

Rabbi Gail Swedroe
Congregation Agudas Achim
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I remember very clearly being told by my pediatrician that I should take a daily calcium supplement. I don't remember exactly how old I was, probably in high school, but I can picture the office with its window which overlooked trees. Bone health, though something I knew was likely to be an issue for me in the future because of my fabulous genetics AND the osteoporosis that my grandmother had AND the copious amounts of calcium my mother was taking at that point, was not something I thought I'd be dealing with for a few decades. The idea of needing to actively build up my body in my teens felt surreal. Getting older was something that came with privileges and excitement still, not things like adulting and talking about various ailments with one's friends whenever we got together.

And, like many of us, I *sort of* listened to medical advice. I took supplements when I remembered to. I actively sought out calcium fortified food. I'd go on kicks of weight bearing exercise in the years after I stopped my weekly ballet classes. (Because of course all types of working out that I actually like – walking, swimming, bike riding, yoga – while beneficial to one's health for many reasons, don't really count for strength training purposes.)

And then, because of an opportunity that presented itself several years ago, I decided to have a bone density scan – despite the fact that this isn't recommended or usually covered by insurance until one is in their 60s – when the rate of bone loss increases exponentially and the ability to build additional bone density is exceedingly more difficult.

Not surprisingly, my results were less than ideal. This news, unfortunately, coincided with my attention being pulled in many more directions than working out in ways that were not particularly of interest to me – growing my family and living through a global pandemic to name just two particularly difficult to ignore matters.

Beginning three years ago, when Rabbi Blumofe was on sabbatical, I set a new kavanah. I knew that if there were additional roles for me to fill, that I was going to need to find ways of filling up my own cup first. I doubled down on finding an exercise routine that was both actually something I enjoyed and met at least some of the recommendations of my doctor – yes, as a child of the 80's I found myself regularly participating in Jazzercise. I re-prioritized my mental health. And the following year, during my own sabbatical, as I've shared previously, I viewed the opportunity, in part, as a fuller reset of how I take care of myself – taking on new hobbies, reprioritizing sleep, and regularly scheduling time to connect with friends. And until this past December or so, I'd been really pleased with how I had maintained a relatively good sense of balance throughout the many facets of my life.

And then, as is so often the case, life threw a few curveballs. And so when my self-care habits started feeling less fulfilling, I used other legitimate excuses to let them go. My fall cold turned into an asthma flareup that made working out impossible for two months. As so many in our community have experienced, rounds of tech layoffs earlier in the year affected my family and the particulars of the job market made the hiring process unlike anything we had previously experienced for much longer than we had previously experienced. So, we adapted, as one does. And thankfully, eventually, my cough subsided. David found a new position. And I thought I could jump back into where I had left off with how I cared for my body, mind and spirit.

But here's what I experienced over the following months instead: the things that once worked for me, no longer did. I had no interest in returning to my old work out routine. The ukelele that I picked up during my sabbatical and which once brought me deep joy felt more like a chore to pick up even once I restarted my lessons. Prioritizing getting to bed early felt almost impossible with the kids' bedtime making that inevitable summer vacation creep.

During this time, I started reading more about bone health, among other things. Though I knew that bone could be rebuilt and also worn down, I had never really thought of it as a dynamic entity, with specific cells continually clearing old bone and, new cells laying new bone into place regularly. And as we age, the breakdown outpaces the rebuilding, which is why bones get thinner, more porous, and easier to break.

The obvious fix is exercise - put more pressure on the bone, and the bone gets stronger. Doctors have known this for a century, even going so far as to give it a name — Wolff's Law. This concept explains why astronauts lose bone density in zero gravity even though they're young and healthy. When there is no physical load, there is no signal to the bone to build. This is why your regular routine isn't wasted effort. It's still doing something: it's the reason you're not losing what you already have. It just isn't adding anything new.

That all seems pretty intuitive. But the part that took longer for doctors to figure out, and that really got me thinking, is the fact that it's only **novel** pressure that actually builds new bone. As shared by the Bone Health and Osteoporosis Foundation, walking doesn't really build bone because we do it all the time. Your regular gym routine, with the exact same reps that you've been doing for two years and you know how to do it in your sleep, mostly doesn't build bone either. We have the amazing ability to adapt, and so once we've gotten used to a given pattern of stress, that pattern stops being a stimulus to trigger new growth. Staying with what we've always

done doesn't allow growth. It's the unfamiliar movement, unfamiliar direction, the exploration which causes the edges of our comfort zone to be expanded that forces us to build what we need to meet the moment.

This time of year we hear use the word teshuva a lot, and we translate it as repentance, but the root is *shuv* — to turn. This is to remind ourselves to turn inward and reflect on where we need to turn our actions around in order to be better people, to do things differently than how we've done them before. The Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuva 2:4, gives five examples of how one might actually complete teshuva: a) constantly calling out before God; b) performing charity according to their potential; c) separating himself far from the object of their sin; d) changing their name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;" e) changing their behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and f) traveling in exile from their home.

Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.

What is interesting about the last four ways of building one's character as outlined by Rambam is that they all involve new ways of approaching things, be it one's name, behavior, or location. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, we can't expect to do things the exact same way we've always done it and get different results. But to take it a step further and apply newer understandings of physical growth to this spiritual concept, we can't expect to do things the exact same way we've always done it and experience the same growth we used to get as a result.

The Rambam's approach to teshuvah refers to a specific sin, but the mechanism he's describing can be applied more generally. It's almost as though he understood the process as an orthopedist would today (maybe because he was a physician who was ahead of his time). For him, just as a system which has adapted to a certain load will not rebuild itself under that same load, no matter

how sincerely and regularly it is applied, one can do the same version of good, more intensely, forever, and it will maintain what one has. It won't grow anything new.

Sometimes, the ways that we are asked to expand our comfort zone or take on new loads, may seem to be beyond what is physically possible. As we read in today's Torah reading, God tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, the one he loves, and offer him as a sacrifice.

Now, Abraham had already passed nine tests, according to Pirkei Avot 5:3. As Rambam understands it, these nine tests are: Leaving his home, the famine that forced him to Egypt, Sarah being taken into the Pharaoh of the time's household, rescuing Lot, taking Hagar as a wife when Sarah struggled to have a child, circumcising himself at age 99, Sarah being taken by King Avimelech, sending Hagar away at Sarah's request, and sending Ishmael away. One would think that enough is enough – Abraham had proven himself to do God's will.

And yet, as the Talmud points out in Sanhedrin 89b, Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra in regards to why today's Torah reading starts with "And it came to pass after these matters [*hadevarim*] that God tried Abraham" that as [Isaac] grew and was weaned, and Abraham prepared a great feast on that day (Genesis 21:8), Satan said before the Holy One, this old man, you favored him with a child, at one hundred years of age. From the entire feast that he prepared, did he not have even one dove or one pigeon to sacrifice before You as a thanks-offering? God said to Satan: Did Abraham prepare the feast for any reason but for his son? If I say to him: Sacrifice your son before Me, he would immediately slaughter him. Immediately, after these matters, the verse states: "And God tried Abraham."

Yes, the rabbis envision Abraham being tested so that God could prove Satan wrong – just like we read about in the story of Job. Why God went along with it is a sermon for a different time.

For now, we focus on why this test?

If we think about how Abraham has been living his life up until this point, we see that there is at least some element of Chesed, loving-kindness, involved (sometimes it's flawed, but as human beings we know that sometimes good intentions pave the way to undesirable places). Of his trials, going to Egypt was to seek out food to care for his family. Allowing Sarah to be taken by the Pharaoh and King Avimelech could potentially be read as Abraham doing what needed to be done to ensure that they both live, even though (again) one might think he'd have found a different, less problematic, way out of this difficult situation. Sending Hagar and Ishmael away was to appease Sarah. Furthermore, God reassured Abraham that Ishmael, too, would be the father of a great nation, and this was the path towards making that blessing a reality. Even when Abraham was recovering from circumcision, he immediately went out to greet the guests who appeared before his home and ensured they had food and drink. He was known for leaving the sides of his tent open on all sides so that travelers could easily find food and shelter. And of course, he famously argued with God to save Lot and the others of Sodom and Gemorah, showing a deep, merciful desire to protect humanity from destruction.

In other words, Abraham's chesed is strong, even if he could stand to fine-tune his technique.

And so, when God decides that Abraham needs another test, even if God's motives are perhaps questionable, if one can say such a thing on Rosh Hashanah, it does not include yet another opportunity to engage in chesed. In fact, we might say that it requires the exact opposite of chesed- din and gevurah, judgment and strength. If we think about Abraham's spiritual routine in

the ways we might think about our exercise routines, this is asking Abraham to apply an unfamiliar strain or to move in an entirely different direction than he is used to.

Among the many challenges one might have with God giving this test to Abraham, Nachmanides asks a question that many of us might be pondering when we read this text: Doesn't God already know what Abraham will do? Why does God need to test him in this way? Nachmanides says that it's not for God's knowledge but for Abraham's personal growth and benefit – because a person is rewarded for what they actually do, not merely for whatever they can do. We don't fulfill the mitzvah of lighting Shabbat candles by thinking about it. We don't get any points for the people we're able to feed but don't. We don't build new muscles by having the capability of lifting more weight but choosing to go on a walk.

There's a teaching Rashi brings on the phrase "which I command you today" from Deuteronomy 6:6 — that Torah should be in your eyes each day as though it were new, not like an old edict that everyone neglects to pay attention to. Rambam also teaches in Hilchot Teshuvah, 7:4, that one who has previously sinned but makes teshuvah should still consider one's self to be among the righteous and will even receive a greater reward than those who have always been righteous. Why? Because they have overcome their yetzer harah, their evil inclination. In other words, one who engages in teshuvah has put an additional strain on their soul of having to overcome their yetzer harah. Those who have always been righteous, must find new ways to apply additional challenges to themselves in order to attain the same level of growth as someone who engages in teshuvah.

Bone cells do two different jobs at once, and so does teshuva. One job is holding onto what you've already built. The other is building something new. Your existing practices are doing the first job. They're not wasted; they're the reason you haven't drifted weightless like the astronaut. But if you want the second job, if you want growth and not just maintenance, as the business saying goes: what got you here, won't get you there.

So, when I think about all of this in light of the recent struggles I've had with maintaining my previous methods of physical, emotional and spiritual self-care, I realize that when I first took on my particular practices, I felt immense growth. Everything I was doing was new, and so I felt challenged in wonderful ways. But eventually, this just became maintenance – what I needed as a baseline to feel whole. Eventually, I felt sort of empty not because of a particular failure but because the load that once built me up became the load that I no longer noticed and simply felt routine. If feeling growth was what was motivating my behavior, then I needed to find new ways of engaging my body, mind, and spirit. I'm still exploring what some of those options might be for this new year. In participating in Music Together trainings, I've been challenged to pay close attention to the specific notes and words in a song in a way I haven't needed to in years. I'm exploring new ways of physically challenging my body so that I can explore new bone growth and trying to establish new exercise routines, but I realize that if I don't bring some of the fun of jazzercise to it, I'm unlikely to maintain the program for long. I'm trying to change the flow of my evenings so that I don't end up revenge procrastinating so that I get to bed at the time that I intended to.

As we each think about the teshuva that we want to make this year, in light of Rambam's understanding that it includes building one's character and approaching things in a new way, we are encouraged to think about where we might benefit from a bit of growth, where we could

stand to apply new pressure to an element of our lives so that we build new strength – be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Where is your version of Abraham's feast celebrating Isaac's weaning — something you do is good, appreciated by others, and plays to your strengths but is lacking a true personal challenge for you? Where is an axis you have yet to load? Not more of the same thing you know you're good at, but a different set of spiritual muscles entirely. Maybe it's working on the relationship you're patient with but never honest in. Perhaps you're great at showing generosity to strangers, but not the person across your table. Maybe your prayers have become fluent but lack pfeeling; there's a sense of keva but not kavanah. If we think of our own bones as providing stability and structure for our physical bodies, what can we learn from Abrahham this Rosh Hashanah as we engage in teshuva, in new ways of being in the world, utilizing Jewish traditions and teachings to strengthen our spiritual lives and keep us emotionally resilient?

Teenage me understood, on a surface level, the need to approach my bone health in a new way. But it's taken me years to do teshuva and actually change what I'm doing in intentional ways.

The process of teshuva and celebrating the new year doesn't ask us to walk further on the path we walked on the previous year. It asks us to notice where the unfamiliar strain could be and whether we're willing, this year, to take it on. Hazak, hazak v'nithazek. May we find the strength to take on these new challenges and may we be strengthened by doing so.

Shanah Tova U'metukah. Am Yisrael Chai.