

Romemu Dvar Torah August 19, 2016

Tonight's talk is inspired very deeply by a piece from Mark Nepo, the poet, in his new book, *The Life We Are Given*. I want to begin with a poem that a friend of mine sent this week, entitled *Two Bears*.

After a hard day's forage, two bears sat down together in silence. On a beautiful vista, watching the sun go down and feeling deeply grateful for life. Though, after a while, a thought-provoking conversation began which turned to the topic of fame. The one bear said, did you hear about Rostam? He has become famous and travels from city to city in a golden cage. He performs to hundreds of people who laugh and applaud his carnival stunts. The other bear thought for a few seconds, then started weeping.

Transfixed as we were this week by all of the things that happened in Rio, we began the week in rubble. We began last weekend with Tisha B'Av, with the destruction of the two temples, with a sense of what has been lost and what isn't any longer. A sense of the deepest sadness that the Jewish calendar can, perhaps artificially, but create. And from that moment, we rose from the rubble on Sunday with our friends at Lab Shul at the UN to discuss how we can rebuild the temples of the world, the sanctuaries, the places that are safe and contained.

But the true rising from rubble is the movement not from Tisha B'Av evening to Tisha B'Av afternoon, but Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of Av, to the full moon, the day of love, where even 2,000 years ago it was considered to be a day of J dating. On the full moon of Av, the Mishnah tells us, singles would go out and mingle and Steinhardt would have a drink. It was an amazing thing.

Shiduchim, shiduchim, matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match. And that movement from destruction to love, they are like a lion who gets up from the ground, who rises from rubble with a roar. That transition from degradation to dignity, from loss to love, that is the greatest transition in our calendrical year.

And the calendar's own dance, you have transformed, transmuted, transfigured my eulogy, my loss, into a great circle dance. We couldn't even arrive at today's redemptive moment without the transfixion on Ryan Lochte and the lying at the Olympics, the embarrassment of what took place in Rio. But another moment in the Olympics caught me this week and helped me ease back into the transition.

It happened yesterday, many of you might have missed it, it was fantastic. During the second heat of the women's 400 meter relay, in the third handoff, second handoff, between Alison Felix and her team at English Grand Gardner, they literally dropped the baton. The exchange went awry and they were disqualified, but upon further review it was clear that

the Brazilian team wasn't in its lane, knocking into Alison Felix and she dropped the baton, and so the decision came down, they are going to race again.

Not everyone, mind you, just the American women. And so Thursday evening, on an empty track, occupying the same lane that they had run in earlier in the day, these four racers set up to race against no one. To race against no one.

To race only against themselves and the clock. And I watched as all of the commentators asked the obvious question, could they botch this too? And the deeper philosophical question which stayed with me, which is, without someone to compete against, what motivates the runners to keep running? That was the question they kept asking. Do they need the energy of someone about to beat them to inspire them to do the best they can? Or can they find a deeper motivation that isn't dependent on what's going on in the lanes next to them, in order to find their own goal, and more broadly, what does it mean to set a goal, to reach it? What motivates us? Mark Nepo asked this question and he imagined a lonely runner.

A runner who was staying in their own lane, straining to clear every obstacle and lunging to beat others to the finish line, and then arriving at the finish line, only to hear the gun go off again and feel an urgency to keep racing. What keeps us racing? It brought me to my own life, moments in my life when I had set up a goal, an achievement, something that I thought that I wanted to excel at and become great at. It found me alone in a study hall trying to be the most learned Orthodox Jew ever.

Or alone in the Chelsea Piers in my 20s at 2 in the morning, practicing going up and down in my goaltender pads so that I could become an excellent athlete. Moments that are driving us where perhaps along the way we wonder, do I still want this goal? Nepo goes on to write, what does success mean? What does success mean? By all accounts, Moshe, the greatest leader, arguably the most famous Jew, back to the bear. In this week's Torah reading tomorrow morning, Moshe stands at the precipice of his greatest goal, the achievement of his life, what he wants more than anything imaginable.

Please, he pleads with God. Please, I plead with you. He begins with what the rabbis call one of the ten languages of prayer. Va'etchanan, the word ch'in. If I have found ch'in, am I charming to you God? The word ch'in from ch'inam, which means free. Moses throws himself before God and says, God, I don't deserve it, but I want it. I want it so bad I can taste it. I will run around the track a thousand times. 515 prayers he offers, says the great medieval exegete Rashi.

515 prayers, that's a lot of praying. He wants it. And God's answer, as it was before. And every parent in here knows this answer. You are charming, you are sweet, you are adorable,

I love you. No. No. Sorry. Sorry. And God said, no, sorry, you can't enter. Moshe's greatest failure. If Moshe is the great success story of a prince become pauper, become leader, his greatest failure is he never enters the land. What he wanted more than anything in the world was to enter into what he calls that good land. Ha'aretz ha-tova. Moshe's failure is profound.

Let's look at that word success. The word itself derives from the Latin verb which means to come close after. To come close after. Successive. To succeed. To succeed is to come close after.

And perhaps the Torah is teaching us tomorrow morning that the greatest teaching of Moshe, greater than anything he ever bequeathed to us, was that he was taught by God and then taught us that you may make a goal and meet it. You may make an achievement what you want more than anything in the world, but at the moment when the universe says no, success means what is it bringing you close to? What is coming after meaning how is this no? How is this not getting what I want? How is this failure a success? How does it bring me to what it is that is truly meaningful and what matters most? To be on the race and to hear the gun perpetually going off, it's okay to want, it's okay to get what we want, it's okay to work for what we want. By working for what we want we actually become greater than what we thought we were.

But what if everything that we wanted pushes us away from success as that which brings us close to what matters? God says to Moshe, what matters Moshe? What matters most? That's what success is. To be denied entry into that land and to be told that that great dream, that great ambition that you had is not an end point, but that life will give you detours that are themselves destinations. Not the dream deferred, but the destination that is detoured so that you become what you were meant to become and meet what you were meant to meet through that deferral.

His dream was not his life's destination. Nepo goes on to say that the way that he likes to think about success and how our framing of it can change our lives is about a bicyclist who had trained long and hard, it's a true story. He wanted to race in an event similar to the Tour de France. He was very disciplined and focused, shaved his hair, streamlined his body, and at the beginning of the race he pulled so far ahead that he couldn't see the other cyclists. And then just as he was descending into a long big hill, here's what happens. A huge Heron with its magnificent wings fully spread swooped down in front of his handlebars.

Isn't that great? He thought to himself, okay, I've got a race to run here. It's not working, right? And what happens? He's stunned. He stops in the road and something in him opens

and it's something that opened in him that is beyond the thing he'd been chasing. He stands there straddling his bike. The others catch up to him and they pass him. He loses the race. And years later his life is completely changed and he's sitting on his porch and they come over to him and they say to him, what cost you the race? He stares off into the distance and he says, I didn't lose the race, I left it. I didn't lose the race, I left it. This story is a story of those who are racing around, who think that the end goal is the goal that they had decided from, from the beginning.

It's the Moshe looking to the Promised Land and God is standing there saying to him, you're not getting in. So what is here? God responds to his request and he says, You already have everything you need, Moshe. You think you need to enter the Promised Land, but that's not your destiny. Your destiny isn't there, your destiny is right here. So you are going to teach everyone who ever reads this parasha, that the rising from the rubble is arriving at love. Rising from the rubble of hatred that destroys temple is arriving at love where this very moment's request and invitation is what you need.

It's what I need. Do we need any greater example of the foolishness of a warped sense of success than to watch what took place this week? Not just the four women in the relay race, but the obsession with the Rio Olympics and the craziness of an athlete who of course not all athletes are going to be ethical and moral. Not all athletes are going to have the same level of development in those lines of development as they do in their athletic prowess, but how silly, how infantile, how immature.

And as the world bantered about Lakti's lying, the image on the TV screens, the image on the front page of the New York Times, the images that all of us will never forget, of Omran Daknash, five years old, pulled from the rubble in Syria. And as my friend Ari Wallach wrote on his Facebook page, please don't spend more than a nanosecond today thinking about swimmers who lie to police about being mugged. Instead, watch and feel this.

This is what we should be focusing on. This is how the future historians and kin will judge us. This is about who we are and want to be as a species. From the rubble and the rising to love, from loss to love, from goal that I want to destination here, surrounding me, to be successful and to capture the soul of success is to be able to take what is given and say, here it is, on this side of the Jordan. That's the soul of success. To be with that, Moshe.

So I want to come back to our two bears. The famous bear who wants to have a golden cage. The Shabbat is Shabbat Nachamu. The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is called the Shabbat of Comfort. You can hear Nachamu and Chayin Va'etchanan. May the source of life bless each and every one of you with, and me too, with being successful.

To be successful, to know that there is what we want and there are the things that bring us closer to what matters most. And may God strengthen our resolve to release ourselves from golden cages, whatever they may be, so that we might see the Chayin, the giftedness of this life, the giftedness of this moment. May that be a true Nechama, a true comfort.

And let us say Amen.