

The LEV Effect: Living with a Good Heart

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Did you know that a recent study from the University of Cincinnati's College of Medicine found that wrapping tefillin every morning can prevent a heart attack? The headline from UC's website reads: "Research shows benefits from Jewish tradition." I mean I could have told you that after my first year of rabbinical school. Here's the full title- Research shows benefits from Jewish Tradition: Study shows expanded cardiovascular benefits wearing tefillin around the arm in both men and women." They must have studied our morning minyan service here at B'nai Jeshurun with tefillin wearers of all ages and stages including many into their 90's and 100's our proud centenarian minyanaires...

Well, I have a story to tell... It was a Tuesday morning, not much different than any other Tuesday morning, except what was different was that I didn't feel right. I was up most of the night with throbbing and burning pain in my left arm for hours, obviously I didn't listen to all those commercials that talked about arm pain means call 911 and arm pain but it eventually subsided. I awoke early for minyan at shul and wrapped my tefillin reciting the prayer for healing for our congregation all the while still not feeling that medical benefit promised by University of Cincinnati. Followed by not one but two meetings at the synagogue and then a drive to the mikvah in Cleveland Heights to welcome a new Jew by choice, a wonderful young man who converted and immersed in the renewing waters of the mikvah.

I had made an appointment at urgent care and so I drove straight from that spiritual high. It was a Hineni moment, like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Hineni, Here I am, welcoming and blessing a new Jew straight to the urgent care where you know you usually have to wait a long time. They immediately looked at me with that look like something was wrong (maybe because I had taken off my tefillin by then) and at that point I had my own Hineni moment. With immense

gratitude for the incredible doctors, nurses, techs and hospital staff at Ahuja, they confirmed to me that night I had what they called a “cardiac incident.”

By the next morning the catheterization was finished and still on the OR table, the surgeon pulled over a large monitor revealing to me the images of my heart and its surrounding vessels. Shocked, it finally hit me that I had a heart attack that previous night and that, Baruch hashem, I survived and thankfully was alive. The surgical team repaired my fully blocked artery with a stent. At that moment, I realized that I was no longer the healthy 49 year old with no prior issues. Starting now, I would have to make a life change, to recreate myself and build myself up again because I want to live longer. I won't continue to take my life for granted and don't we all want that- to be written into the Book of Life, to make the most of our lives each and every day.

To be honest, I don't yet fully comprehend the lessons I've learned from my heart attack less than three weeks ago but I can certainly say this was a Tekiah moment, a wake up call. A time for cheshbon hanefesh, my own soul searching that we are all instructed to look at our lives, our priorities, our actions, mistakes and inactions, review our interaction, words spoken and those words we've too often left unsaid.

Rosh HaShanah is our personal wake up call, with the rousing blasts of the shofar which we will have to wait until tomorrow to hear, urging us to look at our lives anew, as if we have been given the opportunity to begin again, to live, as we engage in the process of teshuvah, self-reflection. Today, truly is the day for new beginnings, the day to re-chart the path of our lives, recenter, prioritize and evaluate who we are, where we are going and who we are truly meant to be.

What I did learn is that it is sometimes hard to listen to ourselves. Perhaps today when Shabbat and Rosh HaShanah coincide and the shofar is silent, we don't need to hear the loud blast of the horn because our Tekiah moment and wake up call isn't always loud and clear. We have to listen for those voices we haven't heard or paid attention for they may be the ones we most desperately need to hear and to whom we must urgently respond. And today, I also have learned the hard way that we have to listen to our own inner shofar notes which are quietly reminding us who we are, who we are meant to be and help guide us on the proper path in life.

In the second chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, the Mishnah's book on ethics usually translated as Wisdom of the Sages, the entire chapter attempts to answer this question posed by Rebbe Yehudah HaNasi: *Eizo Hee Derech Yeshara She-yavor Lo Ha-adam?* What is the proper path that a person should choose for their lives?

For many years, I have been reading about Blue Zones considered the healthiest locations in the world where people have incredible longevity, happiness and satisfaction in their lives. The places on the planet where the most 90 and 100 year olds live. Dan Buettner has been studying them for National Geographic and just released the new Netflix series called *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zone* studying Okinawa, Sardinia, Nicoya, Costa Rica and other isolated and not so isolated locales and has identified nine commonalities that may teach us all how to be written into the Book of Life, to live longer and better focusing on healthy diet, movement, community, finding purpose, downshifting, the power of belonging and giving back. Maybe we can be the next blue zone or better blue and white zone here at B'nai Jeshurun. We can all aspire to live to 120- *Ad Meah V'esrim*- or at least we can learn how to be written into the Book of Life so that we make each and every day count.

If you remember that title of the medical school study, "Research Shows benefits from Jewish tradition," I am not a doctor but I want to suggest we can all learn how to practice heart-healthy Judaism- what I want to call the Lev Effect.

Like the secret of Blue Zones longevity and the need to downshift, Shabbat is our weekly reminder to rest and work on ourselves to become a better person, to build relationships and be in community. My bookshelf is filled with about 50 books about Shabbat and they all have different titles. One is called *Shabbat: A Day Apart* and another is called *Shabbat: A Day to Create Yourself* which is written by the founder of the Shabbos project with the goal to have the entire Jewish world celebrate together on the same weekend each year. Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, writes: "To survive and thrive in the world, we have a lot to do. Amid the turbulence of our divisive society and relentless pressure of our lives, Shabbat gives us the time and space we need to breathe, to create ourselves- to build the inner world, strengthen our faith, nurture our families and find meaning and purpose to create a better quality of life."

We each need to build time into our full schedules to downshift and breathe, making space in our stressful and busy lives for ourselves, our family and community with our ancient weekly respite of Shabbat, our sanctuary in time. So I am going to see all of you next Saturday?

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai asks his five disciples the same question posed by the Mishnah, what is the proper path to choose? Not surprisingly, since we are Jewish, the five students come back with five different answers. The first student answers that the best way to live requires having an “Ayin Tova- a good eye.” We should see the good in every single person. The rabbis advise living a life where we are satisfied with our lives, never looking over our shoulder or on social media jealous of anyone else’s success.

The second answer is to strive to be Chaver Tov- a good friend. The third answers: Shachen Tov- a good neighbor, volunteering and giving back within our community. We all know there is a loneliness epidemic in our society and like the Blue Zones and our Jewish tradition, we must be a part of our community, active and engaged. In doing that, it truly adds meaning and longevity to our lives.

From the incredible outpouring of support, messages, prayers and care packages that we have received from our village, our community, from so many of you these past few weeks; I have definitely experienced firsthand the value of being part of something larger. When we care for each other, we are stronger together and strengthen and help heal each other as if our hearts are beating in sync.

The fourth answer from the student states: *HaRoeh et HaNolad*- This is not so easy to translate. The first way is having the ability to see what the future will bring to anticipate the needs of others. The second meaning is the ability to see the future consequences of our decisions.

This summer I finally made it into the Hall of Fame. I mean that I finally visited Canton’s Pro Football Hall after living here for 22 years. I learned something interesting. Did you know that the forward pass in football which is probably the most iconic and game-changing play in today’s game is a relatively new innovation. For years, it was actually illegal for a player to throw the ball forward and first used in a professional game in nearby Massillon, Ohio. Players could only toss the ball backwards or lateral sideways in order to move the ball forward. That

made scoring very difficult. Our goal in life is most certainly forward progress and we may not always be (insert one of the last 30 Browns' quarterback names here). Rosh HaShanah teaches us to aim high and deep as a good quarterback would do. We need to anticipate the play and the consequences of our choices in order to score each day and be written into the Book of Life. I have one suggestion of a Hail Mary or better yet a deep pass to make this year, why don't you join me and Rabbi Foster on our synagogue's Israel Trip this June?

We believe that God brought each of us into the world for a specific purpose that only we are able to accomplish. The key to happy and healthy longevity for Okinawans is Ikigai or living with purpose. Ikigai is translated from Japanese as "the reason for which you wake up in the morning." It is the intersection of what we love, what we are good at and what the world needs. Purpose-imbued lives provide responsibility and motivation so that we can be written into the Book of Life and live our best lives.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote: "Viktor Frankl used to say if we believe we are here for a reason, then there is a tikkun, a mending, only we can perform, a fragment of light only we can redeem, an act of kindness or courage or generosity or hospitality, even a word of encouragement or a smile, only we can perform that in this world" and that is what the world needs from us. On Rosh HaShanah, we are each asked, what is our Ikigai? What is our purpose?

Finally, the fifth student answers his teacher's question: *Lev Tov* that we should each strive to live with a good heart (my cardiologist said the same thing). For the rabbi, that meant living with integrity and kindness.

The Mishnah responds that there is indeed one preferred path of the five answers and it is the final one, *Lev Tov*, a good heart. For all are included in it because it promotes a healthy and positive outlook on life. Living the LEV effect or as the title of the University of Cincinnati's study states "Research shows benefits from Jewish tradition" is indeed true.

On Rosh HaShanah, we blow 100 shofar blasts and will be certainly doing that tomorrow. We also are instructed that today and everyday, we are supposed to recite 100 blessings to share our gratitude. Can we really say thank you 100 times each day? Do you do that? Have you ever counted? The Talmud answers this way,

maybe you are aren't not able to say 100 blessings and a 100 thank you's each day so this is what you should do. If you can't say all those blessings then focus on saying at least one every day. So what is your one single blessing you are focusing on this year? Mine is that I am here. I am alive. Grateful to be here.

With immense gratitude and humility, joy and appreciation, thank you for all the support and prayers you have given to me and my family. thank you to my clergy colleagues, our B'nai Jeshurun staff, our President Scott Matasar and leadership, family and friends and each and every one of you.

This year, may we all live the LEV effect. May we strengthen our hearts so that they continue to beat together in health and happiness.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova! May this year be filled with sweetness, happiness, inspiration, meaning and most especially health.