them, being cruel to our bodies in order to be kind to our lives.

Who doesn't want to live a long and healthy life? Who doesn't want to see one's children reach adulthood, one's grandchildren born and grow? Who isn't interested in remaining strong and



healthy throughout one's life, in participating in life as fully as possible and as long as possible? If these then are our sincere goals, a longer healthier life, then we have only one direction: towards the gyms and aerobics classes and weight rooms and swimming pools and every other form of torture they call exercise.

Of course, there are no guarantees in life. We are not the masters of our own fates and we know that despite our best efforts, our wishes for life and health may not be granted. But at least we can do our part to make these wishes a reality. As my doctor once put it: "Jogging, I hate it! Three times a week, I hate it! I hate getting up when it's still dark outside. I hate running in the heat and the cold. It's not fun and I get no pleasure from the activity and could think of lots of other things I'd prefer doing at the same time. But I continue to jog, three times a week, because I know it's good for me, and Robert, you ought to do it too, because it will be good for you."

The problem with exercise, besides the immediate discomfort involved, is that it demands discipline. It is after all an exercise regimen, which means that it requires a long-term commitment of so-much time a day or so-many days a week, week in and week out for an extended period of time, if not for life. It demands the ability to put aside one's momentary desires, so as, for example, to stay in bed another few minutes or to have another cup of coffee in favor of the long term benefits. It's hard to keep the long run in mind when the short run says "you must be crazy to be doing this at this time or the day or in this weather!" It demands discipline to keep on the track despite all the temptations all around. To succeed at this task, one must be ready to sacrifice, to say "no" to one's immediate desires, one's yetzer hara (evil inclination) and say "yes" to one's positive, health-oriented inclinations, one's yetzer hatov (good inclination). To obtain the benefits of a good-looking and healthy body, one must be ready to sacrifice, and that is never easy. Doing without is never fun. For most of us, exercise is not fun. But for all of us, the benefits that can accrue from such workouts, in terms of better health, stronger bodies, slimmer waistlines and lower blood pressure far outweigh any short-run hardship.

This notion of discipline, of sacrifice, of doing without, has importance at all times of the year, but especially so on this day, Yom Kippur. We have all come from our homes, the taste of the pre-fast meal still lingering in our mouths. For the next 25 years, that will be the last food we will taste. Until tomorrow night, we will abstain from all food and drink, we will sacrifice bodily pleasures and try to discipline our will.

Why do we fast? Many reasons can be offered. One, however, we can eliminate from the list, and that is asceticism. We do not fast because we enjoy it or because there is something noble, something superior in doing without. Yes, Judaism preaches moderation and abhors gluttony but doing without simply for the sake of doing without is a sin. In fact, the Rabbis taught that an ascetic, one who intentionally refrains from enjoying the bounty of life, will be judged harshly in the world to come for sinning against God, the Creator of the entire world. It is one thing to hear



quietly one's suffering and not protest. It is quite another to somehow enjoy suffering. Our literature is filled with countless stories of saintly Jews who lived on bread and water and the like. But the reason they were so praised is not because they actually enjoyed their sacrifices, but because in making do with less during the week, they had more with which to celebrate the Sabbath or the festivals.

We do not fast because we enjoy it. Happy masochism our religion is not nor ever has been! We fast because we have to. We sacrifice in order to gain God's mercy. We discipline ourselves in order to put first things first. We do without in order to elevate our concerns away from the body and the immediate towards the soul and the eternal. We abstain in order to demonstrate our mastery over our desires and instincts, to show that we are "ego" and not just "id". Perhaps there are a few among us who feel no pain, no hardship during the 25 hour fast. I am certainly not one of them. Most of us are not masochists, and if given the opportunity would start eating and drinking immediately. On the other hand, we deprive ourselves food and drink, not because we enjoy it, but because of the positive good we hope will accrue from our act: that, as in the case of exercise, our lives will be better for the effort. Maybe this little bit of self sacrifice, with God's help, will heal a broken heart or free a life of anger and disappointment or bring peace to warring partners or release us of guilt and remorse. As with the goals of exercise, we are looking for healthier lives, healthier spiritual lives. To this end, our tradition prescribes fasting on Yom Kippur. Like the doctor I mentioned earlier, we might say, "We hate fasting once a year, we dislike not eating when we are hungry, we despise not drinking when we are thirsty. We get no intrinsic pleasure out of the act of fasting, but we do it every year because we believe that it is good for us, because God has ordained it for us and therefore because in fulfilling God's will, we will gain a goodly, a godly reward, a better life."

Yes, fasting on Yom Kippur is good for us. I even have to admit that late on Yom Kippur afternoon, as we finish Mincha (the afternoon prayers) and enter Neilah (the early evening service) I even feel this rush of adrenalin flowing throughout my body, refreshing me as I realize that I have successfully conquered my desires to eat. It has not been so bad. I have made it through. I have been able to discipline myself. To be sure, I did experience discomfort; yes, it was not easy to exercise self control and limit my instincts. But when I hear the shofar blown tomorrow night, marking the conclusion of the Day of Atonement, when I see the havdalah candle lit, separating the fast day from the new day when eating is once again permitted, when I feel that my prayers have been accompanied by my sacrifice, however small it might seem, I know that the payoff has more than compensated for the hardship.

Fasting once a year on Yom Kippur is one kind of discipline that Judaism entails. But it is not the only one. In fact, we might say that all of Halacha, all of Jewish law, is a system of discipline, one that governs our actions not just one day a year, but all of our days and all of our lives. Such is the nature of Jewish law – it is an entire system that orders our lives, that restricts our options, that limits our freedom, that demands from us sacrifice and self-control in the name of a higher





goal and a higher good. Why, we might ask, should we subscribe to such discipline? Why should we continue to say “no” to our instincts and our desires when we’d rather say “yes”? Here too like with the issue of fasting on Yom Kippur, the answers are numerous and many-faceted. To the theologically-oriented, we discipline our lives according to halacha because this “mitzvah”, this is the command that God the Commander has given. To the Jewish nationalist, we exercise our self-control and accept the dictates of Jewish law because this is what 4,000 years of Jewish experience and wisdom has distilled and passed down to us. To the philosophically trained, we accept the need to sacrifice and follow the law, because, as in the language of Jean Jacques Rousseau, this is the general will, that which we would all want and aspire to do were we fully free to choose.

Four thousand years of Judaism, four thousand years of a unique relationship between God and a people, have given birth to a total system of life, which details what to do and when to do it, at each and every moment, from what to eat to what to wear, from how to do business to whom to marry, from how to raise children to how to mourn our departed. An observant Jew must order his or her life, must restrict his or her options, must limit his or her freedom, must learn self discipline in order to adhere to Jewish law. How terrible, we might say if looking from the outside, such a life appears! What hardships, what sacrifices, what self control! Who would ever choose to subject himself to such a life? Why would anyone take this upon herself?

Interestingly, it appears that more and more Jews are beginning to move in this direction. The number of Jews, at least in North America, who are observing the dietary laws, kashrut, is growing. In fact, today, kosher food is a big business, and the number of food products carrying a kashrut symbol is staggering. Similarly, there is a growing trend among younger Jews who spend their lives plugged in to the Internet via their cellphones and iPads and Laptops, at home, at work and even in commuting between the two, to consciously unplug themselves on Shabbat and enjoy 25 hours off the net. Perhaps they do not observe Shabbat in the traditional sense but their decision to unplug from the net is a first step on the way towards self control and discipline.

It takes discipline to lead a healthy life. This we have accepted. But it equally takes discipline to lead a healthy Jewish life. It means restricting ourselves, our behavior, our freedom. It is hard work, but so then is exercise. And like exercise, observing Jewish law – kashrut, Shabbat and festivals, community involvement and the like, can be at times burdensome and difficult. It means giving up something, whether time or money or desires for a longterm goal. Disciplining ourselves for Judaism, as for exercise, is inconvenient. But what price are you ready to pay for your convenience. If a person doesn’t exercise, research shows that he is endangering his health. This doesn’t mean that he will drop dead right away, God forbid, or that alternatively, that if he does exercise, he will necessarily live longer or be healthier. But the odds are in his favor.

By the same token, there are consequences to be considered in choosing to observe or not observe Jewish law. By what criteria shall we measure healthy Jewish identity? In-marriage vs.

intermarriage? Affiliation with Judaism vs. participation in cults? Jewish identity vs. assimilation? Time and again it is clear that those who grow up in a home that strives to observe Jewish law will be more likely to continue connected to Judaism and the Jewish community as adults. There are no guarantees here, like in the matter of general exercise, but it is generally the rule that the more we are ready to impose on us and our children the discipline of Judaism, the greater the likelihood of us and our children and our children's children to live a long and healthy Jewish life. Do you know what the saddest job is for a rabbi? It is to perform a funeral when the only Jews present are the rabbi and the deceased in the casket, when there is no family member – whether child or other relative – to say Kaddish (the mourner's prayer). When our time on this earth comes to an end, do you know who will be able to say Kaddish for you? And do you feel certain that when your Kaddish-sayer comes to the end of his or her life, there will be someone to say Kaddish for him or her?

Judaism can't be a matter of convenience, a thing of how I feel at this moment. Just as there is no effect in jogging just once in a while, so too there is no point in observing Judaism only when the spirit moves us. There is nothing that can be said when Judaism operates in your life only on the level of convenience and feeling.

The Torah tells us that when God decided to create the human race, he started with one man. Vayivra Elohim et HaAdam betsalmo (Genesis 1: 27). Why, asked the rabbis, does the Torah use the definite article, VaYivra et HA'Adam, literally God created THE man, as opposed to the generic VaYivra Adam, God created a man (or mankind). After all, why specify "The man" when this is the only man in existence? They answer: The Torah uses the definite article even though there is only one man present, in order to teach that each of us stands before God as the one man created. While since creation, millions upon millions of men and women have been created, each of us stands before God in the same way as that first man did, the one man created. We cannot hide amidst the crowd of mankind, we cannot allow others to stand and take our place before god. Each of us stands separately and individually. And if each of us stands alone before God, then we must act as if we alone are being judged, we alone are fulfilling the divine command, we alone are observing the law. For if we don't, if we will not discipline ourselves, if we will not impose upon ourselves the demands of Judaism, then in this relationship of one person, one God, there is literally no one else who will.

Dear friends, every journey must begin with the first step. The road to observance, the journey to greater Jewish discipline, the way to insuring a healthy Jewish identity now and in the future, must begin with the first step. If we are ready to begin the journey, then we need to remember that no Jew can nor should be expected to become observant overnight. Like the future marathon runner, one must begin by training slowly, a few steps at a time, gradually extending the workout. We ought to begin the exercise of Judaism equally slowly. Fortunately there are so many different opportunities for Jewish activity in the days and weeks ahead. After Yom Kippur, there are the holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah and, of course, the weekly Sabbath observances.

And around us, not all that far away, there are ample Jewish resources – Jewish schools, institutes, other synagogues – each offering another program or activity to enrich our Jewish lives. As the Ethics of the Fathers teaches, Al Shlosa Dvarim Ha olam Omed – Al HaTorah, ve'al HaAvodah ve al gemilut Hasadim (**Simon le Juste disait: «Le monde tient sur trois choses: l'étude de la Thora, le service pour D.ieu, et la bienfaisance.»**) (Chapitre 1, Michna 2). There are ample opportunities to study Judaism, to fulfill the first of the mitzvot to study Torah. There are ample ways to practice Judaism, to fulfill the mitzvah of Avodah, of worship, and of course, there are countless opportunities for Gemilut Hasadim, for deeds of righteousness, for charitable acts. The opportunities for Jewish observance abound. All we need is the will and discipline to begin.

Let us therefore resolve to make this year, 5772, our year for greater discipline, for physical exercise and spiritual exercise, for health in body and in soul and let us say amen.