

Perseverance

The Brooklyn Bridge that spans over the river tying Manhattan Island to Brooklyn is truly a miracle bridge. In 1863, a creative engineer named John Roebling was inspired by an idea for this spectacular bridge. However, bridge building experts throughout the world told him to forget it: it could not be done.

Roebling convinced his son, Washington, who was an up and coming engineer, that the bridge could be built. The two of them developed the concepts of how it could be accomplished and how the obstacles could be overcome. With unharnessed excitement and inspiration, they hired their crew and began to build their dream bridge.

The project was only a few months under construction when a tragic accident on the site took the life of John Roebling and severely injured his son, Washington. Washington was left with permanent brain damage and was unable to speak or walk. Everyone felt that the project would have to be scrapped since the Roeblings were the only ones that knew how the bridge could be built.

Even though Washington was unable to move or talk, his mind was as sharp as ever, and he still had a burning desire to complete the bridge. An idea hit him as he lay in his hospital bed, and he developed a code for communication. All he could move was one finger, so he touched the arm of his wife with that finger, tapping out the code to communicate to her what to tell the engineers who were building the bridge.

For thirteen years, Washington tapped out his instructions with his finger until the spectacular Brooklyn Bridge was finally completed. Washington would not allow his physical limitation to get in the way of his task and his goal. He persevered despite the odds and despite the challenge. Today the bridge stands as a testament of that perseverance.

The ability to keep on keeping on, even when our efforts are met with disappointment or failure, is an ability that can make all the difference in the world. And that's the definition of perseverance: to keep on keeping on¹.

It comes from being committed to your goal, and from believing in yourself and in your goal's possibility. It borrows strength from resilience and optimism and brushes elbows with courage along the way.

Listen to the story of anyone who has reached a significant goal and you'll hear a drama about someone who had to rebound from setback after setback along the way. There's an old adage that says you can't defeat a man who refuses to quit, and it's as true today as when the words were first uttered.

In the world of Jewish values, the Hebrew for perseverance is *batmadah*. To persevere is to stay on task and never give up. Perseverance is when you show commitment, pride, and a positive attitude

¹ Minarik, Susan K. "Perseverance – The Power Key to Success." <http://www.positive-living-now.com/perseverance-power-key-to-success/>. Accessed August 2017

when completing tasks. Perseverance is the ability to stick to something and complete that task even though difficult circumstances may try to prohibit you from finishing.

Perseverance is whenever you keep trying in spite of obstacles or discouragement. The annals of inspiration are replete with tales of perseverance.

It's often easy to look at "successful" people and think that it's all come easily to them. In many cases this is not what happened. Colonel Sanders went to more than 1,000 places trying to sell his chicken recipe before he found an interested buyer. Thomas Edison tried almost 10,000 times before he succeeded in creating the electric light.

The original business plan for what was to become Federal Express was given a failing grade on Fred Smith's college exam. Ray Kroc, the late founder of McDonalds, knew this too. "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence" he once said. "Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with great talent. Genius will not. Un-rewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence, determination and love are omnipotent."

In all of these examples, the rewards are more of a material nature. Yet it is a common misconception that when it comes to spirituality, some people are just more religious by nature – just as some people are more successful by nature. Perseverance is the key to spiritual success too, it is the gateway to holiness.

So, why is it that perseverance is so beneficial? Rabbi Yisrael Rutman writes, "In secular affairs, perhaps, we can understand it more easily. Society tends to resist new ideas, so it is necessary to persevere, putting the new idea before the public over and over again, until that initial resistance is broken down. In science, it is often a matter of trial and error, and many experiments are needed before the right method is hit upon. In art and politics, it may be a matter of gaining experience and perfecting one's technique -- things that don't happen overnight."

But in prayer and spiritual pursuits why are we unable to bring that same level perseverance that we use to find success in business? What is getting in our way? I don't believe it is a lack of commitment, we are all here today to show our commitment. I don't believe it is because we don't want it – I think we all want it, but we just don't know how to find it.

Perhaps we just don't know where to begin. The acquisition of a spiritual practice is a slow drip – a little by little approach. There is no shortcut, no quick route, there is no WAZE for this. It takes practice and commitment and perseverance. Perhaps we might start by just saying one blessing a day. Start with the Shema, a simple yet profound statement of God's oneness. We are asked to offer 100 blessings a day, which really means to cultivate 100 times a day when we become aware of and appreciate small elements in ourselves and our world. If 100 seems like too much, can we just start with one?

A second and yet equally interesting idea of how we can persevere in pursuit of our spiritual practice is acting as if God is watching. If every day we monitor our actions, and reactions~ As if God is watching us, soon one day at a time it possible we will become people. Maybe even a person who could lead by example. Maybe we will become the person we have always wanted to be. A kind Person,

who knows of consequences. A Person who always strives to does the right thing. Because it comes from our heart. Our actions, and reaction will be purely from love.

Perhaps we might be able gain some level of understanding what it is that God wants from us. I ask myself that question every single, am I living up to my end of the bargain with God? Am I living my life as God wishes me to live? We may never find an answer to that question, but through the development of spiritual practice we may find peace with ourselves. How are we to find a place for God in our heart if it is full of confusion and inner struggle?

Torah teaches that God gives the person eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to understand, but it is the person who must choose to see and hear and understand². It takes time, energy, and commitment to develop a relationship with the Divine. But it takes us actually doing something. Judaism is a religion of deed not creed, our actions matter. We are taught, *na'aseh v'nishmah*³, first we will do it and then we will understand why. God gave us a heart to understand, it is upon us to do the work.

And finally, perhaps the greatest obstacle what stops us from stepping forward, from truly persevering beyond our thought capabilities it is an unwillingness to be vulnerable. Often we get in the way of ourselves. When faced with challenge in life, I myself have often been unwilling to admit vulnerability – that I needed help. I don't see it as a personal weakness, but I see as something that I need to constantly work on and remind myself. There are people that here to help, that all I need to do is open up and admit that I am struggling. I think a lot of are here today because we are looking for help. It could be spiritual help, it could physical, it could that we just need someone to notice us. God is a great support for those that struggling, but God doesn't need to do it alone. God needs us to help out when he is not able to. All it takes is for us to be willing to ask for it.

Brene Brown is quoted as having said, “What makes you vulnerable makes you beautiful.” Being vulnerable is not just about showing the parts of you that are shiny and pretty and fun. It's about revealing what you deny or keep hidden from other people. We all do this to some extent. I bet you've never said to a friend, “Oh my god, I just love that I'm insecure.”

But that's the point, isn't it? You've got to love everything, if you want to be vulnerable by choice. Most of us have probably experienced vulnerability through default. More often than not, we are either forced into that state through conflict, or we are surprised by it after our circumstances feel more comfortable. Few of us consciously choose vulnerability. Why? The stakes are too high.

If we reveal our authentic selves, there is the great possibility that we will be misunderstood, labeled, or worst of all, rejected. To be happy and content in life, we must give in and learn to listen to ourselves deeply. We must accept our vulnerabilities, open ourselves to them, and embrace them! Why? Because only then do we feel the safety net that is always there; that mysterious presence that is beauty, love, kindness, and truth. When we don't move into the mystery of vulnerability, it is like we are clinging to a tightrope after having fallen off, peering into the dark, afraid that there is no net. We find the net by letting go, by falling into the unknown.

² Deuteronomy 29:3

³ Exodus 24:7

This surrender does not have to be, as many think, a large display of emotion, because it is at its heart something internal, something private. Our closest, longest, and most intimate relationship is the one we have with ourselves. So while we might first experience vulnerability with someone else, it is at its heart something we must do with ourselves, by ourselves. It is not enough to be accepted by someone else: We must accept ourselves.

Many of us are here today because we are feeling vulnerable. We are here to face that reality. We are seeking God because we are feeling that vulnerability. Every year we come back to hear the words of Avinua Malkeinu, or Unataneh Tokef, or Shema Koleinu because we are feeling vulnerable – and every year, we are reminded that God stands with us.

And sometimes, even when it seems as though we have all the answers, we have to be willing to let go – to admit that we are not always in control. This can make us feel vulnerable, but it can help us move forward when it seems as though that next step is the most challenging. 13th century Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught a story about creation in which God contracted, performed what is known as *tzimtzum*, and created space for each us. God's act of *tzimtzum* is as an act of vulnerability, allowing space to be created where the once was none.

It is an ultimate example of God's love for us, his willingness to make space for his creatures. When we make space in our hearts, we make space not just for others, but also space to bring God into our world. Love doesn't force or control but gives freedom which empowers the loved one to reach its destiny. By backing down, giving way, not forcing—being vulnerable—the loving person sees, often to his own surprise, that the goal he holds for the loved one is reached. Every time that we enter into a loving relationship with someone—a spouse, a child, a friend—we make ourselves vulnerable to that person. Our love often requires that we back down, give way.

Vulnerability “works.” Our personal experiences and the history of the universe teach us that in the long run the way of vulnerability eventually succeeds. Perhaps the mystery of life is that vulnerability is often more effective than force.

There is no greater moment of vulnerability than when we lose someone special to us. And Judaism provides a ritualistic prescription to help ease the pain of loss. During the mourning period we recite the words to the Mourners Kaddish. Kaddish grounds us when we are floating, when we are spiraling, when we are lost. We have seen or been members of our community lost, unsure of life, and struggling, come into this sanctuary to look for some security during their grief journey. We come to say Kaddish because we all know those words:

“Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabai”

“God is great and God's name is blessed”

In our deepest moment of vulnerability, loss, pain, hurt, we repeat these to remind ourselves that we are not alone. That God is with us. And it is not easy.

“Yitbarach v'yishtabach”

“Blessed be God, Praised be God”

The strength that we muster to say those words when we have lost a friend, a parent, a child, a partner. It is nothing short of miraculous that anyone is truly able to say those words. Who can possibly believe them during our darkest moments. But persevere we must, and persevere we do. When we say those words every week for those 11 months, and then every year after that God is with us that God is there to support us that we will persevere. We all go through challenging times. God is here for us. Arms outstretched. God isn't letting me fall. God is constantly catching me. But it is up to me to realize it, to feel it, to open up...to be vulnerable and let God in.

Perseverance is rooted in hope; and hope is fixed in the belief that things will get better. That is the secret of perseverance. It is the last line of Adon Olam, "Adonai Li, v'lo Ira" – God is with me and I will not be afraid.

George Mallory was the famed mountain climber who may have been the first person ever to reach the top of Mount Everest. In the early 1920's he led a number of attempts to scale the mountain, eventually being killed in the third attempt in 1924. Before that last and fatal attempt he had said "I can't see myself coming down defeated."

Mallory was an extraordinary climber, and nothing would force him to give up. His body was found in 1999, well preserved by the snow and ice, 27,000 feet up the mountain, just 2000 feet from the peak. Give up he did not. His body was found face down on a rocky slope, head toward the summit. His arms were extended high over his head. His toes were pointed into the mountain; his fingers dug into the loose rock, refusing to let go even as he drew his last breath. A short length of cotton rope – broken – was looped around his waist.

When those who had set up camp for Mallory further down the mountain returned to England a banquet was held for them. A huge picture of Mt Everest stood behind the banquet table. It is said that the leader of the group stood to be applauded, and with tears streaming down his face, turned and looked at the picture. "I speak to you, Mt Everest, in the name of all brave men living and those yet unborn" he said. "Mt Everest, you defeated us once; you defeated us twice; you defeated us three times. But Mt Everest, we shall someday defeat you, because you can't get any bigger but we can."

In 1953 two climbers, Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzig Norgay, reached the t⁴op.

Every High Holy Day season it always seems as though we have our own mountain to climb. And just like George Mallory, each one of us has our own Mt. Everest. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and humble throughout the process we can persevere and conquer our own mountains. But the High Holy Days's are not just about climbing those mountains this year, it is about continuing to climb even when the path looks dangerous and daunting. It is not just about the mountain that you can see in front of you, it is about the peaks and valleys that you can't see. The High Holy Day's allows us to check in with ourselves, to see where we are in that journey. Are we climbing or are we falling? Are we emerging from the valley knowing that I will fear nothing because God is with me? Or are we lost and looking for a way out?

⁴ Information reported in Seattle Times (Jan 16, 2000) and Illustrations Unlimited

On this night, may we find the strength to allow us to be vulnerable to ourselves and to each other; may we have the strength to persevere in the face of our biggest struggles; and may we have the strength to see a better world – the world that could be – if only we have the strength to persevere.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah