

Rabbi Schwab's Sermon Day 1 5784: Chasing Inspiration

Shanah Tovah! Author Ton-del-eya Allen wrote, "Sometimes a person just needs a little **inspiration**...to get them propelled in the right direction". I couldn't agree more. It is my belief that we all need a bit of **inspiration** in life, maybe even a lot. Life is short but has so much potential - how can we motivate ourselves to see the beauty in it and to make the most of our time on earth? Life has so many challenges - how can we find the hope and determination we need to overcome them? As we anticipate the new year that lies ahead, full of blessings and challenges, we *seek* the inspiration that will carry us through life with meaning, strength, resilience, and joy.

I bet you are wondering what this is? (Unveil picture) Have you seen this picture before? To me the story behind this billboard *embodies* inspiration. Pictured are Dick and Rick Hoyt. Their story begins when Dick and Judy Hoyt had a son, Rick, in 1962, who was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. Rick's CP would confine him to a wheelchair and make it extremely difficult for him to speak, or do many activities that most of us would consider everyday basics. In an attempt to prepare the Hoyts for what was to come in the future, many of the doctors and therapists told Rick's parents *not* to expect too much for what he would be able to do in life. Despite this advice, the Hoyts found a doctor who encouraged them to dream big for Rick and provided him with every recommended therapy. And then a breakthrough occurred, at the age of 11, he was fitted with a computer that assisted communication. With it, he could share full thoughts and hold conversations and it became *abundantly* clear that Rick was indeed intelligent and very aware of the world. This was the first miracle.

Rick's ability to use this communication device led to a *watershed* moment in the lives of the entire Hoyt family. In 1977, at age 15, Rick asked his father if they could *run* a race together. A little puzzled because his son could not really run and because *he* was not a runner either, Dick asked his son what he meant. He told his father that a boy at school became paralyzed and his family, through the race, wanted to show him that life could still be meaningful with a disability. Rick was inspired by the event and wanted to participate himself. The problem was that Dick, by his own admission, was *not* in very good shape. And he would have to run the race while *pushing* Rick, an almost fully grown teenager, which seemed a daunting task. But inspired by his son's compassion, he agreed, and they raced. It was tough, but they finished. At the end of the race, Rick, beaming with a *big* smile on his face, said to his father, "Dad, when I'm racing, it feels like I'm *not* handicapped. I want to do that again."

That was all the inspiration Dick needed. The very next day he began training: he added a bag of cement to the racing wheelchair to simulate his son's weight and ran *every day* pushing that wheelchair in order to get in shape. Soon they entered another race and then another and then another. By 1980, three years later, they ran for the first time in the *Boston Marathon* -- 26 miles. And it didn't stop there: Dick entered them in triathlons, swimming while pulling his son in a dinghy and cycling with him in a special seat on the front of his bike. Triathlons turned into Ironmans, which is basically a *140* mile triathlon! And if that wasn't enough, in 1992 Dick and Rick biked and ran across much of the length of the U.S., completing a full 3,735 miles in 45 days. All in all, from 1977 through March 2016, the Hoyts had competed in 1,130 endurance events, including 72 marathons and six Ironman Triathlons. They ran the Boston Marathon 32 times. Their partnership and determination inspired millions to believe that they *too* could climb over barriers in *all* areas of life that they previously believed were unscalable, including helping to make *huge* strides for inclusion across sports and other activities. For their accomplishments, Team Hoyt was inducted into the Ironman Hall of Fame, had a bronze statue created in their honor that was dedicated near the start of the Boston Marathon, and were recognized by ESPN on the ESPY Award show in 2013.

To understand their impact in a more *personal* way, Dave McGill-vray, who later became one of Dick's closest friends and Team Hoyt's manager, tells the story of the Hoyts in this manner, "Here I was running the marathon and this guy *pushing a wheelchair* starts to *pass* me. Now I wasn't planning on winning the race but I *was* an experienced marathoner and I thought to myself, I am not letting a guy pushing a wheelchair beat me. So we ran next to each other for much of the race and they inspired me to dig deeper and to realize I could do more. After that race, that was it, I wanted to be a part of whatever *they* were doing". He went on to say, "I always kidded Rick by saying that he had an *advantage* over the rest of us. He asked me, "How so?" I said, "Well, you have your secret weapon with you all the time, right in front of you, your inspiration and motivation. He is like a magnet, pulling and pulling you forward. If and when you get tired, there he is, inspiring you, pushing you, and cheering you on! That's just not fair . . ."

Dick passed away in 2021 and Rick just passed away this May. Their inspirational acts in life leave us a legacy that teaches us *so* many important life lessons: to love others with a full heart through how we *treat* them, to live a life of giving, to see life as an opportunity to realize goals and dreams and *not* as a set of obstacles holding us back, and to understand the power of making the effort to *include* people and how such inclusion can *transform* a life for the better.

And, the story of the Hoyts also reminds us of the important truth that inspiration is a *powerful* force in making our lives more meaningful and giving us the ability, guidance and motivation to be and do what we **never thought we could**

have before. We *need* moments, events, and people, to *shake us* out of our everyday existence of putting one step in front of the other, to raise up our eyes to see possibilities previously unseen, to walk paths we didn't even know existed. Each one of us needs these special moments, like when Rick asked his father to run a race with him, or when Dave experienced the amazing feat of this unique father-son duo as they passed him during the race, or *even* when Dick heard his friend Dave reflect on the way *he* saw Rick -- as a source of such incredible motivation and drive. *Or* the millions who witnessed the love, bravery and determination of Team Hoyt, which inspired *them* to reach for something greater as well. These are the opportunities for inspiration that *jolt* us into living life with more purpose and into being the best versions of ourselves - versions we often didn't even know were possible. For inspiration, leads to motivation. It not only opens our eyes but gives us the energy to move towards that new vision, in pursuit of that new goal, which we had never contemplated or dreamed we could realize.

And for us, today, this is indeed the *perfect* time to reflect, to dream and to find that inspiration. What are *your* dreams? What do *you* wish you could do that always seemed too hard because of the perceived obstacles? To achieve more and grow, it is important to develop a vision of where you want to go, to create some goals you wish to achieve that bring you closer to realizing that vision. And inspiration can help you in both endeavors, forming the vision and motivating us to take the steps to make that vision a reality.

So today I want to give you three models for finding inspiration: leave taking, being inspired by others, and the inspiration of daily blessings. All three of which are reflected in our Jewish tradition.

Leave taking: the thing about inspiration that is often misunderstood, is that inspiration does *not* usually just happen *to* us -- it must be *sought*. While I can't deny that sometimes it *seems* to occur *to* us, more often than not, inspiration can only be found if we *look* for it, are *open* to it, or at least put ourselves in an environment where we would be more likely to experience it. As famous author Jack London wrote, "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club". For example, take all of *us* right now. Where are *we* today? We could have gone through our normal comfortable routine. But instead we *chose* to be here, in synagogue (or on livestream), marking a special time, seeing people we don't always see, praying, thinking and learning in purposeful ways that are uncharacteristic to our *normal* days. We hear and sing melodies that are evocative, listen to messages from our rabbis and others that are (hopefully) thought-provoking. We engage in discussions with people around us that are often intriguing. And we are given time to think and reflect, a *rare* commodity in today's world. *All* of these experiences are some of the very ingredients required

for inspiration. A *purposeful* choice to take ourselves *out* of our ordinary routine and behavior, and place ourselves in a *different* environment that can lead to *different* experiences, opens us up to new possibilities and new sources of energy. Rabbi Alan Lew z"l, prominent author of *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, called this process "leave taking" and noted that many of our Biblical heroes modeled this: they encountered Gd and a higher purpose only after *breaking* routine and leaving the ordinary. Abraham and Sarah left *everything they knew* to follow Gd to Israel in *parshat Lech Lecha*, Jacob left *home* and only *then* experienced the Divine through his famous dream of the ladder, Moses went to the *wilderness* where *he* encountered Gd at the burning bush, and Miriam, Moses and the Jewish people embarked on the *Exodus* in order to experience revelation on Mt. Sinai. In each case, our Biblical ancestors' acts of seeking, leave-taking, and breaking their routine, led to incredible inspiration and growth. And this inspiration infused every day *after* with new meaning and significance.

I invite *you* now to reflect on the course of your own life: When would you say that you have last been inspired? What *was* it that inspired you? Did that inspiration change your life in any way? What did you do with that inspirational energy or with that new insight?

That takes me to number two, being inspired by others. For me, I am often most inspired when I witness, observe, or learn of people who make life choices that seem to make their own lives more difficult in order to help someone *else* make their lives *better*. For me, that kind of next level compassion that allows for such sacrifice is inspirational and helps me think about how *I* should treat others and love others more fully. This is part of what was so inspiring to me about the Hoyts.

Though often inspiration comes most from the people we know and love best. *My* most important source of inspiration is my wife, Erica. While I know she never ever wants attention called to this, sorry sweetheart, on a regular basis she changes her life to make the lives of others better. Just the other week, she was incredibly busy with her professional work, juggling all four kids schedules, had responsibilities with her volunteer leadership work at Beth El, Rochelle Zell Jewish High School and Camp Ramah, and then she got an email from the shul that someone needed a meal the next day. No hesitation. No assuming that someone else "less busy" would do it. She wrote back right away that she would make the meal. I know that meant giving something up for herself. I know that meant more hours in the kitchen and less sleep, but she saw a need and simply fulfilled it. And she does this all the time. And it is inspirational -- now I think of what she would do anytime someone asks *me* for help.

And now for the third source of inspiration - the inspiration of daily blessings. It is clear to me from research, personal experience and the wisdom of our texts, that our ability to be inspired is often a consequence of our mindset. If

we take on the mindset of a seeker, who proactively *chooses* to search for opportunities to be inspired, to improve, and to grow, we *will* be much more likely to be able to do all three. There is literally a world full of inspiration, sometimes we just need to *see* it that way, to focus on the amazement, learn from it and let it motivate us. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the preeminent Jewish authors and thinkers of the 20th century wrote, “Our *goal* should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes *nothing* for granted. *Everything* is phenomenal; *everything* is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual *is* to be amazed.” This is indeed a lofty spiritual goal, not always achieved. But, according to Heschel, should always be *sought*. So to capture this sentiment and make this more tangible, in our morning prayers, *Birchot Hashachar*, we recognize the miracles of the every day by reciting (and I will paraphrase), “We thank you Gd for making us in your image, for the ability: to be free, to see, to stand; for clothes, for basic needs, for energy, and for courage.” Through the lens of this prayer and through the lens of Heschel, each blessing in our lives has the potential to inspire. And through prayer, meditation or just a *little* cognitive adjustment of our mindset, we can allow these everyday blessings to motivate us, lift our spirits, cultivate gratitude, and help us grow as people. As nobel prize winning Chemist Nikolay Semyonov wrote, “No inspiration comes from nowhere. No invention is based on nothing. You always need to be tuned up and be ready to start receiving the energy you look for”. There is an incredible parallel to these lessons about inspiration embedded in our current holiday cycle. We gather together over the High Holidays to effectuate *Teshuvah*, a word that essentially represents our goal to improve, to grow and to better ourselves and the world around us. We come together over these holidays around this notion of *teshuvah*, to be inspired by each other, by our liturgy, by our community, by our sacred writings and by our traditions. The great Rav Kook, first Chief Rabbi of what was then Palestine, and a great thinker, writer and spiritual seeker, wrote in his master work *Orot Hateshuvah* that there are two kinds of teshuva, the first of which I want to talk about today and the second I will save for Yom Kippur. The first is *Pitumit*, from the Hebrew word *pitom*, or sudden. This kind of teshuvah creates a transformative experience of reflection, awareness and growth, which comes in a moment of inspiration. “Sudden Teshuvah” is like the type of inspiration that occurred to Rick Hoyt in that moment when his son told him that while he was racing he didn’t feel handicapped. Boom! Something clicked and he realized life was going to be different. He had a new goal that motivated him and he went to work the very next day. Or like when Isaac Newton witnessed an apple falling from a tree, and he was able to step back and see this simple everyday phenomenon, and be inspired. Wow! His inspiration turned into his formulation of the law of universal gravitation. Or like when people across the globe heard Rev. Martin Luther King deliver his “I have a dream” speech.

Amazement! Because of his leadership thousands of lives were changed as his words motivated them to take part in creating a future with greater equality for all people.

We all need *Teshuvah Petumit*, transformational moments of inspiration that open our hearts, lift our eyes and power our will, to grow, to change and to seek new and deeper meaning. Sometimes this occurs when we witness the bravery, compassion, genius or strength of others, like Team Hoyt, Martin Luther King or often the people closest to us: like our spouses, kids, siblings, grandparents or fellow community members. Sometimes this can happen when we change our mindset, so that we become inspired by the *everyday* blessings in life. Like, the ability to see, smell, hear, or feel love. Like the blessings of food, shelter, friends, or family. For me, prayer, meditation and spending time in nature certainly help with that. And sometimes it is through leave taking: placing ourselves in special moments that create different experiences: like a trip to Israel, or a Jewish meditation or wilderness retreat, coming to shul or taking a class, or reading a new book, or like today, celebrating a holiday that is embedded with meaning and rituals *designed* to give you the opportunity for the reflection, thinking, connection and stimulation that often leads to inspiration. All of these opportunities are at our disposal; inspiration is out there for those who seek it, and our ability to change, grow, transform, realize dreams, and deepen our lived experience, is firmly within our grasp.

So my *bearcha* for us today is that we will all be blessed now, and in the year to come, with the wisdom to be open to the inspiration displayed daily in the blessings of life. That we are blessed to be able to appreciate the beauty of each other and be inspired by each other's courage, wisdom, righteousness, determination and love. That we are blessed to see the wisdom and power of our wonderful tradition, which gives us the tools, opportunity and sacred space to seek transcendence and raise our eyes to the sublime. That we are blessed to be inspired in *all* of these ways to motivate us to overcome obstacles we thought unmovable, realize dreams we thought impossible, and to grow in ways we never contemplated, in order to become *better*, more compassionate people, who can bring joy and fulfillment to our own lives as well as to all of those around us. Dick and Rick Hoyt did it and our tradition assures us, so can we! Shanah Tovah - *Ken Yehi Ratzon!*