

Well, it has been two days since the NYC Marathon and I wanted to write to you all to let you know how much I (and my running partner Ben David) appreciated all of the support you gave us – either in person, before or since the race and special thanks to those of you who also got behind our cause of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen for which we were running.

I have been asked a lot of questions about the day, the race and the experience. So, if you are one of those who asked – or not – but you would like to know, read on. If not, thank you again!

As a prelude, I would like to begin by saying that the more than four months of training and preparation for the marathon were well worth it! I don't know if Limor will agree, but all of the hours devoted to it, the money it takes or the kvetching it entails seemed to pay off. Also, I would like for everyone to know how supportive Limor was throughout, through all of the aches and pains, blisters, an Achilles tendon injury, my complaining all the way through race day and recovery – I couldn't have done it without her support. I would like to thank Ben too, for getting me into this to begin with and being there as an experienced marathoner every step of the way.

As for the marathon, it couldn't simply be summed up by saying: WOW! Everything about Sunday, November 6, 2005 will be with me forever. Even the experience of riding the subway into Manhattan at 5:15AM on race day was memorable. As soon as we got on board, we could already pick out a handful of others who were clearly on their way to the race. Little did we know, that when we got off the train at the NYC Library main branch to catch our bus to the starting line, the subway station was filling up from every car of the train with runners and from the moment we came above ground at about 6AM there were already 100's of volunteers giving instructions and words of encouragement "good luck," "it's a great day for a marathon (though it was still pitch black outside)," "have a great race," etc... I will mention the volunteers later, but from that moment at 6am at the subway until long after the race was over in central park, I felt that I was never more than an arm's reach away from a helpful, friendly face.

On the subway, Ben and I had wondered what kind of buses would schlep us to Fort Wadsworth in Staten Island. I thought city buses, Ben thought little shuttle buses like you get to the airport. Boy, were we both wrong, and it was just the first inkling of how huge an event the NYC Marathon really is. When we got to the corner, we were greeted by an uncountable amount of full-length coach buses, so many in fact that they stretched for blocks and they were continuously coming and going. These buses, which had already been running for an hour, kept arriving in Staten Island for hours, one after the other. It looked like the Port Authority Bus Terminal on a holiday weekend – bus after bus, non-stop until about 9:30AM.

Once we reached Fort Wadsworth, we were greeted by a new phalanx of volunteers and staff, including some local sororities and a lot of NYPD. Inside the fort, we were moved into our "village," one of three. In our village alone, there was continuous live music, a medial tent, food, jumbo televisions, corporate sponsors, photographers, television coverage, relaxation areas and more port-a-johns than I have ever seen (though all runners like to go before hand, so the hundreds of stalls didn't prevent lines!). And that was just our village, there were two others to boot. It looked like a massive relief effort – with just as many emergency workers and volunteers.

Then began our line-up for the start of the race. We packed in tight before they led us onto the bridge. Luckily for Ben and I, we had a very good position and, we were just feet from the starting line. But, there was considerable waiting for the special race starts (wheel chair, the 5 Borough Challenge, Women's elite runners) and then the pre-race pep-talk by the mayor, and the race director, as well as the national anthem. Once that was all over, I witnessed the largest mass-disrobing of my life; sweatshirts, running pants, hats, gloves, and everything else that wouldn't be making the 26.2 mile journey to Central Park came off and started dropping to the pavement or flying off to the sides. It was also the biggest group of (partially) naked people – none of whom cared what another saw – as everyone tried to squeeze one last drop from their bladders, and it wasn't just the men.

Then, before we knew it (and before we expected it – we thought the race started at 10:10) at 10:07AM, the real journey began – for us on the lower level of a nearly silent Verrazano Narrows Bridge – once the longest bridge in the world and essentially a massive man made hill when taken from the point of view of a runner. As they say, we went out with a bang – a real one made by two jumbo cannons fired from the fort. All we could hear afterwards was the sound of thousands of feet pounding the pavement. All around us was an electric atmosphere and the acrid smell of spent gunpowder from the cannons below.

The first three miles of the course were pretty quiet, no spectators on the bridge and then we were on a highway, but then we really got into Brooklyn. Immediately, the spectators had a huge impact, high-fives, cheers, words of encouragement along nearly every part of the course carried us through. People called out our names which we had magic marked on our arms and, as we discovered, people like to call out what we had printed on our shirts, “Runnin’ Rabbis.” We were reveled by cat-calls of “go rabbis,” “run rabbis, run,” “hey rabbi,” “you go rabbi!” And, of course there were a few snickers – as if to say that we couldn’t possibly be rabbis if we were doing something athletic. There were also a bunch of “hey, runnin’ *rabbis*.” I would have to say that we got more comments than anyone around us, though the loudest cheers of the day were saved for two special groups along the way: a group from New Orleans and the Achilles Track Club, which consists of disabled runners and volunteer guides who run or walk with them with them – some of the runners had ailments, some were missing limbs (including one man with both legs missing who we didn’t pass until mile 15!), they inspired us to keep moving and pipe down about our pain.

The course winds its way through all five of NYC’s boroughs, but what was more amazing were the hundreds of neighborhoods that make up those boroughs; the ethnic, economic, racial and religious nature of each neighborhood differed, but it didn’t matter – everyone was cheered and encouraged. Of course, there were some favorites. In Italian neighborhoods, the Italian contingent was mightily lauded, and in the Polish sections, the Polish and so on and so forth. What a show of diversity from the most diverse city in the world! Some highlights were much of Brooklyn (where we ran right past our own cheering section – oops!), including the very Orthodox parts of Borough Park where we saw some very curious looks at our shirts and some sideways glances at the runners in general, but also little yeshivah kids passing out Gatorade and lollipops to the runners. We weren’t in Queens for very long, but the area before the 59th Street Bridge – very steep incline – was packed with screaming fans to propel us over the hump of that creaking old bridge which had caught on fire only 2 weeks before, then like the Verrazano, it was eerily quiet until we reached the foot of the other side of the bridge in Manhattan. And then the real cheering hit us, from the foot of the bridge at 58th Street & 1st Avenue all the way up to about 105th Street and 1st Avenue was the largest group of spectators I have ever seen in my life; people were standing ten deep on both sides of the street, waving flags, chanting, holding banners, balloons and food and drinks. Family members would jump out onto the course to greet runners (including Ben’s brothers, who nearly ran me over), different foreign national groups would gather (there must have been 1,000 Dutch at about 80th Street all wearing clementine colored clothes). We passed groups of our congregants in the 80’s; first Ben’s, then mine and both gave us a push to keep going as energy started to fade. At about 95th Street we connected with the main group of our family and friends which boosted us for the ever-long stretch in front of us. The fans started to fade as we entered Harlem, though the locals were still out there cheering everyone on.

It was at this point that the race and 1st Avenue started to take its toll – who knew that Manhattan was so hilly? 1st Avenue was a gentle incline, but it went on forever. Unfortunately, the course didn’t get any easier as we climbed over the Madison Avenue Bridge into the Bronx. The bridge itself was made out of metal grating – not asphalt – so it wasn’t so comfy on already throbbing feet which had pounded 20 miles of road so far. Then, the South Bronx was as scenic and welcoming as one can expect – we were mostly on a highway service road and there were few spectators. It took the wind out of our sails and we were really hurting at that point. Luckily, we weren’t in the Bronx for too long and we crossed back into Manhattan.

From there we began our trek towards Central Park and the finish line. Again the streets were increasingly filled with spectators. 5th Avenue may house some of the most expensive homes in the world and the best shopping anywhere, but from now on it will be remembered as the most inhospitable street in NYC. Hilly is an understatement. Sure, it undulated, but each upswing was steeper than the one before it and our needles were pointing towards E in the gas tank. At 90th Street we saw our friends and family for the last time (sounds grim – it felt grim) where we were given some goodies to get us over the hump. Unfortunately, not too much later, the hump got over on us and Ben and I had to walk for a bit. We started running again a little while later, but I couldn't – so after hundreds of miles of training and 24 miles together on the race course, Ben (with my pleading for him to go) left me behind. To be honest, it was heart-breaking and it nearly drove me to tears – especially when I saw some unexpected friends lining the road in the park; embarrassment and exhaustion make for a dangerous mix. As I saw Ben fade in front of me, I decided right then and there, that if I had to walk every step on my wobbly legs, I would finish those last 2.2 miles – I didn't come this far to drop out. A little while after that, I decided that I would run the last 1.2 no matter how slow or how painful – I was not walking across the finish line of the biggest run in the world. The spectators were trying so hard to get me going again; their will power fueled my own.

And so, I ran. With my walk giving me a breather, I put in my best mile since Queens and finished strong, passing hundreds of runners as I approached Grand Army Plaza and turned onto Central Park South and as I entered the home stretch after Columbus Circle. My final kick felt liberating and I crossed the finish line, one I had seen on TV since childhood, with my arms held high in the air – an imperfect victory, battered but not broken.

I received my finishers medal, had my picture taken, got some water and food, a blanket and wove my way through the throngs to meet up with Ben, and our contingent. It was quite a long walk, but the camaraderie among the finishers was just one more amazing part of the day. Promises never to do such a stupid thing again abounded, but any runner knows that those are empty promises. Some people, even the defending champion collapsed at the finish line; some from exhaustion and dehydration, others from emotion, and more still from cramping and spasms. Medical experts were on hand, as were those volunteers hordes of them – over 6,000. Through my gasps for air, I tried to thank each one as I passed by – some were surprised to be thanked – other responded with the wink of one who has been on this course before and knew what I meant. Even beyond the finish line, the great effort of all involved could be felt. At no point on the course would one feel alone. Where spectators were forbidden, the volunteers, staff, NYPD, NYFD, EMS and the Department of Sanitation were there to encourage and help where needed.

As someone who grew up in the suburbs and who has lived in this city for five years now, it was best the city ever looked and she offered her best to the 37,000 runners who poured their hearts out onto the course.

Both Ben and I were happy that we finished, but disappointed at the fact that we had to walk and that we didn't make our 4 hour goal (though we were only three minutes off pace after $\frac{3}{4}$ of the race). That being said, it was such a positive experience that missing that goal pales in comparison to the ones we surpassed. As we kept saying during training, the first goal is simply to make it to the starting line – injury sidelines so many runners. Our next goal was to bring attention to the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen and its volunteers. We have been covered in different press outlets (Jewish ones mainly, but some with a large readership), our congregations have taken a great interest and our t-shirts said "Support the HUC Soup Kitchen" on the back, so lots of runners got the message too. We also finished a grueling course, a major goal in and of itself, especially for someone who hasn't ever run a marathon and who, before this training season, hadn't run a race since high school.

Besides, unmet goals only mean that I will have to do it again...next year in the 5 Boroughs!