

Yom Kippur 5786/2025, Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE

From Sedation to Salvation *(Kol Nidrei Night)*

A congregant named Michael calls up his rabbi before the High Holidays with a serious dilemma: “Rabbi”, he says, “I have this huge conflict. You know how big a Red Sox fan I am. Well, the first playoff game with the Red Sox falls out this year on Yom Kippur, on Kol Nidrei Eve! What am I supposed to do? The rabbi immediately answers: “That’s what Cloud DVR is for. Just record it!” “OK, says Michael, “That’s great advice, thanks Rabbi. The next week, on Kol Nidrei eve, the congregant is no-where to be found. The next morning the Rabbi approaches Michael in synagogue and asks him: “Where were you last night?” “Oh Rabbi, I totally took your advice. The game was great and I’m really looking forward to watching the video of your Kol Nidrei Service.

So, thank you all for being here tonight, *in person*.

Jews didn’t invent the Olympics, but a Jew did invent the Paralympics.

By 1933, Dr. Ludwig Guttmann was already considered the top neurosurgeon in all of Germany. When Hitler came to power and Jews were excluded from their professions and Dr. Guttmann was banned from practicing medicine, he was allowed to work only at the Jewish Hospital in Breslau. On the day after Kristallnacht - in November 1938 - when the Nazis were beginning to deport Jews to concentration camps, Dr. Guttmann ordered his staff to admit anyone to the hospital, without question, which he justified on a case-by-case basis with the Gestapo. Dr. Guttmann saved sixty patients – sixty of his Jewish brothers and sisters from deportation to the camps.

In 1939, Dr. Guttmann fled Germany to England with his wife and two children and they settled in the Jewish community of Oxford. His medical skills were immediately recognized by the British government, and particularly his expertise in treating paraplegics - those who had sustained spinal cord injuries. The government asked him to establish the National Spinal Injury Center at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire, the first of its kind in Great Britain.

When Dr. Guttmann arrived, it was assumed that since paraplegics were incurable, they had to be kept heavily sedated, bedridden and basically left to die. The mortality rate at the time for paraplegics was 80 percent. They were treated like hopeless cripples with no encouragement to return to any kind of normal human life. Life expectancy in those days for paraplegics was three months. The accepted medical practice was sedation, bedridden and left to die.

Guttmann said no. There’s no reason, he argued, they shouldn’t work, marry, have families and real life. Through sheer will, determination and medical genius Guttmann brought his patients back to life.

He began by reducing their pain killers because the sedation kept them half unconscious and prevented them from being active and alive. Guttmann made them sit up in bed which was painful. He required them to do exercise and got an instructor from the army to throw a ball at them. Guttmann got them out of bed into wheelchairs and motivated the hospital staff to play athletic games with them while in their wheelchairs. Little by little they started coming back to life.

At first, everyone thought Guttman was crazy including the other doctors, the nurses and the army. There's this one scene in the film that the BBC produced on Dr. Guttman's life, where one of his colleagues, a fellow doctor calls for Guttman to be disciplined and says to him: "Don't you see they're cripples? Don't you see they're never going to lead a normal life, who do you think they are? Guttman famously answered: "Who do I think they are? The best of men".

With great determination Guttman kept going and his patients, young men who had sustained spinal cord injuries in the army, kept improving. But it was painful. They craved the drugs and the sleep which Guttman was depriving them, and they grew tired of working harder. It was difficult and painful, and they just wanted to be left alone. But Guttman wouldn't give up. He saw that as painful as it was, his patients were rediscovering their love for life.

Guttman realized that sport and competition were essential to motivate his patients and so he developed a local competition which ultimately became a national one. In 1948, the first international competition - a parallel Olympics - took place which grew in popularity until in 1960 the first Paralympic Games took place in Rome. Since then, each year, approximately 5,000 athletes from over 165 countries participate in the Paralympics. In 2012, Guttman's daughter, Eva, presided over the games and even held a Kabbalat Shabbat service for the Jewish members of the teams.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, spoke of Dr. Guttman in a sermon and he asked: What was Guttman, against the advice of all his colleagues and associates, doing to these young men?

Guttman was a religious Jew who understood not only the significance of human life but that sometimes life can only be achieved through a painful process. By pushing his patients, he brought them back into the *Sefer Hachayim*, into the Book of Life which we all pray on Yom Kippur to be inscribed.

Dr. Guttman told his patients: If you want to live, you have gotten out of your comfort zone. It will be difficult, it will be painful, but in doing so you will live. If they were lying down, he told them to sit up. If they sat up, he tried getting them into wheelchairs. It was uncomfortable, it was painful, but it was only through that struggle that he gave them their lives back and reinstated them in the *Sefer Hachayim*.

"*Adam ain tzadik b'aretz*" - there is no one on earth who never sins. All of us, continues Rabbi Sacks, have within our soul, within our spiritual being, some injury, some missing limb - muscles that we have allowed to atrophy due to neglect. We aren't connected to G-d the way we should be. We don't pray the way we should, we don't study as much Torah as we could, we don't observe Hashem's mitzvot the way we ought to. And so, in a sense, we are *all* wounded. We've all sustained some kind of injury to the soul. And year after year we accept our condition. We tell ourselves that's who we are and don't try to change us. Sometimes we are so sedated by our physical humdrum lives, by our vices and habits, that we don't even feel our pain. We just stay focused getting through the day, the week, the month and a year goes by. And then on Yom Kippur G-d comes to us, his wounded souls, like Guttman came to his patients, and Hashem says to us 'don't just lie there and accept yourself the way you are. Sit up, get out of bed – Tefillah, Teshuva and Tzedakah - pray, return, give of yourself, learn, observe Shabbat ... keep my commandments.

Leave your comfort zone. Do something you've never done before. Get out of your familiar territory and work on yourself!

The Ramchal in his classic work “Derech Hashem: The Way of G-d” contrasts *this* world with the World to Come, teaching that this world is a world of earning, a world in which we work on ourselves to grow. This is why we and our world are created so imperfectly and why this is the world of observing mitzvot because mitzvot are designed to help us fix ourselves and the world around us. This place, this world is designed for us to grow. The World to Come on the other hand is perfect and so there are no mitzvot, just basking in the presence of G-d, enjoying whatever spiritual level we achieved in this world through the performance of those mitzvot. And so, to use this world for what it was designed, we must get out of our comfort zone. Staying the same is easier, remaining sedated is easier. It’s uncomfortable to make changes, but how else can we grow?

When G-d came to Moshe with his speech impediment and told him to go before the most powerful man in the world and demand the release of his people, it wasn’t easy. How much self-doubt did Moshe need to overcome? Or when Rachel, a young woman who Akiva wished to marry, and she wouldn’t do so until he studied - it must have been difficult. Similarly, it must have been painful for a grown man to go, for Akiva to go and learn the Aleph Bet with five-and six-year-olds, but because he did it, because he left his comfort zone, he became one of the greatest rabbinic figures ever.

It hurts to leave our familiar territory to do something for the first time, especially when those around us aren’t involved in that kind of activity.

It’s not easy to put the phone down and join a Shabbat Dinner when none of our friends are doing that, to wake up early on a Saturday morning to pray when it’s so much easier to sleep in and yet G-d tells us to do it. Hashem commands us to observe His mitzvot, irrespective of our background. Because getting out of our comfort zone is the only way to grow and ladies and gentlemen - we were born to grow! That’s what it means to be alive. Staying the same is comfortable but it’s not living.

I am privileged to have watched so many of you truly living - bringing more of G-d, Torah and Israel into your life. And I have such respect for you because it’s hard when so many others are not doing the same thing, but don’t give it up. Guttman never gave up on his patients and G-d never gives up on us.

So, take a chance with a new mitzvah. Pick one area *bein adam l’makom*, in your relationship with G-d and one *bein adam l’chaveiro* – in your relationship with your fellow man. Pick a mitzvah that takes you out of your comfort zone.

In the man to G-d realm, maybe it’s Tefillah (prayer) – join us on Shabbat if you are accustomed to only come on the High Holidays and if you already come on Shabbat, start praying during the week: begin your day with the Birchot Hashachar (Morning Blessings) and the Shema. If you’re doing that already, there’s also Mincha and Ma’ariv. Maybe consider purchasing a pair of Tefillin and commit to putting them on once a week or join us Wednesday nights to learn. Let us find you a chavruta (study partner) or come to my Basic Judaism class which will be based on my new book *The Jewish Experience: Discover the Soul of Jewish Thought and Practice!*

Whatever it is and wherever you are in your journey, pick something new and stick with it. And remember, if we’re capable of more than we need to strive for more. If we say to ourselves: I’m just not one of those Jews who prays regularly or studies Torah, or I’m not the type to volunteer or donate or raise money for causes - that’s just not me.

That my friends is selling ourselves short.

There's a story told of a professor who stood before his class of 30 senior molecular biology students, about to pass out the final exam. He tells his students: "I've been privileged to be your instructor this semester, and I know how hard you have all worked to prepare for this test. And because I know you're all capable of understanding the material, I'm prepared to offer an automatic "B" to anyone who would prefer not to take the final." A number of the students jumped up to thank the professor and happily left the classroom. The professor looked at the handful of students who remained, and offered again, "Any other takers? This is your last chance." One more student decided to go. Seven students remained. The professor closed the door and took attendance. Then he handed out the final exam. There were two sentences typed on the paper: "Congratulations, you have just received an "A" in this class. Keep believing in yourself."

Let's strive for greatness and holiness in the coming year:

In the realm of mitzvot *bein adam l'chavero* – in our relationship with our fellow human being, maybe it's tzedakah, pushing ourselves to donate beyond our comfort zone. Or being more careful to refrain from speaking ill of others? Maybe we plan our next vacation trip to Israel via Birthright to do some volunteering. MJE will be going next summer but Birthright has heavily subsidized trips all year round to help farmers and other businesses in Israel that need manpower due to so many Israelis serving in the army.

Let's pick one mitzvah in each of the two areas and over the next 24 hours as we pray, ponder how we can make that new activity a part of our life in the coming year. In doing so, we will have created a *zechut*, a spiritual merit for ourselves to advocate on our behalf this Yom Kippur. A reason for Hashem to bless us with another year is because we have shown that we are open to growing and that we will no longer remain stagnant and sedated. That we will pay more attention to our injured soul. It may be uncomfortable but, in doing so, we will be writing ourselves into the *Sefer Hachayim* - into the book reserved for those who are not only *physically* alive but who are alive spiritually. G-d can give us physical life but only we can suffuse it with purpose and meaning. May the New Year bring all of us good health, blessing and peace and B"H the opportunity to really live.

G'mar Chatima Tova