

Growing up, I was famous for chasing my brothers around the synagogue. Once Friday night services were over – and the *oneg* was under way – we would join a pack of 10 or 15 other regulars – the president’s kids, the cantor’s kids... and together we’d race through the halls as fast as we possibly could. The parents would be in the auditorium, talking current events and sipping coffee, but we’d be running. The floor in the synagogue, especially down by the education wing, was tiled and the bottom of our shoes gripped it perfectly and we took everything we had – whether it was angst or energy or frustration or exhaustion or sheer will – and we put all of it into these hour-long, high-speed chases.

By the time our parents came looking for us we were red-faced and sweating, probably missing a button or two, but we were content. We were six or seven or eight years old and we were content. We were more than content, actually. We were fulfilled. We felt our hearts beating strong in our chest. We left the synagogue – every time – after having prayed and having run – we left fulfilled. Looking back, I’d say we prayed and we ran in the only way we knew how – sometimes improvising, sometimes because everyone else was doing it, sometimes because it was the only thing we could think to do, sometimes because we just weren’t quite sure how else to express ourselves – to each other – and to something...larger...something much larger than our own selves.

The title of this sermon is: THE WORK OF OUR FEET AND MILESTONES

The alternate title is: DREAM

Also when I was younger, among the many things I didn’t understand (though I now understand less than I did when I was younger), among the many things I didn’t understand *then*, was why politicians would say they’re running for office. Most people I knew drove to their office, some biked I suppose. What did it mean that these people ran for an office? What kind of office was this? I once met one of the senators from my home state, who was again running for office. He was a tall fellow – most people that you meet when you’re seven are tall – but he was particularly tall and well-groomed and quite well-spoken. Even I was aware of this – and I was seven.

I was used to running the halls of the synagogue or running up and down the soccer field. That was my running. His running was for the sake of CHANGE.

What was I running for? Maybe I was running because to sit still assumed a kind of...complacency. And even if I didn't know the word...complacency...even at that young age I knew somehow that the last thing I wanted to be, ever, was complacent. I wanted to run for something – even if my hair wasn't well-groomed and I wasn't quite well-spoken – I wanted to spend my time *for* something, for *the sake* of something. I didn't want to be one of the people who doesn't run. I didn't want to be one of those people who doesn't dream.

It's a funny thing, running. I've spent quite a bit of time in Central Park and Bethpage State Park, and I've seen a number of runners *in my day*. Adult runners. Runners who suddenly aren't attorneys or stock brokers or salesmen or even recovering patients or widows, but runners – even if only for thirty minutes at a time. I see grown men and women running on the same legs they've run on since they were eight or nine years old. On the same legs that take them around to their business luncheons and professional consultations.

And sometimes I think to myself, when I see these runners, that maybe they're running for something – that they're not running *from* something, but *for* something. That they have a cause and that cause is the cause of their running. Maybe they're in training because they plan to run in an event like The Race for the Cure, which raises money for breast cancer research or they're in training because they plan to participate in an event like The Light the Night Walk, which raises money for leukemia and lymphoma research or they plan to do the AIDS Walk or ride in the M.S. 150 or maybe they're in training because they want to be able to keep up with their two-year-old son or they're in training because they want to try to avoid a heart attack or maybe they're in training because they know that, in various ways, we have two options in this world: We can choose to do something or we can choose to not do something.

I don't mean to imply that everyone should put on their running shoes tomorrow and set their sights on the Olympics. When I say running what I basically mean is running in quotation marks, a symbolic running, a suggestion that at this time of beginning, in this season dedicated to starting

over, we think about those things for which we will run this year. What will you run for this year, this 5766? What's your cause? Renewal? Knowledge? Charity? Are you running for the sake of someone who can't run? Are you running for the sake of those without the means to do their own running? The homes that have been washed away. The children who live in parts of the world far less safe than our own. The teenagers who will never be allowed to express themselves. Or – maybe – in addition to these things – beside these things – you will run, just a bit, just a few strides, at long last, for yourself.

In the Mishnah a Rabbi by the name of Ben Azzai teaches that we should 'Run to do the least of the commandments as we would to do the most important.'

Now, it's okay that the most important for you and the most important for your neighbor are not one and the same. Actually, one of the beauties of Judaism is that each of us is coming from a different place, with different backgrounds and inclinations and aspirations. I would say find the most important mitzvah *for you, your mitzvah*, and run for it. Run for it all year. And after the year's up, keep running for it. And as you run for your mitzvah, whether it's learning or social action or worship, whether it's music or teaching, encourage those around you as they run for their mitzvah.

Less than one month from now, on November 6, your new rabbi – that's me – is going to run the New York City Marathon. After months of preparation, after miles and miles and miles *and miles* of training, I will join 35,000 other runners, from all fifty states, and more than one hundred countries, and run twenty six point two miles, passing through each of the five boroughs. Each of us will have our own story coming in and each of us will have our own story when it's over.

I know I will have my own story, of an extraordinary morning's worth of highs and lows, a story of exhaustion and exhilaration, exhilaration and exhaustion. I've run two other marathons, twice managed to complete the twenty six point two mile distance, but never on a stage such as New York City. And never for the reason I plan to run now.

My running partner – who is also a rabbi actually – (I know, it's like a bad reality show waiting to happen) he and I intend to use this experience to raise awareness of the soup kitchen located at the Hebrew Union College.

This soup kitchen, located at Fourth and Broadway, feeds countless people in need every Monday night. People travel to it from all over the city for a meal and maybe a new set of clothes and maybe a pleasant conversation for the first time in days. I know that many of you are familiar with the soup kitchen. Many of you have gone there, when we've volunteered there. It is a minor miracle, this soup kitchen, an entity that grants life and love to those whose lives have been decimated and who live without love.

If you are looking for a cause this year, consider that one. They need volunteers every Monday night, especially in the winter.

Judaism, you see, has never been about sitting still. At no time has being Jewish been about complacency. It's been about running, running to do mitzvot.

So many of our milestones are imposed upon us – are created by others for us – or by the mere passage of time. Turning 50. Turning 60, 70, 75. So it goes with wedding anniversaries as well. What if we made our own milestones? What if we took it upon ourselves to seek out milestones, to make milestones, rather than simply bump into them along the way. Running for a cause, for a dream, your dream, our dream, running to bring about real change. That is what it means to make a mile stone, to make a moment, and a moment of holiness at that.

Sometimes I know that it feels like we're running behind. We use that phrase a lot, actually. We use it at work and we use it as we *run around* throughout the day. We always say we're "running behind." I guess all of us are running behind in some way. Which is why we always feel like we're running behind. But I sometimes wonder if the moments when we're running behind are not the moments we're behind, but the moments we're actually quite far ahead. If you're two minutes late for a dentist's appointment because you were on the phone with your mother, well then actually you weren't behind at all. And if you're five minutes late to a student council meeting, because you were helping a friend who just needed a bit of help, well then actually you weren't behind at all. You weren't running behind. Maybe the clock said you were, but your conscience said otherwise. That's the thing about running. It doesn't always have to be about time.

I also think that this business of running behind – or feeling as if we’re running behind – has a lot to do with the fact that, as we get older, the dreams that once seemed so close, so near-at-hand, so reachable, those dreams begin to slip further away. Or at least it feels like it. Maybe you once dreamt of being a painter or a poet or a great Torah scholar and now you think, no, no, it’s too late now. I’m too late. I’ve *run* out of time. All of the dreams that I meant to catch – I’m now running behind those dreams. I’m chasing those dreams and they’re slipping away from me. But that doesn’t have to be the case. Because it’s not the case, actually. Maybe running after dreams isn’t about running at all. Because the dreams aren’t going anywhere. You’re the one who’s going places. The dreams are there. They’re waiting for you. I mean that. All of your dreams are waiting for you.

The longtime leader of the Lubavitch movement, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, he once equated our plight as human beings with an eternal footrace. He said that we’re always running behind God. That as hard as we try, as fervently as we pray or study or learn, we never quite seem to catch God. We cannot know God, no matter what we know. We cannot catch God, no matter how fast we are. Maybe that’s when you have to realize that it’s not about running, actually. Maybe it’s not about running at all. Maybe that’s the wrong approach. Maybe God’s waiting for you, just as the dreams are waiting for you. Maybe God’s just waiting for you to slow down. And that’s when you can finally catch God.

In the running community, there’s on-going conversation on all of the topics you’d expect: nutrition, apparel, terrain, training programs, but more often than not, conversation always seems to return to the topic of form. It’s about form. Do we run as efficiently as possible? Do we use our arms enough? Do we keep our chin up? Quite ironically, people work for years sometimes at trying to capture and master a quote, “natural form.” The idea is that when we were younger, when we ran free, down synagogue halls, across backyards, through basements and baseball fields, we were running...properly. We were running in the way we were meant to be running.

I think about this sometimes – and not just as a runner. I think about how hard we have to work, as adults, to regain some of what we felt as children – that sense of possibility, that sense of ability, that sense of strength, the idea that the idea of limitations is just that...an idea. Maybe

that's what appeals to be now, as a runner, and a Jew. This realization, this idea that I can do more. This idea that we can do much more than reason tells us we can do. Because, rationally speaking, bringing about world peace and understanding, ending world hunger and suffering, bringing a sense of wholeness to the community and to our family and to ourselves – rationally speaking, all of that seems quite impossible. But to me, to us, that doesn't seem impossible at all. Difficult, yes. Exhausting, yes. But not impossible. Instead of impossible, possible. Instead of exhausting, exhilarating.

There's a remarkable thing that happens during marathons, especially in the beginning. It's the sound of 30,000 people running. It's the sound of 30,000 people *doing*. You hear this sweeping parade of footsteps. You can hear, or you think you can hear, the breathing lungs and beating hearts of everyone. What you are hearing is a beautiful lack of complacency. It's not the sound of impossible. It's the sound of possible.

I have also heard such sounds while taking part in community wide mitzvah projects, such as gleanings. It's the sound of doing. It's the sound of not waiting for milestones, but making them, with our hands, with our feet, together. It's the sound of an argument against those who tell us change is impossible. It's an argument for all that is possible.

The sounds of footsteps, this sound of doing, you know, it sounds like prayer. It's a very particular brand of prayer, not as spoken by the mouth, but as spoken by the soul, by the inner you.

A story I sometimes tell is of a famous Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who took part in a civil rights march with Martin Luther King Junior. And after this great march he was asked what it was like, how it felt, to take part in such a monumental kind of an event. Rabbi Heschel responded: I felt like I was praying with my feet.

Judaism is not about complacency.

Milestones are there for the making.

Find your mitzvah. Make your milestone.

I like to think that your best running happens not during those first few steps, when surrounded by 30,000 others, but later, much later, way

down the road, when you continue to run, even though your legs are heavy and your back aches and your head is telling you stop already, *please*. That's, actually, when you do your best running. Because you're no longer running with your legs or with your head, you're running at that point with your heart. You're running with soul. And that's what we have to do. We have to live with soul. We have to run with soul – because your legs and your mind will only carry you so far. You have to believe in possibility. We have to believe in possibility. We have to believe that the mitzvot we perform, even the smallest of mitzvot, those mitzvot are making the world a better place. Those mitzvot are leading you – and leading all of us – from the impossible to the possible.

Find your mitzvah.

Make your milestone.

When I was younger, though I knew a great deal, I didn't know the meaning of this word "milestone." And I would think: What kind of stone is it? Is it a heavy stone? Where do I find a *milestone*? I had visions of these milestones. I could picture them. And the image I had was of life, stretched out before us, on a long and winding kind of road, much like the course of a marathon, and on this road are actual stones – mile stones. And just reaching one of these stones is reason for celebration. Because you've managed, somehow, to reach another one. You've made it.

But then, much later, I came to realize that we can also make our own stones. That on this long course, on this winding road, we can actually make our own mile stones – with the work of our hands and the work of our feet and the work of our...heart. We can make these mile stones, each one of us can make them, and all of our stones will look different and each of them will be just...perfect. And so, at the end of the day, at the end of the run, when we stop for just a moment and we turn around and we look back at the course, at the winding road that is the course, we see an entire garden of mile stones, a vast field of mile stones – which we have made. The stones are too numerous to count – and each one is more precious and fantastic than the next. They are us, these stones. In the end, they are us – and we are them.

May God continue to bless us with the strength to run – and the ability to dream, this coming year and for years to come.

Amen.