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HIR - The Bayit

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I learned an orthopedic halakhah this week. It's called Wolff's Law, and it's a law which I believe has some bearing on the month of Elul and the process of preparing for the Yamim Noraim. Even though it's not yet Labor Day, we are hopefully beginning to awaken ourselves to embark upon and intensify that journey of preparation for the High Holidays.

I was out running this week, and I tripped on something in the road, and sustained a very minor fracture of my kneecap.

By the way, a helpful point of note: your kneecap is also called your patella. I didn't know this until Tuesday, when after talking about my kneecap for a while, my doctor then said I might have a fracture of the patella. I thought I had broken 2 bones! Then my doctor explained that your kneecap is your patella. I hope that will save the rest of you some trouble in the future.

So after this fall, and my X-rays, the orthopedist explained that I should in fact not lay off my knee, but should use it - carefully, but I should use it. My orthopedist said that in fact if I don't use my knee, it will get very weak and can be unhealthy and the healing can be less successful. I was speaking to Dr. Donald Liss, who explained to me that this is in accordance with Wolff's Law, an important theory developed by a 19th century German surgeon, Julius Wolff, which essentially says that a healthy bone will adapt to the load it is placed under. Therefore, if it is used and bears load, it gets stronger. If it is not used, it has no stimulus to respond to, and it will get weaker and the bone mass will decrease. The implication of this is that as soon as a broken bone is reunited and sufficiently healthy and safe, one should actually use it as much as possible in order to strengthen it.

There is a careful balance to strike between laying off the limb - protecting the bone from reinjuring, and using the limb - protecting the bone from weakening from disuse. According to Wolff's Law, *the very same stresses that created the break, when applied gently and carefully, will strengthen the bone in the area where the break occurred.* That's probably not to say I should keep tripping in order to strengthen this kneecap, but just that I should continue to bend it, stress it gently, and use it. More and more, as soon as a bone is stable, doctors try to move patients from immobilization and inactivity to careful use of the limb in

similar ways to the pressures that created the fracture. Please note: this is not orthopedic advice, just my layperson's understanding of the medicine. Ask your local orthopedic expert before putting this wisdom into practice.

Wolff's Law, though, strikes me as an important aspect of our journey of teshuvah in this season. We have such an instinct to move away from the broken or imperfect parts of ourselves. There is a certain wisdom in this - in life, it is very good to leverage our strengths, and focus on those, and not dwell too much on our weaknesses. Those are our broken parts - we should just let them be. But Wolff's Law suggests that in fact they can be strengthened by gentle, careful use.

When we have a broken relationship, a less-than-ideal trait, or a part of ourselves we are not totally proud of, it is totally tempting to leave it behind - to jettison it. Let's work on ourselves in every other area, and become the best we can be to overcompensate, or just to counteract, those weaknesses. But that is not what teshuvah - return - is all about. The process of teshuvah reminds us that we need to go straight back to that painful, broken, weakened part of ourselves, and gently push and nudge and stress and strain it - to make it healthier and more vibrant.

This is even more heightened by the challenge of Rambam's definition of total repentance. Total repentance from a sin is not becoming perfect in every other area of life except that one tiny place where we struggle. It's tackling that area - lovingly, not harshly - we don't want to reinjure it. It's tackling that area so that in fact it becomes so strong that if we fell again, this time that part of us would not break, but would withstand that challenging situation.

I am trying, in this season, to celebrate the strong parts of myself and make them stronger, and that is an important thing. But the real work of teshuvah is to truly journey into our hearts for the wounded and imperfect parts. Some we know right where they are. But some we've hidden away so far. Immobilized in casts and braces, that it takes some searching to find them. When we do, we have to unbandage them, expose them to ourselves, and then exercise those parts of ourselves.

This message is shared in a simple way by many of the Hasidic masters on the opening verse of our parashah. It begins, שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך. Place judges and officers - leaders and enforcers - in all the gathering places, the judging places, the communal institutions of our people. Impose external

forces of order on yourselves. That is the plain sense of the text. Say the Hasidic teachers - no, **בכל שעריך** - in all your gates, are not the gates of your cities. They are your gates - the gates of your heart. In the end, all the judges and police officers in the world won't really make us the people we need to become. No - turn inward - and gently, lovingly, examine your own inner gates. Judge justly, but supportingly. Notice what is wrong and massage it back to health. **למען תחיה**, continues the next pasuk - this is what gives you life, just as Wolff's Law would say - this is what makes us stronger. And I would note that that loving evaluation and enforcing has to be done **בכל שעריך** - in all our internal gates - not just our strengths, but our soft, bruised parts, too. Not abandoning those parts of our insides, but turning to them, exposing them to ourselves - it need not be to anyone else, and actually working on them to strengthen them and give them life.

We are now square in the month of Elul. Elul is a gift. And one of the guides of the month of Elul is Psalm 27, which we recite twice daily. I encourage you to take some time and read it closely - it has so many pearls of wisdom for this season.

One of its extraordinary lines, in fact one of the most amazing lines in Tanakh, I think, is the phrase **לך אמר** **לבי בקשו פני** - on your behalf, O God, my hearts calls out, "Seek my Face". From within us God calls out to say, seek me. When we are aware that we are in an intimate relationship with our Creator, that there is a partner out there that somehow wants the best for us, and loves and accepts us for who we are, then perhaps we can be less afraid of journeying in to find those pained parts of ourselves that need fixing.

So let it be a month in which we take the words of Psalm 27 to heart. **ממי אירא**? Who should we fear? Not the external *shoftim v'shotrim* - only the consequences of not truly turning inward to find our bruises and knead them back to health. Let us take Wolff's Law as our guide. Let us take a look at our more broken parts - the traits, the relationships, the responsibilities, that are not what we want them to be, and then let's gently - not to aggravate them - stress them, press them, and work on them. They will grow stronger. And we will stand on Rosh Hashanah able to say **חזק ויאמץ לברך** - our hearts are strengthened. Shabbat shalom.