

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Evening  
September 18, 2009 – 1 Tishri, 5770  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

For the last several years, Temple Beth El has kicked off its Mitzvah Day celebration with a 5K run called, “The Mitzvah Day Dash”. When I was in high school, I ran three seasons of track and cross country. And let me tell you, I was in shape. But since then, as it goes, I have fallen out of shape. And even though every year on these holy days I commit to myself and God that I will work harder at getting more physically fit, I keep giving myself things to repent for on Yom Kippur.

And so, even though I’m not really in good shape, every year I run the Mitzvah Day Dash. Back in high school, during cross-country, 5k races were the norm. And so every year I like to get back to my youth and run. And every year, it just flat out hurts. I’m pretty good for the first mile, but by the second mile, I’m sucking wind. And it just gets worse from there.

Halfway down Palmetto Park Road, staring into the bright morning sun and a bit of a headwind, I think: “Maybe I should just stop. Maybe I could walk for a bit. I really think I’ve just about had enough.”

The Mitzvah Day Dash is one thing. Real life, though, is quite another. This past year, life was more like a marathon than a 5k jaunt. For so many in our congregation, in our country, and in the world, the pain was unrelenting. Since we last gathered for the New Year, I have spoken with members of our congregation who have lost their jobs, whose homes fell into foreclosure, even a few who found themselves homeless. As the economy fell off a cliff, as word spread of Bernie Madoff’s colossal thievery, as we watched businesses dry up, salaries slashed, and savings implode, for many the despair became overwhelming. Others in our congregation are facing serious illness, broken marriages and relationships, agonizing parenting decisions when children get in trouble. The anguish can be excruciating.

In these difficult times, when we feel the weight of the world bearing down on us, and the ground beneath us buckling under the weight, how do we move on? How do we keep running when the pain becomes so great?

Our people know what it is to find meaning in the midst of despair. Thomas Buergenthal was not quite six years old when he and his parents were forced from their home in Germany to a ghetto in southern Poland. By virtue of his father’s ingenuity and his own wits, Thomas managed to survive two labor camps and ultimately his transfer to Auschwitz. But in January of 1945, shy of his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, Thomas faced them most difficult challenge yet. The order was given to evacuate Auschwitz and the death marches.

The children’s bunk was asked to lead the march. The cold whipped through his thin uniform. He was thrown a black loaf of bread and ordered to march. This was worse than anything he could have imagined. The children had it harder than those behind them since they had to pack down the roads that were covered with snow and ice. As the sun set

on the first night, the temperature fell colder and colder. Finally, after it had grown dark, they lay down on the road or in the drainage ditches beside the road to sleep.

Along the way, those who could not go on, would sit down by the side of the road, and were promptly shot by the S.S. guards.

Tommy thought about that as an option: “As I got ever more tired,” he wrote, “I wondered whether it would not be easier to lie down and let them kill me. The prospect had its attraction because it would be speedy and liberating.”

So what kept him from giving up? What gave him the temerity to fight on – to persevere?

Next week, when we read the words of Parashat Nitzavim on Yom Kippur morning, Moses and the Israelites face the same question: “I set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse: choose life, that you and your descendants may live.” But what does it mean to choose life? How do we find meaning in life, especially when life grows hard? What gives us the power to persevere, when the suffering seems overwhelming, when the darkness seems all-consuming, when we can’t see where we’re going, when we don’t know what to do?

When we are in pain, it’s hard to think about much else. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist who survived the camps, reflected on what hunger did to his fellow inmates. All they did, he said, was talk about food. Food became an obsession, it consumed all thought and all imagination. Fresh bread, a few vegetables, a sip of milk – these became the stuff of fantasies and dreams. Pain clouds our thinking and our consciousness.

But pain is also instructive. Imagine if we could not feel pain! If we could hold our hand out over a stove and not feel the consuming heat – instinctively causing our hand to jump away. Pain reminds us that we are in trouble, pain reminds us that we are broken, but pain also reminds us that we are alive. As we look back over the course of our lives, it is often the moments of pain that defined us, and helped us to grow to become who we ultimately needed to be.

When I was on my high school track team, I would often go for long runs with my coach. As I would grow tired and my legs would ache, I would find myself running with my head down, staring at my feet. “You’re tired,” my coach would say.

“Yeah,” I would reply.

“Then look up, not down,” he would say. “Look up at the horizon and see the finish line.”

“But we’re nowhere near the finish line,” I would argue.

“Then keep looking. If you keep your head up long enough, you’ll see it.”

It’s natural and normal when we’re in pain to think only of ourselves. When we feel threatened and vulnerable, to circle the wagons and look inward. But to make it through the suffering, we need to look up not down. We need to reach out, not in. We need to engage in the world more deeply, rather than shrink away from it.

In the midst of life’s struggles, we need to find something worth fighting for, something worth living for.

In 1990, a man named Jim Alderson was happy working as the Chief Financial Officer for North Valley Hospital in Whitefish, Montana. He had been there for years, and his family had put down roots in Whitefish. Then the hospital hired a new management team, and one day the new vice-president called him in to talk about cost reports. He explained to Jim that he had to prepare two reports, one to submit to the government and the other for in-house use. Jim could not believe what he was hearing. Keep two sets of books?!? It violated the very basic tenets of accounting ethics. So he refused.

Five days later, Jim was fired, saying that the arrangement wasn't working out. Unable to find work, Jim took a job with a hospital 300 miles away. The family had to endure questions and rumors about his job switch. In May of 1991, Jim filed a wrongful discharge action, and later a whistleblower lawsuit. Over the next 13 years, the family had to endure major sacrifices, including fourteen separate moves around the country. They lost friends, their savings, and at times even their faith.

"There were many, many times," he wrote, "when I had to ask myself: Why am I doing this? You don't always know why, but then you see your kids and you realize you may have lost your job, your career, most of your savings, everything you've worked for, but if you ever lose their respect, it's something that cannot be replaced. I knew that when it was over, no matter how it turned out, I wanted to be able to look my kids in the eye and tell them that truth and honesty really do matter."

Victor Frankl noted in his experience in the camps that if you had something to live for, you could endure the most horrible that human experience can offer. He remembered Nietzsche's words: "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*." The answer to despair, he explains, was understanding that survival had a purpose, a meaning, that the world still expected something from us. For one man it was finding his child whom he knew with all his heart was waiting for him; for another it was a series of books he had begun that needed to be finished.

For Thomas Buergethal, the answer was straightforward in the manner of the child that he was. As he marched out of Birkenau, he looked back to see the remains of the crematoria the Nazis had tried to destroy. He remembered the words of his father, back when they were in the ghetto in Poland: "Do not despair. Sooner or later we will win this war and bury them deep under the ground. ... Now, as I looked back at the vast murder factory, he said, I felt victorious and kept repeating to myself, as if addressing Hitler directly, 'See, you tried to kill me, but I am still alive!' If I give up, they will have won."

The obstacles we face in life have purpose. They force us to look in the mirror and ask us why we go on. As Robert Frost wrote:

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood  
Throws down in front of us is not to bar  
Our passage to our journey's end for good  
But just to ask us who we think we are.

Life's deeper meanings come in how we choose to live each day, with purpose and dignity, in service to others and to God. I learned what this means from a woman I knew in my former congregation who had once battled breast cancer. For 17 years, she had good

reports and clean scans, and then had a recurrence that was inoperable. She and her husband had just sold their home in New Jersey and had bought a house in Florida. The doctor had told her that he didn't expect her to survive the year. It was devastating.

We talked for a long time and we talked about making the most of the time she had – to use the time she had deliberately and thoughtfully.

A week later I saw her in synagogue and she told me she be away on Shabbat because she was attending a wedding in Minneapolis.

“Minneapolis – in February?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, laughing. “So why are you going?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “I really don't want to go. But the bride's mother is my best friend from college and I've known her for all these years. And even though we're not that close, I still care for her very much, and she knows what's happening, and she knows what it means for me to come. And I want to give her that gift.”

We can't forget that life, even in its darkest moments, is a gift. It's a gift we sometimes think as burdensome, and sometimes take for granted. But Rosh HaShanah is a time to give thanks for that gift, and endeavor to use it more purposefully, more wisely.

We can fill our lives with frivolity. We can spend our time consumed with the mundane trivial things in life. Ultimately we can be consumed by our own singular concerns -- what's happening to me, what about my feelings, my wants, my desires.

But that selfishness is not what God demands, nor does that selfishness lead to a meaningful life. Life's meaning is found in what we give and do for others, how we share our love and concern and care, not on what we do for ourselves, but what we give of ourselves. As the Torah teaches so emphatically in the book of Leviticus: “V'ahavta L'reecha Kamocho – you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yesterday, President Obama bestowed the Medal of Honor posthumously on a young soldier named Jared Monti, who died in Afghanistan on June 21, 2006, trying to save a soldier in his unit who had been wounded. I share with you a portion of President Obama's remarks in presenting the medal to Jared's parents, Paul and Janet Monti.

It was written long ago that "the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet, notwithstanding, go out to meet it." Jared Monti saw the danger before him. And he went out to meet it.

He handed off his radio. He tightened his chin strap. And with his men providing cover, Jared rose and started to run. Into all those incoming bullets. Into all those rockets. Upon seeing Jared, the enemy in the woods unleashed a firestorm. He moved low and fast, yard after yard, then dove behind a stone wall.

A moment later, he rose again. And again they fired everything they had at him, forcing him back. Faced with overwhelming enemy fire, Jared could have stayed where he was, behind that wall. But that was not the kind of soldier Jared Monti was. He embodied that creed all soldiers strive to meet: "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen

comrade." And so, for a third time, he rose. For a third time, he ran toward his fallen comrade. Said his patrol leader, it "was the bravest thing I had ever seen a soldier do."

They say it was a rocket-propelled grenade; that Jared made it within a few yards of his wounded soldier. They say that his final words, there on that ridge far from home, were of his faith and his family: "I've made peace with God. Tell my family that I love them."

This year, as I was running the Mitzvah Day Dash, I thought about Thomas Buergenthal. I thought about all the men and women who did not get to finish their race during those cold, miserable days in January of 1945. I thought about all the men and women who do battle each and every day against disease, who get up each morning and hold their head high. I thought about all the men and women who struggle in poverty, who toil and labor to feed and clothe and shelter their families, and I thought about all the men and women who do not even have the opportunity to toil.

I thought about my children, and your children, and the fact that we need to teach them to be generous and kind, to be compassionate and fair, to understand that they must love their neighbors as themselves, and that they must learn to assume personal responsibility for our collective society. I thought about how much I have yet to learn, and how important it is that I learn life's lessons well enough to teach the next generation to live better than we are. I thought about how I have not contributed enough to my community, my people, my world. And I kept on running.

And as we make our way through this coming year 5770, a year that I suspect may be as painful for many as the year that has passed, let us hold each other as we push through the pain. Let us resolve to do something meaningful – do something purposeful – do something in service to something larger than yourself. If you have a job, reach out to the Temple and help someone else find one. Volunteer your expertise, your wisdom, your time to the congregation, to the community. Mentor a young person, bring canned food to the Forster food pantry or to Boca Helping Hands, give more tzedakah than you think you can afford, do something for someone else. Keep running for your parents, your children, your family, your community, your people, your country, for Jared Monti, and for all those who have lost their race, but whose spirits we can embrace and carry across the finish line. And may it be that when our race is run, that we look back at our journey and take pride in how we ran, in what we did, in what we taught, and what we gave.