

Rabbi's Message

EXERCISE AS METAPHOR



As I write this column the weekly Torah portion is Vayishlach. It is in this parashah that Ya'akov spends a night wrestling with an unnamed man who happens upon him. As you may recall, come morning it is not all that clear who won the match; however, the unnamed opponent changes Ya'akov's name to Yisra'el. The man then explains the name saying, "*ki sareeta im elohim v'im anashim vatucha*" – because you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed. To struggle is an inherent part of our collective name, B'nai Yisra'el – The Children of Israel.

As I go through life I struggle with lots of things both divine and human, as, I suspect, do most of you. Life is not always easy and the appropriate choice is often elusive. Also, we are often unsure of exactly why we struggle and with whom.

As you continue reading I beg a moment of your indulgence while I share some personal information. I do so in order to be able to share some lessons I feel valuable in regard to understanding life through the metaphor of exercise.

A short while ago I sat pedaling on my stationary exercise bike. Many of you know that I do this every day and am approaching the completion of five years without ever having missed a single day. (Wherever I travel there is always an exercise bike to be found.) I have been variously praised and pilloried for this "obsession." In many ways this daily activity has come to define, or at least significantly structure, my life.

The time spent on my stationary bike has afforded me a wonderful opportunity for daily reflection. It has become a place wherein I do a significant amount of the work of thinking, planning much of what I teach, write, and speak about. In fact the agenda for today's exercise session was the development of this column.

As I began to pedal I found myself facing an inability to find something I thought worth sharing; yet I knew that I was up against our Editor's deadline for the submission of copy. As I pedaled I became hyper focused on the very act of pedaling and soon came to appreciate that which I now share.

My exercise routine is a fixed one in both the number of miles I pedal each day (eleven) and the resistance setting I use (the maximum the bike offers). These two things never vary; what does vary is the amount of time it takes me to complete this fixed number of miles. A lesson: life often presents us with fixed responsibilities which need be met regardless of how we feel or what we desire; how well we respond varies greatly depending upon a host of external realities. What remains constant is that we must do what must be done if we are to meet the responsibility.

I couple my obsessive exercise routine with an obsessive chart of data. Every day gets a hash mark on the chart and every time I attain a new personal "fastest

time" for doing my constant number of miles I note the new "record." I have never set out to break my old record. There have been times where at some point during the session I have noticed that I was going at a pace sufficient to beat the old mark and have then pushed on in an effort to reach a new record. On average I have attained a new "best" every few months throughout the years. I do expect that this will become harder and harder to do; yet, in my childhood the "four minute mile" was thought an unattainable goal and today that goal has been bested hundreds of times. Who knows where the limit is?

A lesson: constant application to doing daily what I must seems to yield the byproduct of regular improvement. This, in turn, gives me a sense of accomplishment, yielding both satisfaction and a reinforced commitment to continue. Each day I simply strive to do what I must as well as I can, I leave the rewards to themselves. I appreciate rewards, however, I do not seek them; I work, I put forth my best effort that day, and I trust that it will have value. There is a Hebrew idiom that I love, "*ha'zman ya'aseh et shelo*," which conveys the meaning that "time will do what it does."

This brings me to the question I have been so often asked, why do I do it? When I began to exercise my first grandchild was not yet one year old and I told myself that I was doing it in the hopes of seeing him grow up. I knew that there were no guarantees, but I hoped to improve the odds. As the months rolled by the daily tedium threatened to undermine my resolve, as my grandson's wedding was a bit too far into the future. My motivation shifted to trying to stick around for Roz as long as I could, but that soon flagged, as I have no idea when either of us will leave mortality behind and the pedaling was often a royal pain.

Still, I would not give up as I tend to be a bit obstinate and I now had a stake in the growing number of consecutive days as a goal unto itself; how long can I continue?

Through the years motives have come and gone in a constancy of change. Truth be told I do not know why I do it except that it has become, for me, one of the more sustaining aspects of my life. Each day as I pedal I am reminded that life is often filled with dull realities, unpleasant responsibilities, endless challenge, and frequent struggle; yet I am also reminded that life presents an equally endless opportunity to derive great satisfaction from simply accepting reality, meeting responsibility, embracing challenge, and continuing to struggle to live each day as best I can.

I have found that pedaling that stupid bike is its own reward. Forcing myself to sit upon it, start pushing, and hang in until my eleven miles are done reminds me that there is great strength and satisfaction to be found in engaging with life's daily struggles. My daily exercise grind may or may not lengthen my life, may or may not ease or prevent some of the worse aspects of aging, but it definitely gives me a great opportunity to feel good about myself, about my ability to deal with life, and to realize that blessing abides in all moments and is there for us to seek, find, and just possibly realize.

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I never let go of my big dreams for a perfect life in a perfect world; but, while I dream big, I must live in the daily realities of actuality. The bike reminds me that, while I wait for the fulfillment of my big dreams, I can find great strength and satisfaction in simply doing my best each day to meet the challenges of that day's struggle. I do know that as I put each day's hash mark on my chart I feel great.

Thank you for the opportunity to share; I pray you find some value for yourselves in the lessons my bike has taught me.

L'v'racha,

Norman Koch, Rabbi