

**Rosh Hashanah Sermon Day 1, 5781:
Crossing the Finish Line Together
By Rabbi Michael Schwab
(A draft written for speaking)**

In 1976 at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they were all off, running with a relish to finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The others heard the boy cry behind them. A number of them, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, slowed down and looked back. They saw him on the ground upset. So, in the midst of the race, they turned around and they went back. They helped the boy up, they linked arms with one another and they walked across the finish line -- *together*. *Everyone* in the stadium stood, and at the moment when they completed the race, arm in arm, the crowd cheered like they had never cheered before.

Though I have heard this story before and even shared it once from this *bimah* many years ago, I get emotional every time it is told. And it is not just me, thousands of people find the story powerful and have shared it with others over email and social media. Which begs the question -- wherein lies its special power? Why does this story *move* so many? As we welcome in this strange Rosh Hashanah, during these challenging times, I think that the answer is connected to the essence of what it means to be human - an essence with which we desperately need to be in touch, during times like these.

Deep down, we all know that the most noble instinct, our most precious value, is to care for others. This value is championed by our tradition and embedded in our God-given souls. And, at the same time, we *also* know how hard it is to forgo our *own* benefit, to give up on something we very much want, in order to help other people. Lest you think otherwise, those special olympians trained for *months* for that race. They too, like *any*

Olympian, truly wanted to win. They dreamed about it and worked hard to give themselves a shot. But in the face of the suffering of another, almost without hesitation, they made a difficult and powerful decision -- they expanded their dream of crossing that finish line to *include* someone who otherwise would have been left behind. *This* is what the crowd cheered for! The ability of these athletes to live the value of compassion at real personal cost: *That is* what has touched so many others about this story! And for me, *our* ability to do so is a core part of what I think it means to be a Jew, what it means to be a creation of God imbued with a soul and what it means to be a *dugma*, a role model for others to inspire further acts of compassion.

As a rabbi, I have had a unique perspective on the many crises of our time and how it has affected our local community and our larger society. The pandemic, anti-Semitism, racism and our political divide, have created a great deal of suffering. If at one point we *started* the race together, so to speak, many of us at *this* point have stumbled and fallen behind. (And that doesn't even address the issue of those who started from behind at the beginning). Following the example of those special Olympians, though, the question for us then becomes: what will those of us still racing down the path do? *Will* we turn around when we hear the cries? Will we slow down and go back to help? What will the cost to us be, if we do? What will the cost to us be, if we don't?

I would argue that our tradition has a clear opinion on this one: the cost to us, and our greater society, if we do *not* lead with compassion is far higher than the cost of almost any individual sacrifice. Our Torah insists that it was such a lack of compassion that led to our *own* people's enslavement in Egypt, those many years ago, but which we *still* recall each and every year on Passover due to the lessons that this difficult episode in our history

has taught our people and the world. And that is why the Torah incessantly repeats the phrase throughout its pages that we need to be compassionate as Jews today because, quote, “you were once slaves in the Land of Egypt”. In fact, this is the most repeated phrase in the Torah - mentioned thirty-six times and specifically when speaking about our moral duty as Jews. Our core identity, our origin story as a people, is embedded in this value. Through our own collective memory we know what it was like to fall and to have no one there to help us get back up, until God God’s self had to save us.

Or, just look at the famous line in Leviticus that was chosen as the theme of our learning this year at Beth El: *V’aAhavta Lereacha Kamocha*” - “Love your neighbor as yourself”. As I taught in the opening class, which introduced this theme only a couple of weeks ago, this phrase does *not* just say, “Love your neighbor”, which seemingly would have been sufficient as an imperative. Rather, instructively, it purposefully and powerfully asks, “to love your neighbor as yourself” - adding a whole new dimension. This additional phrase raises the bar for the level of compassion we must display as Jews by a) asking us to love *ourselves* too, as a foundation for loving others. And b), which is more relevant to this topic, by demanding that our love for others mirror the intensity and expectations of how we would want to be treated ourselves. We can’t simply love others minimally, like checking a box, rather we must love others maximally as we would expect others to love us and our dear ones.

In other words, our tradition wisely teaches that when someone needs our help, our first instinct when deciding what to do, is not to think about whether *we* have time or what it would cost *us*. In fact, our first instinct should not be to think about ourselves at all. Rather, first we should imagine the situation from the perspective of the person

suffering and further add weight to that side of the equation by imagining that the suffering person was none other than *us!* *We* would want someone to aid us when we fall. And while we wouldn't enjoy the fact that someone might have had to inconvenience themselves, or give up something to help us, we would certainly be touched and utterly grateful if they would. Those special Olympians did not sit and ponder the merits of going back to help their fellow athlete, nor did they hold a meeting to weigh the pros and cons before deciding. Instead, they heard suffering and responded to the needs of the sufferer. Period. *They* are our *dugma*; they are our role models in loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And what is more, the magic of engaging in such acts of compassion, of truly fulfilling the *mitzvah* of loving the neighbor as oneself, is reflected in the response of the crowd. The willingness of the Olympians to turn toward suffering and meet it with compassion at the expense of their own potential success, unleashed a feeling of inspiration, meaning and sustaining goodness that was fulfilling and uplifting for both parties and for everyone who witnessed it, or has learned of it since. Thus, the cheering of the crowd and the thousands of shares of this story.

As I mentioned, our country, our world, is experiencing multiple crises. What *should* happen during a crisis is that people should be thoughtful and chart a path forward based on core values, such as compassion for others. Yet, often a crisis actually reveals *fears* that are buoyed by irrational prejudices and tangible anxieties, which, in turn, cause us to act out of insecurity, ignorance and self-preservation, instead of acting based on our clearest thoughts and noblest ideals. In America, as around the world, people's actions have been driven by fear of the virus, fear of the Jew, and fear of people of color. This fear

has created: barriers of separation, injustice, anger, hatred and the proliferation of suffering.

Thankfully, one of the great blessings of Judaism is that it provides an eternal tradition of core values and ethical principles that can act as our guide, during both the everyday and, of course, during challenging times. As I just demonstrated, these values, these texts, these laws, these principles of living, serve as anchors, supports and guiding lights for us, so that our path forward is constructed out of *love*, through a determination of what is *right*, and with a sense for the *sacredness* of the world that God created. So that we are not driven by fear and anxiety, but rather by compassion and caring. In other words, crisis *should* bring us back to our values and should be handled as we ideally handle everything in Judaism, with thought, care and our highest ideals in mind, especially that of compassion. For the Talmud tells us that we, as Jews, are to be: “*rachmanei b’nei rachmanei*” “Merciful ones whose legacy is mercy”. This compassionate way of *being* is one of our core values as Jews and we should live its truth as often as we can.

One of the great examples of meeting crisis with compassion comes from none other than Moses. Moses, after all he had done for the people, was told he could not enter Israel with them and that a successor needed to be appointed. As Rabbi David Wolpe points out, “As Moses prepared to relinquish leadership of the Israelites . . . he entreats God to appoint as his replacement [someone who is] “*ish asher ruach bo*” -“a man in whom there is spirit.” Sounds good, but what does that phrase actually mean? In the Midrash Tanchumah, our sages offer a very interesting interpretation. They explain that Moses was asking for a leader “who would be able to deal with *each individual* according to his or her own temperament.” Or as the Etz Hayim Humash translates it, “a leader able to relate to

every Israelite”. In other words, Moses and God understood that the people needed a leader who was, most of all, *compassionate*, sensitive and cared not just about the people as a whole, but also about them as individuals -- unique persons with their own dreams and concerns. Wolpe remarks, “Studies have demonstrated that as people ascend the ladder of leadership, their sensitivity to others tends to diminish. Moses knew that the Israelites, [at a critical and turbulent time in their history], needed a leader who could remain both principled and compassionate.”

Principled and compassionate: Moses is teaching us that these twin values should act as our Northstar in the face of crisis, the touchstone that should guide how we make difficult decisions and how we should choose our behaviors in life, especially in a time of stress. Think about the story of Maya Moore. She is a WNBA superstar with Olympic gold medals in women’s basketball and a historic career at the University of Connecticut that is unparalleled. She discovered that there was a man named Jonathan Irons who had been sentenced to 50 years in prison for a home burglary that he consistently swore he never did. After doing much research she believed in his case and took off two years from the WNBA, giving up salary, prestige, and the love of playing professional ball to help Irons get his sentence commuted and his conviction vacated. The court agreed that he was wrongfully convicted and he is now free. He is free because Maya heard his suffering, paused in her race, came back for him and helped him cross the finish line with her by his side.

At Beth El, when the pandemic hit, I am proud to say that we too heard the call. And our truest colors came out in how we responded to the needs of our most vulnerable members. An army of volunteers called, and are still calling, members who

otherwise might have fallen a bit behind in the race: assessing needs, shopping for those homebound, bringing medicines, food, Shabbat meals and protective equipment to those who are vulnerable and even driving people to essential appointments. If you know of someone who could use this support, let us know. On a weekly basis, people are taking time out of their lives to help others and have given of their own resources to make sure that people have what they need.

As you can see being an exemplar of compassion is certainly not only for those with official positions, like governmental officials, clergy, and heads of organizations or corporations. You don't need to be a Moses or a superstar athlete. Every person is needed to affect change. As Cynthia Ozick observed, the shofar has a broad end and a narrow end. If you begin by blowing in the broad end, you get nothing. But if you blow in the narrow end you get a sound everyone can hear. Judaism may seem like one small tradition in a large world. An individual, like the narrow end of the shofar, may seem small and insignificant in the face of the challenges of an entire community. But Jews who have spoken in the name of our tradition and our values have been heard throughout the ages and throughout the world. Individuals can, have and always will, make a difference in the lives of others on a daily basis when they choose to do so. By blowing in the narrow end of the shofar, so to speak, with principle and compassion -- by empowering ourselves as both individuals and as a community, to act decisively based on our core values, we give ourselves the capacity to be the source of a powerful blast of goodness that can be heard and felt by so many others.

Like those olympians it is time for us not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. As Aristotle wrote, and which Forest Gump famously paraphrased much later, "We

are, what we do. By way of our deeds, not our words, we rise and fall.” At *this* moment in our history, we too need to act according to our ideals, creating a consistency in word and action and demanding the same from all of our leaders. And whether you thought of yourself as one before this moment, or not, each of you is indeed an exemplar to those who are around you. The degree to which *you* demonstrate patience, kindness, collaboration, respect, nobility, compassion and love creates unspoken and powerful signals to those around you, whether your actions are on a large or smaller scale. In fact, it is so often the smallest things that speak the loudest and have the most powerful effect on others.

So I conclude with a famous midrash that our rabbis told, in order to explain why God chose Moses, of all people, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The midrash relates that one time while shepherding his large flock of sheep one small lamb went missing. Moses became concerned and immediately took the time to track her down over hill and rock and then carried her back to the flock on his *own* back. The Midrash claims that, as far as God was concerned, this act demonstrated the most important character trait in choosing him as God’s human partner: compassion, even for a lamb. Like our Special Olympians, Moses heard the cry of one in need and did something about it with a full heart. In the year ahead, let us keep our ears attuned to the cries of those who stumble, making the choice to widen our definition of what it means to succeed according to our sacred values, so that we can walk arm in arm across the finish line together, helping to mend a world in desperate need of repair through our own compassion and commitment to Torah. Shanah Tovah to everyone!