

# Cycling Through Life: Reflections on My Journey and Lessons About Change

Rabbi Stephen Weiss

2<sup>nd</sup> Day Rosh Hashanah 5776 – 2015  
B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike OH

So there I was, standing with my bike at the entrance to the desert hills that surround Lake Mead outside Las Vegas. It was 6:00 in the morning. I had woken up at 4:30 so I could get here before the day heated up. It was going to be a toasty 117 that day. Now, in the early morning, it was only 90.

I came to Las Vegas to visit my parents. I had only started my bike riding two months before. I had been riding every day usually just a couple of miles, occasionally more, always flat. I was afraid if I stopped I would not start again. I know myself my habits, my laziness, my tendency toward inertia, so I found a place in Vegas to rent a bike during my stay.

I asked the gentleman working in the bike shop if there were any particularly scenic places to ride. He pulled out a map and showed me the River Mountains Loop Trail, a trail around Lake Mead. "No," I say, "I am looking for something *flat*." "Well," he responds, "if you start here, this part along the lake is all flat. *An easy ride.*"

I look at the path that meanders back from the road and disappears between two hills. The trail-head consists of four parking spaces and a restroom. There is nothing else as far as the eye can see. At the start of the trail there is a large yellow sign with big bold letters: No Hiking in June July or August. And then in even larger all-caps: HEAT KILLS. It is July 2.

I stare at the sign nervously. Should I go in? The guy in the bike shop recommended it. I wait a few minutes for someone else to ride out of the trail or drive into the small parking lot and assure me that it is okay. But there is no one. Then I remember what the man in the bike store said: "Around here, always take two water bottles. When the first one is empty, *turn around.*"

Okay... I have two water bottles. He said the trail is flat. I can always turn around. I may live in Ohio, but I was raised in Los Angeles. 90 is not *so* hot. I plunge in.

I pass between the two hills and round a bend. Sure enough, there it is: the trail winds up a tall hill. I almost turn back. But darn it, I got up at 4:30 in the morning for this! I am determined to ride. I steel myself. You can do this. I switch into the lowest gear and huff and puff my way to the top panting, too exhausted to even notice the oppressive heat. Then I coast as I snake down the other side. The hot wind blowing across my face feels good. In the distance I catch glimmers of the lake, the barren desert around me looks almost sculpted. I am mesmerized by its beauty and feeling proud of my accomplishment. That wasn't so bad. One hill. He just forgot to mention it. Now it will be flat.

I ride a bit, over a bridge crossing a dry riverbed filled with sands that appear painted dark red. Then I see it: another hill. Now I have a decision to make: Do I go forward over that hill? I don't really want to. Or do I go back? But then I realize: behind me is also a hill. One way or another I

have to climb a hill. So what do I do? What do any of us do when in life we find ourselves caught between two hills? I take a big swig of water and go forward.

Well, you can imagine... the whole way was hills.... I have learned that when cyclists say a road is flat they mean something different than the rest of us. In cycling as in life the road is never really flat. It seems there is always another hill that appears when you least expect it. Always another challenge, another obstacle whether you want it or not. Seldom do we get to just coast in life to our destination. But I also learned something about myself that day. I was capable of more than I thought.

Suddenly my short, flat bike rides just weren't going to do it for me anymore. I continued on vacation to see my siblings and each time, I rented a bike. In Portland I rode up a mountain trail to the scenic view at the top of Forest Park. In Los Angeles, I biked the canyons from the hills of my childhood to the beach. Now, back in Ohio, I regularly bike over 100 miles a week. When I started out, I was afraid of hills. Now I look for them.

There are many in this congregation who are much more seasoned and capable cyclists than I am, and many of you have greater challenges than mine. But I share my story with you today because as these Days of Awe approached – these days in which we seek to transform and improve ourselves – I found myself asking, “What have I learned this year from my journey? What can I take from this experience with change that can help guide me in the changes I seek to make in the coming year?” The answer is: I have learned a lot.

I learned that change often begins with listening to those you love, and I learned that listening is not always easy. My journey began when my son first approached me to have a Son-Dad talk. No, not a father-son talk. That's the kind of talk where a father gives advice to his son. But those of us with grown children know there comes a time when those roles reverse, and our children are giving us advice. In his interview with Stephen Colbert the other night, Vice President Joe Biden talked about how his two sons raised him, how they watched over him, gave him advice and kept him on the straight and narrow. He shared how he would be doing a national debate watched by 70 million Americans. When it was over, when everyone else had left the room, his two sons would be still be standing there with him. They would say: “Look at me dad. Home base. Remember who you are, dad.” My kids do that too. So this was not a father-son talk. It was a Son-Dad talk. Menachem said to me: Dad, I want you to be here for my children.”

I did not want to hear it at the time. You know, it's hard to take advice from your kids. You are supposed to be the older and wiser one. You are supposed to be guiding them, helping them succeed. And there is something threatening when a child gives you advice, as if you are no longer competent for that role. Of course, that's not true. The truth is that advice goes both ways our whole lives. We learn from our children and our children learn from us. But in that moment I could not see that.

And something else was also in play in my inability to hear my son. You see, by that point I had already thrown in the towel. I had lost so much weight and gained back even more so many times that I was afraid to try again.

My wife's grandmother of blessed memory, Bubbie Fay, used to have an expression. Whenever someone in the family would catch her doing something she shouldn't be doing, she would say, "I can't help myself. I was born this way."

How many times have we each faced life's challenges like that? "I can't help myself. I was born this way." "I know that I am a workaholic, or that I get angry too easily, or that I don't say thank you enough, or that I am not kind enough, or patient enough. I know I need to change, but: I can't help it, I was born this way."

We all say that, don't we? Well, that was me in that moment with Menachem. I was born this way. Maybe, I rationalized, I have to stop fighting it, and just accept my weight. That meant that Menachem should accept it too. Instead of hearing his concern, I resented that he could not accept me for who I was. But the truth is if Menachem had not given me "the talk," I would never have changed.

I also learned that sometimes it takes a crisis to make us see the need for change. For me, that crisis was Shingles. Now, shingles is not a life threatening condition, but you may recall I had a particularly severe case that lasted almost two years. You all stood by me during that time and I am grateful for your love and support. For the first time in my life I was faced with a completely debilitating condition. Menachem's words kept coming back to me. Shingles was not forever, but far worse health issues lay on the horizon if I did not get my weight under control. Unlike shingles, they would not go away. Would I be there for my grandchildren? For the first time I found myself confronting a fear greater than my fear of failure. I determined to find a way once and for all to lose the weight and keep it off.

Well, as the rabbis teach, *averah goreret averah* and *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*. The more you sin, the easier it gets. But the more good you do, the more you are motivated to do good. My former self was happier to take a nap than a walk. But by March, as the weight was coming off, I was feeling the *need* to exercise. This is something I had never felt before. I had known it in my head, but I had never felt a need. And so came the fateful day when I was driving down Chagrin and on the spur of the moment pulled into Bicycle Boulevard and bought a bike. I didn't know the first thing about bikes. I said to the young man working that day, I need a bike – not too expensive, that is really comfortable to ride, good for streets, sidewalks, trails, with enough gears to make hills easy, so I have no excuse not to ride, because I knew myself. I could buy that bike and quit the very next week.

It was totally spontaneous. You know, so often when we *sin* it is spontaneous; but when we are trying to do good, we always plan it out. Sometimes we spend so much time thinking about doing something good just the right way that we never actually do it. If I am approached about giving Tzedakah I need to calculate to whom I should give it, how much, how will it be recognized, how will it be used... when I see someone in need of help I stop to weigh: do I have the resources and the time? When I think about keeping kosher I deliberate over the cost and how will I keep all that stuff all straight in the kitchen, and then the thought of it overwhelms me so I move on. I think a lot about calling my estranged relative but I never actually pick up the phone.

But when I get angry? Or decide to skip shul on a Saturday, or miss Yizkor, or under-tip a waiter, or gossip about someone... That takes no time at all. We don't give that a second thought. How quickly – in a second – can we ruin a relationship? And how long does it take us – sometimes a lifetime – to say we are sorry or to forgive, to reach out and reconcile?

If only we could be more hesitant about hurting and more spontaneous about healing, slower to hate and quicker to love, if we dawdled to sin but rushed to do mitzvot. If only we could be – as we are urged to be in Pirke Avot – “strong as a lion and swift as an eagle to do the will of our Father in Heaven.”

I learned too that often change comes in small steps. At first my rides were short. My first ride was Beachwood Park from Brainard to Richmond. Then I expanded to Green. Then to Warrensville. Then I started biking around the east side to meetings, lunches, hospital visits.

It was around that time that my kids bought me the best Father's Day present ever. It was a book – Pedaling the North Coast – with 18 (yes symbolic isn't it?) different bicycle routes throughout Metro Cleveland. I opened the book and I began to shake. I had been biking three miles, five miles, six miles. The routes ranged from 11 to 63 miles in length. Some of the trails were described as flat but most as rolling or hilly. Did they really think I could do that? It was so out of my league. But this was from my kids. They believed in me. So how could I not believe in myself?

Another lesson. To change, to really change, you have to believe in yourself. You have to believe in the good in you and in your ability to change. And to believe in yourself, you need others to believe in you too. Change is not a journey you can take alone. And my journey was not taken alone. There are so many along the way to whom I owe a debt, who were with me on that journey: doctors and psychologists, family and friends, many cyclists who gave me advice. Most of all each one believed I could do something I thought I could not.

And while it may be true that change can come in small steps, my experience at Lake Mead taught me that the opposite is also true: sometimes change comes through big unexpected challenges that are forced upon us. We cannot avoid the hills in our path in life, but we can become stronger because of them.

I know this journey is not over for me. I share these musings with deep humility, recognizing it has only been one year. The truth is that I live in fear every day that I will not be able to maintain this change. I have failed too many times before. And there are still plenty of days when my will is not strong enough.

When I began biking this summer, I started using Strava, an app that keeps track of routes, miles ridden, speed and elevation climbs. Each time I would see how far I rode, how high I climbed, it pushed me to want to do just a little more. And when we move forward just a little at a time... it is amazing to look back and realize how far we have come.

I don't have a Strava for my moral and spiritual life. That's too bad. I could use one. We all could use one. But we have the next best thing. We have this Machzor, and this Torah, which remind us of the goals we should set for ourselves and the kind of person we should strive to be.

As we gather here to pray on these High Holidays, we know that we are not that person yet. We try. It's hard. There are so many hills to climb. We have been here so many times before, beating our breast, making the same confessions, the same promises to change. But as we look back over this past year, as we look back from the crest of each of those hills we have climbed, we realize we can climb higher and travel farther than we thought. We just need to:

Listen to the voices around us of those who love us

Believe in ourselves

Look at each challenge as an opportunity to grow

To take the journey one step at a time

And to have the courage sometimes to be spontaneous in making change and doing good, plunging in fearlessly.

The New Year is laid out before us like a trail to our new selves. The journey will not always be easy. There will be rough patches in the road, hills to climb and setbacks along the way. But we can do this. Not just to change one thing we do, but to really transform who we are. To find within us our better selves.

Come, let us ride together into the New Year.

Shanah Tovah.