

We have a lot of endurance athletes in this community. We have marathoners, triathletes, and multiple sport athletes but, and I say this meaning no offense, I don't know if any of you could tackle the Barkley Marathon.

The Marathon is run deep in the forests of Eastern Tennessee. It is thought to be the most brutal footrace in the world. The route is long and indistinguishable, the inclines are steep, and the terrain unforgiving. The race – between 100 and 130 miles long with 63,000 feet of elevation – has a dropout rate of 99%; prior to this year, there had been no finishers since 2017. This year, three more successful finishers added their names to a list of 19 people who have ever completed a race that has been around since the late 70s.

Aurelien Sanchez was the first Frenchman to complete the race this year. After more than 58 hours straight of racing with only 15 minutes of sleep therein, Sanchez achieved one of his lifelong dreams. After calling it the hardest thing he's ever done, Sanchez shared that he was already thinking about running it again next year. On why he does things like this, Sanchez shared the following in an interview:

“I had a lot of failed projects in the last six years. It was very difficult, very tough to fail in some of the ways I failed, but I learned **out of it**. I learned that I was not the strongest person ever, that I had to deal with my weaknesses.”

Doing hard things gives us a real window into our weaknesses and provides an opportunity of growth. Notice his language. He learned out of it. That in fact, out of hard stuff, out of failure, we can grow from it through wisdom. Most of us aren't going to run marathons, ultramarathons, or the Barkley, but we do like challenging ourselves...which reminds me about Betty Crocker, Build a Bear, and AirBnB of course.

What links this unlikely trio of commodities? The Effort Paradox. While anecdotally we might say when given a choice, humans and non-human animals alike tend to avoid effort. Neuroscientists suggest that the opposite is also true. Not only can the same outcomes be more rewarding if we apply more (not less) effort, sometimes we select options precisely because they require effort.

We see this in all of these entities. When instant cake mixes were introduced in the 1950s as part of a broader trend to simplify the life of the American housewife by minimizing manual labor, housewives were initially resistant: the mixes made cooking *too* easy, making their labor and skill seem undervalued. As a result, manufacturers changed the recipe to require adding an egg; while there are likely several reasons why this change led to greater subsequent adoption, infusing the task with labor appeared to be a crucial ingredient.

Build-a-Bear offers people the “opportunity” to construct their own teddy bears, charging customers a premium even as production costs are foisted upon them, while certain air bnb and similar platforms offer “haycations,” in which consumers pay to harvest the food they eat during their stay on a farm.

They recognize something in the human psyche. As much as we often take the easy way out, we also recognize the power in doing the hard stuff. There is real, long lasting value in that type of work.

This is an ancient concept as well. During this period of time during the counting of the Omer, some Jewish people have the tradition of studying Pirkei Avot, a collection from the Mishnah that contains many timeless pieces of wisdom. One of my favorites (4:14-15) says as follows:

רַבִּי נְהוֹרַאי אוֹמֵר, הָיִי גוֹלָה לְמַקּוֹם תּוֹרָה, וְאַל תֹּאמַר שֶׁהִיא תְּבֵא אֶתְרִי, שְׂחַבְרִיהּ יִקְיְמוּהָ בְיָדֶךָ. וְאַל בִּינְתָךְ
(אֵל תִּשְׁעֶן) (משלי ג

Rabbi Nehorai says: Exile yourself to a place of Torah, and do not say that it will follow after you; your colleagues will make it yours. Do not rely on your understanding.

From the jump, it is a jarring teaching. Exile yourself. It's a verb we normally associate with negative things. To be in exile means to be away from your center and your home. To be in exile means to be in pain. Yet here, we are told to actively seek it out. And when we do it, the place to which we are exiled should be a place of Torah, which I understand with a capital "T." Send yourself to a place where you will be fully immersed in gleaning wisdom.

Clearly the second clause implies that you have to work for your Torah. Don't assume that it'll come to you. Commentators range the spectrum of how they think this teaching applies. One of my favorites comes from Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum a former clergy and friend to many in this community who says the following:

“Never feel too much at home. Everyone who lives a life of Torah must always be ready for the possibility of travel. Don’t think that it can be found where you are, for the world is the Torah’s home and so it wanders. So too you must accept even being exiled to a place of Torah...Don’t imagine your own intellect will hold it in place. The Torah is a profound power in a constant state of ongoing development and anyone who has decided to live their lives bound to it will always have to be prepared and ready for unending travel.”

What it means to be a Jew is to always be a bit uncomfortable. We should have a home, but we shouldn’t just rest there. Our first model from the Torah is born as a Jew on a journey, into tough circumstances and so are we. If the Torah is always changing, then we need to always be changing. That means that we shouldn’t settle for the easy way out in life. We should be leaning into challenging communal conversations. We should be in relationships with people and communities with whom we don’t always see eye to eye. We should be experimenting in our education and programming such that even with missteps we are growing. That is part of what it means to be in exile.

It’s a fitting topic to think about as we bring another young Jew into the fold of Jewish adulthood.

Who and what are we supposed to be when we grow up?

We live in a world where so much is so instantaneous. Much of that is good. Our connectivity gives us immense potential. But I also worry we're losing out on some of the grit and challenge of life.

The majority of success in those areas comes with the help of others, because we can't do it alone.

Commenting on the clause from the Mishnah that our peers will help us establish our wisdom in this place of exile, the Vilna Gaon relates it to the Talmudic question on the meaning of the Proverb "iron sharpens iron."

When those immersed in the journey of Torah learn together, they sharpen one another.

It doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, I think that's part of the intention behind it. When we're in exile together, it's hard work. We can't rely solely on ourselves because we'd crumble. Being in it with others allows us to come out stronger because of the sharpening we're doing. Our rugged individualism can only power us for so long. Especially in a place of exile, we only survive with the help of others.

Studies continue to bear this out. Psychologist Dr. Veronika Job authored a study at the University of Vienna in which 121 people were outfitted with electrodes to monitor their cardiovascular activity as a physical measure of how hard their brains were working on a standard memory task.

One group of participants was rewarded based on how much effort they exerted. Another group was rewarded with random amounts of money regardless of their effort.

Then, the same participants had to complete a different cognitive challenge of solving math problems and were allowed to pick the difficulty. Crucially, the participants were told they would not get paid for this portion of the experiment.

Despite this lack of extrinsic reward, the participants who were previously rewarded for their efforts decided to tackle more difficult math problems compared with the participants who got random rewards.

This was a relatively small study whose effects are still being studied but in Job's words, it does seem to run counter to much of the reward based learning we teach in our education systems that could be more detrimental than we realize.

I don't think this means we should go full bore in everything we do. After all, we have seen the past few years the effects of burnout and how much hustle culture tends to grind people down to nothing. But I do think we can find a bit more balance in this dynamic, especially being Jewish.

To live life as a Jew is not meant to be easy. Thousands of years of history reflect that. But even on a daily basis, the struggle is apparent and maybe that's the point.

As R'Soloveitchik noted in his work *Halakbic Man* where he reflects on the imagery of Psalm 23:

“The path that eventually will lead to the *“green pastures”* and to the *“still waters”* is not the royal road, but a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at the traveler’s feet.”

Sound like a race you’ve heard of? The effort is much more important than the ends. Sure, Sanchez reached his goal but the work seemed even more impactful for him.

So run that race. Climb that mountain. Maybe don’t run the Barkley. But find something in between. Do it with others. Because doing the hard stuff in life, especially in partnership, tends to lead to a lot more growth than we might imagine. See you in exile.

Shabbat Shalom!

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