



Senior Rabbi Ken Chasen

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“Time... Temperament... Turning”

Most everyone I know who gets in their regular exercise by running, as I do, has their marathon story. I mean, if you're determined enough to destroy your feet, your ankles and your knees in the name of physical fitness, you're surely determined enough to do it for 26.2 straight miles at some point in your life. I have countless family members who have that photo of themselves crossing the finish line. I have friends with the photo. Our former rabbi, Leah Lewis – she has the photo. I had to have it, too.

My marathon story goes back to 2001, when I was living in New York. I'd been a fitness runner for years by then, and I decided that this was my time. My temple had just hosted the rabbi of the fledgling Reform movement in the Former Soviet Union, and we learned that he had to serve four different communities, separated by many hundreds of miles, with a combined budget of just \$72,000. I remember thinking to myself: “I'm going to double their budget this year. I'm going to run the New York City Marathon, and I'll get my congregants to sponsor me... to the tune of \$72,000.”

The hubris of a young rabbi. \$72,000 would have been a mighty mountain to climb if I'd promised my congregants I was going to end world hunger with their money. For the purposes of building Reform Judaism in Kiev, let's just say I had identified an ambitious goal. But undeterred, I set out to train. I called up a congregant of mine who had run the New York City Marathon several times, and I asked him what I needed to do to transform myself from a 4-mile kind of guy into a 26-mile kind of guy. He helped me find the right running shoes, learn the right hydration patterns. But most of all, he taught me that the challenge of running a marathon isn't actually the running of the marathon. It's getting to the day of the marathon in one piece. He explained that I would need to be very disciplined about how I built up my mileage, or else I would end up injured, and that would be that. So he laid down the law. You can only run four days per week. Most of those runs shouldn't be longer than four or five miles. Only once per week can you attempt a distance longer than that. You can never attempt to run a full marathon in practice... in fact, you'll never run more than 19 miles until it's the day you have to run 26. You must stretch. You must ice. These are non-negotiable rules, I was told.

Some of you know I can be a little competitive when it comes to athletic endeavors. So of course, I decided that the rules were for mere mortals. I started training, and I got that runner's high. I felt my cardio capacity growing explosively. I was indestructible. And indestructible people who have a busy congregation to run can get by, I figured, with just a little stretching, and maybe with icing just when there's an abundance of time. One day, still more than four months before the marathon, I headed out for a 12-mile practice run. And I was feeling it. My heart fitness was so great, I was barely breaking a sweat. I could have kept running forever.

Long about the three-mile mark, I felt a pretty sharp pain in my right knee. "I'm a marathoner," I remember thinking. "There's supposed to be pain." So I kept running. Nine more miles. By that night, I couldn't walk down the steps in my house without a rail.

The doctor told me I had iliotibial band tendinitis. That's a fancy medical term for what happens to idiots who pile on too many miles thinking they're indestructible. He said that if it was just about my heart health, I was ready to run the marathon already. But I had to stop running immediately and let the tendinitis heal, or I'd never make it to the starting line. "But I can't just stop," I protested. So against his better judgment, he permitted me to cross-train – to ride a bike and use a StairMaster... fitness activities that involved no running, so I could maintain my cardio readiness while waiting for my body to heal.

Only my body never healed. Every time I tried to resume running, usually sooner than doctor's orders, I would try another long run, and like clockwork, each time at the seven-mile mark, my knee would flame. This went on for months, until I finally surrendered, accepting that the Reform Jews of Kiev would have to get by without me.

As I've grown older, I've come to understand that our lives are a lot like training for a marathon. The hardest part is just getting through the process in one piece. You have to be really disciplined about how you build up the miles. You have to stretch. You have to ice. Otherwise, that will be that.

Or at least that's how it often feels. Being a rabbi – your rabbi – means that I am often called upon for "marathon training counsel" when you face the longest runs of your lives. When the marriage ends. When the business collapses. When the doctor's news is devastating. When your child suffers. When the money dries up. When you stumble away from the grave and enter that incomprehensible tomorrow.

Most of us aren't so good about stretching and icing while weathering the life-shaking moments. We tell ourselves, "Just keep piling on the miles. Keep going. Be active. Be strong. Be indestructible." Of course, our very essence as humans is that we are destructible. Try though we may to flee that fact, we have this day to offer its sober reminder. We are destructible – it's guaranteed, in fact – so how we navigate the forces that take us apart has an enormous impact upon what our short lives will be like, and sometimes even upon how long our short lives may last.

And let's be clear – the forces that take us apart aren't only in our personal lives. Some of them are in our collective life. I have spoken with so many of you about this, and I can see it in your eyes even now. The state of our country and our world, beset with a growing tribal hatred that threatens our serenity, our safety, and the very character of our nation, is literally savaging our souls. We aren't sleeping as we should. We're on edge, afraid, hostile. And we feel like we can't even afford a moment's respite, because everything is just too tenuous to permit looking away. And so we're caught up in a relentless tension pulsating in the public sphere – and feeling like our only option is just to keep pushing, keep fighting, keep piling on the miles.

I'm not sure if there's a special name for iliotibial band tendinitis of the spirit. I am sure that most of us are suffering from it. And it means that our souls can barely walk sometimes, and yet we keep forcing them to run. Like the young mom who recently told me, "I can't have even one more new burden placed upon me right now... I will snap." A lot of us feel that way.

So what can we do about it? Well, these holy days have included a number of answers that we, your rabbis, have sought to propose. On Rosh Hashanah eve, Rabbi Berney urged us to seek refuge from a violent and scary world by more intentionally choosing words and actions that reduce the dangers, especially to women. The next morning, we considered how "rehumanizing" others – particularly those with whom we disagree – can free us from the hatred that is being stoked inside of us. Last night, Rabbi Ross reminded us of how our trust and faith in being a part of something bigger than ourselves can be a source of tremendous sustenance and comfort. Our tradition is, of course, filled with wisdom designed to help us get through the process of living in one piece – to help us build up the miles in a way that makes us stronger, not more feeble.

This morning, I want to propose three more disciplines, drawn from our tradition, for finding equanimity and resilience when we are pushing ourselves through the longest runs of our lives. This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive list; so much of our tradition is aimed at this goal that it would be impossible to share all of Judaism's insights on the subject. But these three, I believe, are well suited to this particular moment, when the collective public marathon and the separate personal marathons of our lives are converging in a manner that demands some conscious strategy for self and soul preservation.

It so happens that the three all start with the same letter... three Ts. The first discipline is time – and by this, I mean Judaism's profound understanding of time and our positioning within it. Many great Jewish thinkers have attempted to describe the Jewish concept of time, but my favorite to have done so in recent years is my dear friend, colleague and former classmate Rabbi Yael Splansky, who serves as senior rabbi of her longtime synagogue in Toronto. Rabbi Splansky wrote these words two years ago as part of her announcement to her congregants that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was in her early forties at the time – a wife and a mother, and also her community's spiritual leader. So she knew that her news was going to land hard. To create the context for revealing her diagnosis, she wrote the following: "Jewish resilience is a distinct kind of resilience. It has to do with time. When the Jewish People is faced with adversity, our greatest evidence that we can endure it is the past and our greatest motivator to endure it is the future. We *can* carry on because generations before us have proven that we can; we *must* carry on because future generations depend on it.

This is a kind of faith that even the most unattached Jew carries with him wherever he goes. It's a faith that resides not in the *neshama* (the soul), but in the *kishkes* (the gut)."

Rabbi Splansky is suggesting a version of faith that is hardwired into us Jews, even the most God-averse among us. Her teaching reminded me of a story written by the legendary giant of modern Hebrew literature, Shai Agnon. In his story *Pi Shnayim*, "Twice Over," he describes a man paralyzed by a decision he has to make on Yom Kippur eve... which of two *tallitot* he should wear to services. One was a *tallit* he inherited from his father-in-law upon his death. It was wrapped around one of the many holy books his father-in-law left to him from his majestic collection. This *tallit* held the power of the past – when wrapped inside it, he could hear the voices of his ancestors and feel the old world reaching to him. The other *tallit* had no such history. He had purchased it for himself when he made *aliyah* to Israel, and he imagined it carrying the story that was still to come in his life – the future that was yet untold. It would someday hold the kind of gravity and power for others that his father-in-law's *tallit* held for him.

So there he stands, with Kol Nidre eve beckoning, and he needs to choose. Will he wear the *tallit* of his past or of his future? He suffers over his decision, laboring over every imaginable angle worth considering. Finally, in an act of surrender, he simply closes his eyes, grabs for whichever one happens to land in his fingers, and he rushes off to the synagogue. The trouble is: when he gets there, the sanctuary is empty. He had agonized for so long that services were over. He had missed Kol Nidre because he couldn't choose between the *tallit* of his past and the *tallit* of his future. And he describes himself as "an apothecary, so long at work mixing powders for a drug, that in the meantime the patient dies."

This is what Judaism teaches it is to be paralyzed by the present. When we are most demoralized and overmatched by the moment, feeling overwhelmed by the consequence of the instant, Judaism, with all of its rituals and blessings for moments in time, is there to remind us to wear both *tallitot* at the same time. Past and future – for the present, no matter how enormous it may seem, is situated amid so much more. The past reminds us that we can endure. The future reminds us why we must endure. Not to fix it all, but to do our part.

It is exactly as was taught by Rabbi Splansky, who thank God is now well again. And with both *tallitot* draped around our shoulders, hugging us in our moments of greatest fear and doubt, we are steadied enough to see: the matters that are plaguing us have been experienced and discussed and lived through for thousands of years. And with just a little humility before the grand rush of time, we can look to the future with tremendous hope, even in our darkest hours, because our small contribution to advancing love or peace or wisdom – we can still make it, even while dying. Our brushstroke on the painting of the human story.

A second discipline – having to do with our temperament. When we are most troubled either by dark challenges in our personal lives or in the world or both, we are often inclined to become pretty dark ourselves. It feels frivolous, unserious – maybe even oblivious – to remain light. But our tradition has long pointed to the

corrosiveness of that impulse. Not only does it make us more miserable than we need to be. It makes us less effective, less capable of inspiring ourselves and others.

When the great 20th century Orthodox rabbi, Aryeh Kaplan, was asked whether the Talmud had jokes in it, he replied, “Yes, but they are all old.” So perhaps our ancient rabbinic literature is not your best source for cutting-edge humor, but that doesn’t mean it devalues humor. Quite the opposite, in fact. The Talmud records the story of a rabbi named Beroka Hoza’ah, who would from time to time be visited by the prophet Elijah when he was in the marketplace. Once, he asked the prophet, “Is there anyone in this marketplace who has a share in the World to Come?” Elijah answered, “No,” but soon, two men walked by, and Elijah said, “These two... they have a share in the World to Come.” So naturally, the rabbi rushed over to ask them what they did for a living. “We are comedians,” they said. “When we see people who are depressed, we cheer them up. And when we see two people quarreling, we strain hard to make peace between them.”

I can’t say whether our people’s historical propensity for comedy was a response to that teaching. What I can say is: when our tradition teaches the importance of laughter, even in times of great trouble, it’s not suggesting some sort of gratuitous silliness. After all, one of the deepest spiritual voices of Jewish history, Reb Nachman, famously taught, “It is a great mitzvah always to be happy.” Now, you have to understand that Nachman had his own well-chronicled struggles with depression and despair, so he surely wasn’t arguing for mindless giddiness. He was encouraging the discipline of retaining a lightness of soul – one which unlocks our capacity to deepen human connection and possibility, and to disarm conflict, just as the marketplace comedians in the Talmud strove to do. And let’s be honest – you already know that Nachman was right, because I’ve seen you... laughing through your tears while telling a story at the bedside of your dying loved one... leaning on your sense of humor when you lost your job... bursting out in laughter while sharing remembrances at the *shiva* house. We don’t laugh because we don’t understand the seriousness. We laugh because it is a great mitzvah always to be happy, and we discover that if our souls are able to touch joy while facing the height of the pain, we will remain able to touch joy while living with the pain.

If this still feels tone deaf to the difficulty of this moment in our world or in your personal life, consider the following excerpt from an obituary that was written last year upon the death of the Holocaust’s survivor of all survivors, Elie Wiesel: “Mr. Wiesel,” it read, “was liberated from the Buchenwald camp as a 16-year old but at his funeral he was remembered for a legacy little known by those outside his immediate circle: he loved to laugh.” Indeed, news reports about the funeral described the eulogy delivered by Ted Koppel, who was one of Wiesel’s close friends over many decades. He told listeners about how funny Elie Wiesel was – about how they were always working to come up with ways to make each other laugh.

If times weren’t too dark for Elie Wiesel to retain a lightness of soul, it’s certainly not too dark for us right now. For the sake of bringing peace and changing hearts, including our own, let us strive to follow his example.

Which leads us to the third discipline – the one that brings us all here today. In Hebrew, it’s called *teshuvah*. In English, we often translate it as “repentance,” but what it actually means is “turning” – as in “turning”

ourselves back toward our higher impulses, realigning our actions with our values. That's what this season of the High Holydays, with its crescendo on this Day of Atonement, is supposed to be about. Most of us think about this as an exercise in guilt – a rigorous time of admission and often shame over what we've become and not become. Sounds like the kind of activity more likely to drain our resilience than restore it. But that's not what our sages teach us to see in these days. To them, *teshuvah* – turning – was about rebirth... our rebirth... and what could be more renewing for our souls than that?

The great pioneer of the *Musar* movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, pointed out that "the *Midrash* teaches, 'Everything that came into being during the six days of Creation requires improvement' ... Our world is a world of transformation. When we are improving and refining ourselves, we are in concert with the Divine plan – fulfilling our purpose for existing in this world... Not only is the human being created for this purpose, but he is also given the ability... to attain this supreme goal." That's what Rosh Hashanah was supposed to trigger for us. We were to be as new creations ourselves – birthday of the world, birthday of us – and then to spend these first days of our new lives working tirelessly to transform.

Every single one of us knows how hard it is to live up to that vision. All you have to do is think about "those sins." You know the ones I'm talking about – the ones you now accept as habits. They're the sins you think and pray about every year, because they don't change. You feel ashamed of them, but in truth, you've learned to tolerate them in yourself. You're not so keen on tolerating them in your children, who have learned them from you, or in other people throughout the various corners of your life. But in you, they've become regrettable expectations. You annually announce to yourself your intention to defeat them. And then you're back again a year later, sitting here with them in embarrassment, just as you did the year before.

Just imagine if this year, you managed to break that cycle with even one of "those sins?" Imagine what it would feel like to transform yourself – to transcend yourself? It would be one of the greatest accomplishments of your life. It would revolutionize your relationships with the people you love the most. And it would prove to you the capacity for human change – right at the moment in our world when we so desperately need to believe again in that capacity. Want to change a broken world? Start by asking yourself: "Who am I to change a broken world?" Maybe if you can change the broken you – and I, the broken me – we might truly believe that redemption is possible for the broken we.

This is precisely what the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber meant when he wrote: "In the (person) who does *teshuvah*, creation begins anew; in his renewal the substance of the world is renewed." That's the power of this day, this season. Use it well – then take it home, turn it into real change, and kindle in yourself an optimism about what is possible for all of humanity that will revive your flagging hope. If ever there was a moment for doing the real work of human change – *this* human's change – this is that moment.

Time, temperament, and turning. Three tools that our tradition has gifted to us to help us rebuild our sagging spirits. They're the ice packs and stretching regimens we need in order to make it through the process of living in one piece. When the miles are piling up, and you are feeling and fearing just how destructible you are –

don't just keep running. Give a little something back to yourself from our Jewish tradition. Remember how not to become paralyzed by the present... how to wear your *tallit* of your assuring past and your *tallit* of your promise to the future simultaneously. Embrace the power that lightness of soul can unleash for yourself and others. And start changing the world by changing yourself... for real... because the love you'll feel for yourself, and the belief you'll gain in the potential for human growth, will transform your vision of what is possible for this world.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, we are taught: "God said, 'Since you all came for judgment before Me on Rosh Hashanah, and you left (the judgment) in peace, I consider it as if you were created as a new being.'" You made it. The new year is here, and you're in it. Be a new being.