

“Find Your Way to Leipzig”

Yom Kippur Sermon

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Many of you know about Diana Nyad, the first person to ever swim from Cuba to Florida. She's remarkable. Took her three days. Continuous swimming for three days. She swam through sea life of all types, bad currents, hunger, dehydration, she found a way to accomplish her dream. She had the dream for decades, made previous attempts but failed each time, but at the age of 64, she did it. And she wrote a book, called, "Find a way."

Her's was a unique dream. A big dream. But there are very few people that I know, that do not have a big dream. Something they hope to accomplish in a lifetime. And for all of you big dreamers, this sermon is for you.

Today is Yom Kippur. A fast day. You may think fasting is a gift for God. Or perhaps some type of sacrifice you make to the Jewish people. Maybe you've never really thought too deep about why you are fasting, it's just something that's done so you do it.

To fast is to build character. It is to show yourself that you can do it. For if you can choose to fast, if you can choose to embrace the discomfort that fasting brings, and find a way to make it through, then you've learned how to function in a state of discomfort, and this builds resilience. Fasting builds resilience. And we need resilience to grow as individuals.

We can all chose to eat on Yom Kippur, nobody is going to get struck down by God on the holy altar. But is that your standard in life? To avoid discomfort? To be comfortable at all costs?

The experience of fasting is not about withdrawing, it's about expanding. Of course, there are many ways to grow, I'm not suggesting that fasting is the only key to success, nor am I saying that if you don't

fast, or cannot fast, that you will never accomplish your goals. Not at all. But what I am saying is that fasting on yom kippur helps people grow, positively.

The common phrase we say is, "I hope you have an easy fast, in Hebrew, "tzom kal." But "easy fast" does not capture the true essence of fasting, nor the true nature of life because life is not always easy, so why should the day we seal ourselves in the book life life be about ease?

Rather than easy fast, we should call for a good fast. May you have a good fast, tzom tov, may you grow as a person through your practice of fasting. What's so good about easy? Nothing was easy about swimming from Cuba to Florida. Achieving bold dreams is not easy. They require the opposite of ease - they require hard work and dedication and focus - to find a way.

There are a lot of people who want to be accomplishing more, but they are not sure how. I'm going to offer you three ways to get from here to there - all lessons that we learn from Yom Kippur. But first a story.

This story is about a man in Europe, over 100 years ago, who buys a ticket to ride a train. He boards the train and says to the conductor, "I have a ticket to Liepzig. Does this train to go Liepzig?" The conductor nodded his head, yes, and the man finds his seat as the train departs.

Within an hour, the train begins to slow. The man asks the conductor, "is this Liepzig?" No. They pull in and pull out, some passengers depart, others join.

Approximately 45 minutes later, the same thing happens as they approach a town. The man asks, "is this Liepzig?" No. More passengers on and off.

The train pulls away and now the man is feeling nervous, "excuse me conductor, I want to go to Liepzig." The conductor replies, "sir, eventually this train will arrive in Liepzig, but before you get there, there will be many stops and starts along the way."

This is life. Starts and stops along our way. Each stop important. Each stop full of lessons, not always easy, but often important.

But what happens when the train stops, we get off, and cannot seem to get back on. And we find ourselves stuck. Spinning in place.

This happens to many people.

There are many people who want more for their lives. They want to be healthier, they want to have better relationships, they want to feel more inspired at work and advance their careers, they want to feel more fulfilled in their lives, they want to enjoy parenting more. They want to get to the next place, the next station, but they are stuck.

We all know these folks. You might be sitting next to one of them right now. Or, you might be one of them yourself.

What to do? You have to find a way.

Positive Judaism is about living your best life - and having the most positive impact on those around you at the same time. It is the thriving life. The flourishing life. You may be wondering, why is the rabbi talking to us about thriving today. The day when he is wearing a kittel, the death shroud, and we are giving honor to the deceased?

Because today is the day when we engage in teshuvah, return, a return to our best selves. And when we make the commitment to ourselves, no matter what, to find a way.

People who are thriving in their lives have found the way. You know that person in the corner office, you think they are thriving. The guy with that huge summer home, you think, he's flourishing. She who has 5000 facebook friends and a million instagram followers, you think, she's happy. Don't be so sure.

Wealth, personal items, likes on your social media account don't really count. On the outside those folks might seem like they have it all and are happy, but on the inside, they could be miserable. I have a feeling everyone in this room knows people like this.

So if happiness is not about money or popularity or the size of house, what is happiness all about?

The top three areas in life that determine happiness are:

1. the quality of our relationships;
2. the quality of our health; and,
3. the meaning we derive from our work.

These are the three areas of life that have the potential to actually increase our overall wellbeing and Yom Kippur draws attention to each of them in a specific way.

Number one: Relationships. Relationships are the key element to wellbeing and happiness. The Torah is clear, “love thy neighbor.” Martin Buber called it “I-Thou.” And so on Yom Kippur, the Jewish practice that encourages us to increase our wellbeing is to “forgive.”

Forgiveness can be hard. It’s the ability to give up the need for revenge. It is also a deep understanding that people change and others must accept that change. But to be absolutely clear: forgiving others is something that we do for ourselves.

On Yom Kippur we say, “I hereby forgive all who have transgressed against me, whether on purpose or by accident, whether in this lifetime or on any other plane.”

Forgiveness. It’s about taking 100% responsibility for your life and when problems happen, it’s about pointing the finger at yourself, not at others. Forgiveness is one of the pathways to improving wellbeing, and increasing happiness because you can free yourself from the burdens that you’re carrying.

This year, no matter the wrong, I would encourage you to try and forgive. No matter what, find a way, because in the words of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, “forgiveness is the key to action and freedom.”

Number two. The second pathway to wellbeing is through health. Fact: People who are physically healthy and mindful of their bodies experience more happiness. Yet ours is a culture of people who are in poor health, have high stress lifestyles, and are struggling physically, emotionally, and mentally. So much of the quality of our health results in how well we take care of ourselves.

I don’t know anyone who does not feel better after eating well and exercising and because on Yom Kippur one of the mitzvot is fasting - which is physical - we are naturally in touch with our bodies because we feel them differently - we feel the difference in our bodies. What’s stopping you from spending more time dedicated to your health? Eating wiser and healthier? What can you do to reduce your stress levels? The 12th Century Jewish Scholar, Moses Maimonides wrote, “a person should aim to maintain physical health and vigor in order that his soul may be upright.”

Number three. And the third practice Yom Kippur teaches, is to increase the meaning in our lives, especially the meaning of our work. Today is about taking stock, taking an accounting of our lives, doing

the deep check. A recent study showed that only 50% of the American workforce is happy in their work but that those who are happy have found a deeper purpose to what they do every day.

For a minute, forget the office politics and the daily grind - which everyone has - and think, remind yourself, what you love about your chosen field. What took you there in the first place? Was it a mentor who advised you? Was it a skill or hobby that you loved? Was it your special and unique talent? What is that work that wants to live in you?

In the words of Abraham Maslow, “the most beautiful fate, the most wonderful good fortune that can happen to any human being, is to be paid for doing that which he passionately loves to do.”

Here’s the little secret that only rabbis know.

People who are thriving in their lives have learned how to flourish in these three areas. It may look easy from the outside, but these folks work hard on their relationships, their health, and their work. They spend time, money, resources, and effort to continually improve - no matter what their age and place in life, young - middle - old, in these three areas.

On the other hand, folks who are languishing, are likely not investing in their relationships, not spending time daily to improve their physical and mental health, and they have lost their purpose, the real connection to their work.

This is how people get stuck. They get stuck in bad relationships, poor health, and meaningless work. They got off the train and are stuck at that station. There are so many valid life experiences that way-lay people: Illness, divorce, bankruptcy, trauma, and other very real setbacks.

Real difficulties. Real disappointments. Jews are no strangers to problems. So what are you going to do? Let your troubles become your life? No, you’re going to find a way.

Could you imagine if our biblical ancestors just stopped in the desert? Gave up. Ok, Moses. Done. Kaput. We’re giving in. This journey to the promised land is too much. We just don’t have what it takes. We’re going to give you every reason why we should just pitch our tents one last time, right here. This is our final stop. No mas.

They actually tried that but God said, “Just get going.”

Getting stuck is not the Jewish story. Our ancestors did not live that way. They did not struggle, and fast, through all the trials and tests - starting in the desert 3000 years ago and moving from one land to the

next, taking the Torah with them from place to place and cherishing it. You think they did that so that we could inherit the lesson of stoppage?

Quite the opposite. We are the inheritors of resilience, optimism, and hope. So that no matter what hurdles get placed in front of us, we're going to find a way.

Yet still, while some make it all the way to Liepzig, others do not.

If you're on the wrong train, or if you're stuck at the station, what are you waiting for? You've got to find a way.

And that is the message for today.

There are two ways this story ends and the script is yours to write. It may not be easy, it won't likely be passive, but I'm confident that if you choose to improve your relationships, your health, and the meaning of your work, eventually, you too shall find your way to Liepzig.

Where is Liepzig? That is for you to reveal. You may have unexpected stops and starts, but God willing, we'll all meet there, together.

That is how I hope my script unfolds and that some day, long into the future, that is how you will remember me.

I am sure that each name on our memorial Yizkor list, each beautiful life these names represent, each person that was once close to you, is looking down on you from the heavens above, wishing this for you. They want you to live your best life possible: to live well, to be wise, and to be happy. They are hoping that you too will find your way to Liepzig, where they are waiting for you, lovingly, and with open arms.