

# Shockingly, the Internet Did Not Give Rise to Procrastination

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I don't know about you, but I absolutely hate ledges. While I am pretty good with heights, and love the panoramic view, for example, from the top of Masada in Israel . . . standing at the edge of a cliff, or on the upper deck of the Empire State Building, or being in Chicago and stepping out onto the glass skydeck of the Willis tower looking out over the edge fills me with a sense of impending doom. I can't help but think: what if?

I'm sure you know exactly what I'm talking about. You've probably felt that same sensation in the pit of your stomach as the E train bears down upon you. You steady your feet. And you pray those feet remain firmly planted as you look up and watch the bravest person you have ever witnessed casually walk that scary yellow line on the front of the platform as the train blows by him.

Needless to say, this fear did not serve me well a few years back while on a visit to my friend Elazar's moshav in the Arava. Bored on a Shabbat afternoon in February, Elazar decided that we should take a hike along the Faran ridge. "Don't worry", he said to me, "Yarden loves this hike." Yarden, Elazar's daughter, was four years old so I figured I'd be okay.

The hike began simply enough; we heard the click clack of our boots on the dry Arava soil under our feet as we ascended the mountain ridge, slowly, very slowly at first. But somewhere within the first half hour of this simple hike, I began to notice that the rounded mountains to either side began to drop off rather precipitously. I kept my eyes focused down on my feet and kept walking slower and slower.

Another twenty minutes passed and I now began to notice how pieces of the mountain began to tumble down toward the valley floor. It was then that I saw it, or rather, heard it, since I rarely looked up to see where we were going, when Elazar yelled back to me: "this is Den Den's favorite part!" I had hoped he was referring to the end of our journey, but no. Elazar was referring to the portion of our hike where we were to walk along a vertiginous ledge, pressing our bodies against the side of the rock-face in order to squeeze past.

As I approached the ledge, I prayed that my feet would remain steady and that my heart, which by that time was pumping furiously, wouldn't jump out of my chest. I slowly inched my way on to the ledge, pushing myself farther and farther along the frightening path. The time it took to cross the ledge might have only been a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity in my mind. My head was pounding. As I sweated and pushed myself through, I made a decision to change my focus. I decided at that moment to take a new tact. Instead of looking down at my feet

toward what I was certain was the doom that awaited me below, I would instead look up. I would turn around and start on a new path with a new focus.

Suddenly, I was no longer concentrating on what could go wrong if my feet slipped; instead, I became engrossed by what I saw: the most beautiful gold, red, yellow, and silver light, radiating off the hills of Jordan. I no longer wanted to be out of the moment and wishing I could be anywhere else. I was no longer fixated on just getting to the other side. Instead, I was in the moment, oddly enjoying the experience.

Some might call what happened a stunning realization or awareness mindfulness: a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. As for me, I think I just stopped worrying about worrying – I stopped psyching myself out of what might happen, and instead started to think about what was happening.

Let me be candid. I'm sure that like many of you, I often spent a lot of time, probably way too much time, in the "what ifs" and not enough time in the "what is." I didn't know this about myself for a while, but I'm a perfectionist. Growing up I expected a lot from those I worked with, and even more from myself. But the truth is that perfectionism often underlies a fear of failure. I used to set very high standards for myself, ones that no person could ever meet. And a result, I would spend more time worrying about what might happen when I didn't succeed than actually sitting down and doing the work.

Philosopher Richard Taylor says life by itself, is meaningless—what gives it meaning, however, is a sense of purpose: the will to survive. How many of us actually attempt to make our dreams a reality? The trouble is that very often, before even beginning to work to achieve our dream, many of us have doubts about our ability to do what we love. "Can I really do this?" "I'll be how old by the time this actually happens?" We are apprehensive and hesitant to attempt to change and try out something different.

Self-sabotage is any kind of behavior or thought that keeps us from achieving what we desire most in life. One characteristic trait of self-sabotaging behavior is a reluctance on our part to take up new challenges. It is the conflict that exists between our conscious desires and unconscious wants—or as Sigmund Freud would describe it, the struggle between our identity versus our ego—that manifests itself in self-sabotage patterns.

In short, our self-sabotaging behavior originates from our fear of failure. The overwhelming sentiment growing inside of us, gnawing at us, and saying, "You cannot do this," is what, time after time, deters us from our goal of achieving the greatness we are born to do.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of change. What can we begin to do differently to stop sabotaging ourselves?

The first, and perhaps most important thing we can do is to realize that "regret is worse than failure."

From the age of 10 or so, I always had the inkling that I wanted to become a Rabbi. Though I studied a variety of subjects, and ultimately majored in Archaeology in college, I knew that ultimately I was going to work in a Reform congregation. Following graduation, I spent a few years as a youth director in Westchester and New York City, resume building and ostensibly checking off the boxes and the years until I would apply to rabbinical school. I went to and eventually worked at Jewish summer camp, I was involved in Jewish communities, and I knew the right people in the Jewish world. I applied to Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in the Fall of 2007 and, as happened to so many others before me, was promptly rejected from rabbinical school – no reason given, just heartache and heartbreak.

Those were some hard months and difficult years. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was afraid. I was afraid that I would remain lost forever, unsure of myself, unsure of my path. I felt I had let so many people down, my parents, my friends, and my mentors. I was adrift and disoriented. Three long years passed before I even considered the possibility of reapplying. I was afraid to fail.

One day, while sitting in an office of a mentor of mine, he said to me, “regret is worse than failure.” Imagine yourself in sixty or seventy years, sitting with your grandchild, what would you tell them? Would you tell them that you were afraid to pursue your dreams or would you tell them that in spite of it all, in spite of all the fear and all the pain, you picked yourself back up and turned your dream into a reality.

Now, when I fear of failure enters my consciousness I just think about regret, and I stop it from entering my mind. As best-selling parenting and children's book author L.R. Knost writes: “When lying in bed at night and regrets from the day come to steal your sleep: ‘I should have’ ‘If only I'd’ ‘I wish I'd’ . . . grab one of them and turn it into an ‘I will’ and sleep peacefully knowing tomorrow will be a better day.”

A second way that we can stop sabotaging ourselves is to acknowledge our avoidance and focus on moving forward. I wasn't always exactly what you might call a proactive individual. I might have been called a bit of a dawdler, a dragger of feet, someone who might be referred to as a procrastinator. There it is. I said it. I am a recovering procrastinator. It has taken me years to even admit it, but I suppose, especially with procrastination, that is kind of the point.

Shockingly, the Internet did not give rise to procrastination. Instagram, Facebook, BuzzFeed – these are all recent symptoms of the greater sickness that is procrastination. People have struggled with procrastination, or “habitual hesitation” for thousands of years. The Greek poet Hesiod wrote in 80 BCE, “do not put your work off till tomorrow and the day after.” And the Roman consul Cicero called procrastination “hateful” in the conduct of affairs.”

The truth is that procrastination isn't just hateful. It's also harmful. According to the Association for Psychological Science, “in research settings, people who procrastinate have higher levels of stress and lower well-being.”<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University

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<sup>1</sup> JavaScriptKit.com, By. "Why Wait? The Science Behind Procrastination." Association for Psychological Science RSS. Accessed September 06, 2016.

notes, “It really has nothing to do with time-management,” he says. “As I tell people, to tell the chronic procrastinator to just do it would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, cheer up.”

For each of us, there are many moments in our life when we have to make choices. Some are easy, and some are hard. Sometimes we immediately know the right choice and sometimes we have no idea how to proceed. For many of us, making a choice feels as though we are walking on a ledge – on one side we find ourselves upright and sure-footed and on the other we feel the potential for a precipitous drop.

When I was in my darkest hours of procrastination, this was the trope that played over and over in my head. It was fear, fear that I might not succeed. Fear that I might not do my best. That fear would cripple me, freeze me, and I would put any action off to the very end. I would procrastinate. This is one of the major reasons why we procrastinate: fear of failure. What happens if I try my hardest, and I still fail? Is it worse if I don't try and end up failing? We protect ourselves from the possibility of failing. If we fill our schedules with busy-work we will have legitimate reason for not getting around to the more important tasks. Perfectionism often underlies the feeling of failure: We must remember that we are human. We are not perfect. We cannot be perfect.

And when it comes to the reasons why we procrastinate, sometimes the opposite of fear of failure is true. A fear of success can be just as scary. Sometimes we procrastinate because we are afraid of what will happen if we start on a new path and actually achieve success. Maybe we are afraid that if we succeed, more will be expected of us in the future.

Self-sabotage is not an act; it's a process, a complex, tragic process that pits people against their own thoughts and impulses. Though we all make mistakes, a true self-saboteur continues to try to fix those mistakes by top-loading them with increasingly bad decisions. Addicts, for example, present a parade of excuses and delusional thinking while avoiding the painful, decisive action necessary to set their lives right. All too often we hear stories of talented individuals who, despite much potential, allowed drugs and alcohol to drag them down.<sup>2</sup>

I have told the story a few times about my friend Rob who I grew up with. Rob was 14 years old and at summer camp when he had my first experience with alcohol. He never saw people his age drinking before, but he wanted to fit in. Rob got completely drunk, felt amazing, and learned that he could erase my anxiety with alcohol. Rob was able to mask his negative feelings with a temporary solution that would lead down a dark path.

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<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2013/april-13/why-wait-the-science-behind-procrastination.html>.

<sup>2</sup> By Edward A. Selby, Timothy Pychyl, Hara Estroff Marano, Adi Jaffe Ph.D., Published on September 6, 2011 - Last Reviewed on June 9, 2016. "Self-Sabotage: The Enemy Within." Psychology Today. Accessed September 06, 2016. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201109/self-sabotage-the-enemy-within>.

From age 16 to about 20, Rob was a daily drinker and marijuana smoker. While they did an adequate job of keeping his social anxiety under control, Rob didn't realize how he had inadvertently narrowed my social circle to the other "druggie" people who wanted to pursue constant intoxication as much as he did. Rob continued to quick-fix his life away, compensating for the guilt of being too wasted to study or attend school by getting wasted or stoned yet again.

Self-sabotage is all about doing things that are bad for you and telling yourself you're actually improving things—even as the evidence piles up around you. It isn't about making a single mistake but rather a world-perception so inherently skewed that you can't see the destruction of your own choices. For Rob, that meant clinging to the idea that he needed drugs and alcohol to fit in and feel cool, even as many of the people he started out trying to impress were driven away by my behavior. Ultimately, Rob's perception of my own choices was so warped that it would take me from the relative mundanity of being a stoner burnout to something far darker.

In 2007, Rob tried to seek help. The clinic was full, come back the next day they said. Rob got high one last time that night.

There is also a third way to stop sabotaging ourselves. We must say to ourselves that patience and faith are our best friends. No one can determine the final destination of his or her life's journey. Therefore, the next best thing we can do is to keep our cool and have faith in ourselves. Whenever I feel I am detouring from my destiny, I try to remind myself that my journey is my path. It's a journey full of peaks and valleys, sunshine, rain, and, you guessed it, ledges. This faith allows me to explore uncharted territory with confidence. I am at ease with failing by trying to move forward. Because even when we fail, we do not lose it all—we can learn valuable lessons, and build the foundation for the next chapter in our lives.

Sometimes we are asked to wait for something even though it is promised to us. God promised Abraham he would be the father of many people. But at a very old age, he was still without any children. Abraham and Sarah knew what God had told them but they had yet to see evidence of the promise in their lives. How could Abraham become the father of many when he didn't have any children? Abraham and Sarah trusted God and they waited patiently. This doesn't mean they waited perfectly. They took matters into their own hands at times. But God's still fulfilled his promise, just on God's terms.

For Jews this is the season of change, of turning. We talk all the time about teshuvah – of seeking out moments and opportunities to repent and be different. Our liturgy speaks to us *Hashiveinu Adonai Elecha*, turn us to you God and we will turn. It is hard, it is difficult, but it is definitely rewarding. If we keep waiting and keep putting it off, we will never get to where we want to be – we will never become who we want to become.

If you find that you are not moving progressively in the direction of your dreams and goals, or that you begin projects and never finish them, most likely you are sabotaging yourself somewhere in the process. This could be from negative self-beliefs or unhealthy behaviors, a fear of failure or success, or a combination of these things. It is important to realize that sabotage will limit your ability to move toward your goals and the future that you desire.

Once you have come to the realization that you are self-sabotaging yourself, perhaps the next question you should ask yourself is why? Perhaps it is because you are impatient, perhaps it is because you are afraid of failure, or perhaps it is because you keep putting off the inevitable. Once you have identified the reason, you can start the process of moving forward –*of teshuvah*.

One of the best tools that I have found when embarking on self-discovery and change is a journal. A journal can help you to write out what you feel or think. In order for it to be most successful you have to trust yourself, write freely without worrying about grammatical mistakes, express yourself, know there are no rules, and know it is for your eyes only. In the beginning it can be awkward, even intimidating, Try it – you just may surprise yourself.

A second useful tool is to practice positive “mental chatter” – or even a mantra. Apparently we have over 50,000 thoughts a day! Self-talk is the conversation that we have going on in our head all day. Sometimes those thoughts are negative, often riddled with guilt of the past or anxiety of the future. What if you changed the way you spoke to yourself? Perhaps using a mantra like “I am not who I’m going to be. I am always becoming.” Once you begin to put this into practice, however, several things will happen. First, you will realize just how often you berate yourself. Secondly, you will begin to adjust the way you talk to yourself. Thirdly, you will begin to think differently about yourself, as your self-esteem and confidence builds.

And finally, a third tool to combat self-sabotage is the one sitting right in front of you. It is through that *machzor* that prayer book. It has long been documented that strong faith and prayer can affect our mental and physical self. It is believed that even just occasional private prayer and meditation help people live healthier and longer lives. The person who prays has an outlet for stress and anxiety. Blood pressure can improve.

But prayer has another benefit. When we take our focus away from ourselves and direct towards the Divine or the other, we allow ourselves to focus on someone or something outside of ourselves. This helps bring the prospect of hope when we feel inadequate. This will allow us to believe in ourselves again.

This is not the time when we want fear of failure or fear of success or fear that we don’t have the skills to be the reason we don’t do something. Fear is all we seem to hear about in the news today – but I, for one, will not allow it to control me. I will not allow distress to get in the way of what I need to do. I will not wait, and I pray that you will not either.

After all. What are you waiting for?