SH’MIRAT HA GUF- Taking Care of Our Bodies
Connecting Physical Well-Being and Spiritual Health

It’s hard to believe but my daughter Miriam will be 3 years old in a few weeks. She was born less than a week after Yom Kippur. It was an interesting High Holy Days for sure. Probably one of the most physically challenging, for obvious reasons, yet also incredibly exhilarating. Since I was anticipating that the new year was starting off with a wondrous new life!

About two years ago, just after her first birthday, I came to the conclusion that it was time to make some changes in my life…mostly physical. I knew I was done have babies (Miriam is our third). And I decided it was time for me to stop making excuses about the choices I was making in terms of healthy living. Mostly, I decided to start taking time to eat right, exercise regularly and really take care of myself so that I could have the energy, flexibility and health I need to not only take care of my family and our congregation, but my whole self. It was a pretty big transformation, not just size wise, but perspective wise too. Because I needed to make myself a priority in ways I had never done before.

I realized that while that all sounds nice and good, it wasn’t always going to be fun or convenient. That it would involve sacrifice, a lot of scheduling and most importantly…intention.
I needed to take time to consider the ways I could better value myself…my health and my strength as representations of who I am as a whole and holy person. It turned out to be a pretty spiritual quest one which – no matter your age, size, or physical abilities, we should all take time to consider, particularly since this is an ideal moment to begin anew!

So though we’ll be reading from parashat Vayera...specifically the story of the binding of Isaac which we all know as the Akedah....a tale that challenges our understanding of faith in God and the choices we make when it comes to balancing all the competing responsibilities and demands in our lives, we are going to focus on tomorrow mornings’ Torah portion...Bereshit....and our relationship with ourselves....both physically and spiritually....And how that relationship extends to the way we see and treat others as well.
For as we will see...they are intimately connected....even the ancients understood this as you can see by Philo’s comment:

The body is the soul’s house. Shouldn’t we therefore take care of our house so that it will not fall into ruin?

(Philo, 20 BCE- 50 CE)

So we start at the beginning with Genesis chapter 1.

Genesis 1:27
I especially love Heschel’s point because it takes us beyond the typical understanding of our obligations to treat others with respect. The way we live our lives is a representation of God’s image. God’s image is not a physical one but something more ephemeral… not to be touched but to be felt, experienced by those around us by how we present ourselves on every level. So that really being created b’tselem elohim, in the image of God is not just how we behave with others but the way we treat ourselves too.

In Jewish tradition there is no separation between the mind, soul and body- they are all inter-connected. The mitzvah of taking care of one’s body (and its connection to the spirit and mind) is called Shmirat Haguf – or to guard/protect the body. The midrash shares the importance of this mitzvah with a fun story about Rabbi Hillel.

VAYIKRAH RABBAH [5th Century Midrash]…Once when the sage Hillel had finished a lesson with his pupils, he proceeded to walk along with them. “Master,” they asked, “where are you going?” “To perform a mitzvah,” he answered. “Which duty is that?” “To bathe in the bathhouse.” “Is that a religious duty?” they asked. “Yes! Somebody, appointed to scour and wash the statues of the king that stand in the theaters and circuses, is paid for the work, and is even associated with the nobility,” he answered. “Since that is so, how much more should I, who am created in the image and likeness of God, scour and wash myself? As it is written, ‘In the image of God did God make humankind.’” (Genesis 9:6)

Why would the rabbis pass down this story about cleanliness?
Why compare a physical image (a statue/idol) with a human being?

If you aren’t taking care of yourself physically you are not able to take care of yourself spiritually or intellectually because you are not honoring your WHOLE person.

From a practical perspective – there are lots of blessings- from washing hands and saying motzi, to a blessing on going to the bathroom….all meant to help us think about what we are physically doing and why we are doing it with the hope of adding extra layers of meaning to our lives.

RABBI ELYSE GOLDSTEIN [Author, director of Kollel- The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning, Toronto, ON]…

Shmirat HaGuf - taking care of your body - is viewed as a spiritual as well as a physical act. The wellbeing of the body has to be maintained as the vessel of the soul, the repository of that which most closely connects us with God. Our body is a gift from God, a divine creation which is to be respected, cherished and cared for as long as we are in this world. With awareness of Shmirat HaGuf, even the simplest activities, such as eating, walking, or washing one’s hands, become acts of holiness. [www.kollel.org]

In addition to individual blessings connected to certain acts, this value is actually incorporated into the daily liturgy of our prayer books. The morning blessings that come before the Barechu are called Birkaot Ha’Shachar. They include blessings for our physical selves and our spiritual selves (we actually read those this morning) And then there is also a list of blessings called Nisim b’chol Yom….which translates as daily miracles…

Here are a few…..
They all start… Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam…And then each thanks God for a specific miracle in our lives.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam…
Blessed are You, our God, Ruler of the world….

Poke’ah ivrim
Who makes the blind to see.

Malbish arumim.
Who clothes the naked.

Matir asurim.
Who frees the captive.

Zokef kefufim.
Who straightens the bent.

Roka ha’aretz al hamayim.
Who stretches forth the earth upon the water.

She’asah li kol tzorki.
Who provides for my every need.

Hamechin mitzadey gaver.
Who makes firm a person’s steps.

Hanotein laya’ef koach.
Who gives strength to the weary.

These are some of my favorite blessings because they are both tangible and spiritual at the same time. Meant to be read on both a literal and figuraiive level.

They originate in the Talmud—tractate Barachot (60b) (blessings). The intention was that each blessing would corresponded to a specific physical action when you woke up in the morning. When opening your eyes you would say “who makes the blind see... when sitting up after having been comparatively motionless during sleep one should say, ‘blessed the one who releases the bound.’” While getting dressed one should say blessed the one who clothes the naked.....

eventually, these blessings got moved from the home to the Shul... but the intersection between the physical and allegorical is powerful still as Steve Sager explains:

RABBI STEVE SAGER... [Director of Sicha, Rabbi Emeritus-Beth El Synagouge, Durham, NC]...The transference of these blessings to the public worship service (9th century) disengaged the blessing and the particular act of awakening with which it was joined. In their public setting, the morning blessings took on a new level of meaning. Removed from the acts of awakening, individual activities became metaphors for Godly action. The blessing “who clothes the naked,” ceased to be a pointed acknowledgement of personal possessions and personal protection. Instead it became a celebration of God as the power that prompts the care and nurturance of humankind. The blessing “who raises the lowly” ceased to be a blessing of physical mobility and became a blessing of the divine presence manifest in actions that raise the bodies and elevate the spirits of those who are low. [Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vechagim] (Sicha, Hebrew for “conversation,” is an organization promoting the vital ongoing dialogue between classical Jewish texts and modern life, enabling Jewish communities and their leaders to enlist the Jewish past in the service of the Jewish future.)

It’s a great example of evolution of Jewish prayer and practice, but I still think that the power of these blessings dwells in the space between the literal and figurative meaning. The brilliant Rachel Adler tells us why.

DR. RACHEL ADLER [Professor of Modern Jewish Thought & Judaism and Gender, University of Southern California & the Hebrew Union College]... In the rigidly stratified society in which these prayers originated, people were less conscious of identity than of status. Thus, the original forms of these prayers expressed the thankfulness of the most privileged members of the community- free Jewish males- that they did not have the less privileged status of women, slaves or non-Jews. The blessings we now use affirm that since we embody the divine image, we are all intrinsically valuable. To degrade or enslave others is to deface the image of God. We are created free just as our Creator is free. We are capable of choice, of invention, and of transformation in our lives and in our world. We also give thanks for our particular identity as Jews. God who creates our common humanity, also cherishes human diversity. Each person, (and person) is unique and precious. [Kol Haneshamah: shabbat Vechagin]

So saying Nisim b’chol yom (or some personal version of it) reminds us of the choices we have every day. We need to be thankful for our ability to be out in the world and function as human beings... to consider what a miracle it really is that we can open our eyes, get out of bed and be out and about. And that the physical aspects of our human bodies... how we treat them, how we see them, are a reflection of the person we are and the person we want to be, the person we want others to see and know.

I was really taken by what Cantor Jason Kaufman wrote in a blog posting for the American Conference of Cantors. Not just because I personally resonate with what it means to makes changes in your life that are out there for public display and comment, but because there is a recognition on his part, that making a commitment to live a life with greater intention has positive ramifications that go way beyond body image.

CANTOR JASON KAUFMAN [Congregation Sukkat Shalom, Wilmette, IL]...One year ago, I decided to live a healthier life... I felt that God had a different plan for the life that I was living and that my weight was becoming an everyday obstacle for me to overcome. I needed a change...The fact that I was struggling to live a healthier life so publically gave permission for many to share their own personal health struggles with me...As I became more open with my journey, many became more open with theirs...I have always felt that synagogue is where one should bring their most authentic selves. A synagogue is a community that should welcome our struggles, not cause us to hide them in shame. From the most serious of eating disorders, to the ‘yo yo dieters”, to the bat and bar mitzvah student who casually makes a derogatory comment about their physical appearance, it is clear to me that there is not a person in this world who is free of dealing with body image issues. How can we as a Jewish community care for our spiritual health without being equally focused on our physical well-being? How can we promote physical health without narrowly focusing on weight loss and athleticism? Most importantly, where is God in this conversation? I believe that Judaism, at its core, is about bringing intentionality to our lives. By bringing purpose into an act that may initially be perceived as mundane, we transform the ordinary into holy. We do this each time we say Hamotzi or Birkat HaMazon. Should we also create a prayer before we begin to exercise, pausing to acknowledge that
taking ownership of our physical health exists in our partnership with God and honors the notion that we are made in the image of God? [www.accantors.org]

SO here is what I want to do for the next 5 minutes…. The next commentary is actually a list I took from a program I am going to be doing with our 8th grade girls this year called Rosh Hodesh it’s a Girl thing. Look over the list and then with someone who is sitting by you pick a few to talk about... the ones you love because they make you happy with yourself, the ones that make you feel a little awkward...that are outside of your comfort zone the ones that are really challenging because you know you struggle with them all the time. Maybe pick a few (or all) that you are going to try and incorporate into your life in the coming days and months ahead.

FEEL FABULOUS...Strategies [Moving Traditions - Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing- Tevet, adapted]

- Become aware of what your body does each day. Marvel at its extraordinary abilities.
- Walk tall, with pride and confidence.
- Enjoy your body: stretch, dance, walk...
- Come to view your body as the instrument of your life, not an ornament for others.
- Remember that you are a person, not a size.
- Count your blessings, not your blemishes.
- Every morning when you wake up, be thankful for your body’s rest and rejuvenation.
- Consider this: If you only had one year to live, how important would body image and appearance be?
- Think about the people you love. Is their appearance a fact in your affection for them?
- Create an inventory of all the ways your body takes care of you.
- Stop obsessing about your weight and appearance.
- Engage in activities that honor and increase your body’s strength and potential.
- Be careful not to judge other people’s bodies. Strive to notice and affirm the inner beauty of others.
- Become aware of comments about appearance, and be willing to challenge them.

Anyone want to share a few?

In a little while we’ll head down to Manor Park to do Tashilich….throwing our sins symbolically into the Long Island Sound as an act of renewal and return aspirimg to be our own best selves. This year, maybe include a few goals for honoring your Guf...your spiritual and physical self.

I am going to make an assumption that everyone single one of us sometimes disrespects our bodies in either thought or action. Maybe you skip breakfast too often or allow self-criticism to ruin a good time. Maybe you over indulge with food or alcohol one day and then feel sluggish or ill and even ill-tempered the next. Perhaps you don’t make physical activity a priority because of your overly busy schedule, or you are worried it will be too hard. But then you lack the energy and physical strength to do the things you love to do. Or maybe you find yourself making disparaging remarks about other people’s appearances either because you are jealous or insecure in your own right.

Think about what unhealthy tendencies you want to discard....and add it to your tashilich list. Think about some ways you can do a better job of fulfilling the mitzvah of shirmat ha guf...Honoring the miracle you are as a whole person...inside and out. Accepting the beauty you bring to this world just by being you. How will you honor your body better this year? How will you value God’s presence within you?

Join me in this affirmation of physical well-being and spiritual health!

Rabbi Myriam Klotz [Co-founder of the Torah Yoga Institute at Elat Chayyim Jewish Spiritual Retreat Center]... Your strength is enormous, your beauty without end; your sacred spirit is unceasingly present within you. Your spirit is felt through the touch of your hand and the look in your eyes. May you feel God’s blessing in your mind, your spirit, and your body each and every day, and may you pass this gift on in the circle of life that you live. Amen. [Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing! - Tevet]
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