

Burnout
Rosh Hashanah Day I 5782 (2021)
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רַב עֵתָה – Enough!

רַב עֵתָה יְקֹנֶק – Enough God! Enough!

In the book of Kings, Elijah the Prophet is pursued once again by Jezebel and her evil messengers, and once again Elijah escapes to the desert:

מלכים א פרק יט
(ד) וְהוּא הֵלֵךְ בַּמִּדְבָּר דֶּרֶךְ יוֹם וַיָּבֹא וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחַת רֵתֶם אַחַת וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוּת וַיֹּאמֶר רַב עֵתָה יְקֹנֶק קָח
נַפְשִׁי כִּי לֹא טוֹב אֲנֹכִי מֵאַבְתָּי:

4 [Elijah] went to the desert, a distance of one day's travel, and he came and sat under a juniper and requested that his soul die, He said, "Enough, now Lord [רַב עֵתָה] take my soul as I am not better than my forefathers."

According to one Swiss psychotherapist, in a history of burnout published in 2013, Elijah is suffering from burnout. The psychotherapist notes that "Burnout is increasingly serious and of widespread concern" and that it can be traced back to the Bible itself. He argues that Moses was burned out, in Numbers 11:14, when he pleaded with God, "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me." And in that desert, Elijah was burnt out as well. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/24/burnout-modern-affliction-or-human-condition>)

And there we find ourselves too, under Elijah's juniper tree, tried and tired, in the Covid wilderness. Tried by the length of this pandemic. Tired of masking, fatigued by Zoom, depressed by feeling isolated or alone, seeking respite from marital strife or relief from parenting stresses.

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Rashi paraphrases Elijah's groan of discontent, רַב עֵתָה – Enough, as saying עד אימתי אנא מטריף, that is, "Until when will I be confused like this?" (Rashi on I Kings 19:4). The Radak provides a context for Elijah's lament: וְאֵינִי בּוֹ בִּסְכָנָה כָּל יוֹם וְיוֹם meaning, "I had enough in this world, a place in which I find myself in danger each and every day" (Radak on I Kings 19:4). The Malbim comes to Elijah's defense: כִּי כְּבֹר הַשָּׁלִים וְעָשָׂה רַב וְהוֹתֵר, Elijah went above and beyond. Elijah has done too much (Malbim on I Kings 19:4).

Under Elijah's juniper tree, tried and tired, in the Covid wilderness, we find ourselves asking these very questions:

Until when will we be confused like this?

How can we carry on in a world in which we find ourselves in danger each and every day?

Haven't we done enough?

When the pandemic first started, I found myself offering this sage advice to anyone who would take it: Pace yourself, after all, this is a marathon!

This past summer, a year and half into this pandemic, like many of you I found myself desperately wanting to slow down. While losing patience with a run that seemingly has no finish line, I suddenly realized that I have never run a marathon in my life.

Pace yourself? This is a marathon? Geez, Yonatan, what do you know about running a marathon?

I tried going for a run, but in truth, I never liked running. So I got to the end of the block and then I walked back home.

In the following days, I tried getting my hands on any book or article on marathon races. When I mentioned to Issy Kipnis, our former president, that I am reading quite a bit about running these days, he quipped, “Rabbi, might I remind you of the difference between Halakha and *Maaseh*, between Theory and Practice?”

When I finally Googled the words “Judaism”, “Torah”, and “Marathon”, I pleasantly discovered that I do in fact know something about marathon racing in practice.

Several articles online describe the weeks leading up to Passover as a marathon. Been there, done that.

The all-night learning of Shavuot is described by many shuls and Jewish organizations as a Torah marathon. Been there, done that.

And, perhaps most relevant to us, the High Holidays are often called a spiritual marathon. Yup, been there, done that.

If you think about these festive times, then you quickly realize that Jewish practice, day in and day out, is a sort of an ongoing marathon.

In an article titled, “Sprints and Marathons” the late R. Jonathan Sacks z”l, describes Judaism in exactly this way. He writes:

“In *Good to Great*, management theorist Jim Collins argues that what the great companies have in common is a culture of discipline. In *Great By Choice*, he uses the phrase ‘the 20-Mile March’ meaning that outstanding organizations plan for the marathon, not the sprint. Confidence, he says, ‘comes not from motivational speeches, charismatic inspiration, wild pep rallies, unfounded optimism, or blind hope.’ It comes from doing the deed, day after day, year after year. Great companies use disciplines that are specific, methodical and consistent. They encourage their people to be self-disciplined and responsible. They do not over-react to change, be it for good or bad. They keep their eye on the far horizon. Above all, they do not depend on heroic, charismatic leaders who at best lift the company for a while but do not provide it with the strength-in-depth they need to flourish in the long run.”

R. Sacks notes that, “Turning ideals into codes of action that shape habits of the heart is what Judaism [is] about. Never lose the inspiration of the Prophets, but never lose, either, the routines that turn ideals into acts and dreams into achieved reality.”

<https://rabbisacks.org/acharei-mot-kedoshim-5781/>

Under the juniper tree, Elijah asks: “Until when will we be confused like this?” And the Torah answers unambiguously, “The Lord, your God, shall you follow and Him shall you fear; His

commandments shall you observe and to His voice shall you hearken; Him shall you serve and to Him shall you cleave” (Deuteronomy 13:5).

אַחֲרֵי יְקוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ וְאֹתוֹ תִירְאוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּבְקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאֹתוֹ תַעֲבֹדוּ וְבוֹ תִדְבָּקוּ:

The world might be confusing, but because of our Torah, we refuse to be confused about what it is we are here to do.

Elijah pushes further, “How can we carry on in a world in which we find ourselves in danger each and every day?” And the Sages answer in the Mishnah, שמונה עשרה – בכל יום מתפלל אדם שמונה עשרה – regardless, “Every day a person must pray the Amidah” (Mishnah Brachot 4:3). Even in a world in which we find ourselves in danger each and every day, we pray to God three times a day.

But Elijah is relentless, “Haven’t we done enough?” And *Pirkey Avot*, the Sayings of our Fathers chime in, חורין להבטל ממנה ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה – “It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” (Pirkey Avot 2:16)

In my theoretical study of marathons, I did ultimately find advice from a rabbi who actually ran a marathon. R. Henschel Teller, one of our generations’ most well-known storytellers, happens to also be a runner. In one of his recent interviews, he offered some reflections from his second time running a marathon. This is what he shared:

“I have a colleague who is buff, he looks like an athlete, he is an athlete. It was my second race. We got to the starting line at the same time. He said to me, that “Mr. Marathon” (Pheidippides), the guy who ran from Sparta to Marathon -- it was a 26.2-mile run -- when he got there, he dropped dead. I said to my friend, I’m not sure this is the most opportune time to tell me this. He said to me, on the contrary, if you finish a run, and you have energy to keep on going, you did not run it correctly. And that was so much inspiration for me. It gave me such a kick, I ran so fast I beat my own students.”

R. Henschel Teller then goes on and explains how that very experience also guided him while he took care of his father in his last days:

“My father was a robust person, but the last few months of his life, I had to feed him, I had to breathe for him, I had to change him – and I had that metaphor: it’s the end of the race. I just have to be there for him. [...]. I wanted to finish that race, and I had that great consolation. In many things in life, give it your all.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCxONcBVhPw>)

Until when will we be confused like this? As long as we may feel confused, let’s still give it our all.

How can we carry on in a world in which we find ourselves in danger each and every day? As long as we are in danger, let’s give it our all.

Haven’t we done enough? No, we must still give it our all.

It is not our duty to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.

I know you are tired. I am tired too.

I know some of us are overwhelmed. At times, I feel that way too.

I know you don't see an end in sight. Sometimes, I too struggle to see the finish line.

But when I hear an inner voice proclaim:

רַב עֵתָּה – Enough!

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I also hear the voice of our Torah, the voice of our sages, and the voice of our ancestors proclaiming just as loud:

You already know what to do. Rest on the power of our tradition. Rely on the teachings of our past. Without knowing there is an end, without resorting to the adrenaline of pumped up heroism, rest your tried and tired soul in the tried and true tracks of daily prescriptions.

So now is the time to draw guidance from our Torah, and from our sages, and from our ancestors.

And now is the time to draw on our reserves.

And now is the time to give it our all.

And as we do, and I know that we will, I pray that the Holy One will match our effort and our resolve with love, with grace, with respite, with good health, with strength, with hope, with faith, and with life. And may it be so.