

Dreams

Rosh Hashanah 5772

In our dreams, we can go anywhere, accomplish anything, be anyone. Sometimes we soar through the air using only our arms and legs to fly. In other dreams, we take the wrong step and fall endlessly until we abruptly wake to reality. Many of us have dreamed of being naked in a public place or being stuck in an unfortunate circumstance. It is odd, but people across cultures, locations and socio-economic status all share common dreams, suggesting that they also share common fears, hopes and concerns. I see dreams in two categories: the ones we have when we are asleep and the dreams that drive us, the ones that articulate our passions, our goals, our ambitions.

Dreams are vital to who we are and what we become. We must not ever stop dreaming. Rabbi Avi Weiss, an American Modern Orthodox rabbi and renowned author, teacher, lecturer and activist, who heads the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and is founder and Dean of the “open Orthodox Yeshiva in New York, questions, “In simple terms, how are we to deal with dreams that have gone awry? The key is to recognize that there is a difference between dream and reality. Dream is the hope of a glorious, almost perfect future. Yet, reality, by definition, includes disappointments. But the challenge is that when reality sets in, when disappointment sets in, never to forget the dream. Once you forget the dream, it’s all over, because you won’t be able to handle the reality.”

Chris Wadell, recently featured on 20/20’s episode titled Super Humans: Arms of Steel, definitely learned to never stop dreaming. The episode featured Chris’s climb on the varied terrain of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa. He needed to climb this mountain, so he turned the crank on his hand cycle one revolution and then another and then one thousand more times until he reached camp for the day.

A skiing accident two decades before had left 20 year old Waddell paralyzed from the waist down. At age 43, he says that this experience taught him a metaphor for life: we’re all climbing our own mountain.

Because he refused to focus on what he could no longer do, after his accident, Waddell said the accident was the best thing that has ever happened to him, that he felt like a transformed person, in a lot of ways, like the person that he always thought he was, like the best form of himself.

Waddell was back on the ski slopes on a mono-ski, a ski in which both feet are attached parallel to the board, a few months after his accident. He set his dreams high, determined to focus on the positive aspects of his disability. He fully intended to be a world-class skier, the best in the world. He eventually competed and won 12 gold medals for mono skiing and one gold medal for wheelchair racing, becoming the most decorated Paralympian in US history.

At the apex of his career, after being named one of the 50 most beautiful people by People Magazine, he decided to retire and set his sights on his next goal: Kilimanjaro.

After months of training, Waddell and his team began the climb in September 2009. On the first day, he easily climbed 3,000 feet of elevation, arriving at camp ahead of schedule. He defied expectations as he cranked through miles of difficult terrain with the help of porters, who placed boards under his wheels to make the trails passable. Day two was a little more difficult, and day three, Chris skipped meal breaks and powered through, but on day four, with the dizzying altitude of 17,000 feet and the difficult terrain, Chris didn't know if he could do it. Gravel on the boards made his wheels slip off, inches were taking hours and only 30 feet from camp, his arms turned to rubber. So he took it one turn of the hand crank at a time, the message that inspires the title of his documentary. One small turn of the crank can cause something so much bigger, the achievement of climbing the mountain, and the idea of change. Change in how we see ourselves.

Yet, on day 6, the mountain forced him to take a new look at himself. With only 400 feet to go, his path was filled with rock and he couldn't go any farther by himself. He reluctantly let his team carry him 100 feet to bypass the rocks in his way. At that point, he felt like luggage and like a failure until his lead advisor privately reminded him, "no one climbs a mountain alone." Just then, he learned the lesson he was supposed to learn all along.

Suddenly, the man who spent years powering through life with his disability, trying to achieve and overcome, had a different vision. He didn't want to ask for help, because he would be a lesser person, but he realized that asking for help is human.

Chris had always believed that being super human was only the ability to have a goal or a dream about something and then to actually have the guts to go after the dream. For Chris, this meant changing the perceptions of disabled people, a message he shares through all of his work. "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do with what happens to you."

Without this dream of climbing Kilimanjaro, none of this would be possible. Chris needed to keep the dream alive. Because the reality did, of course, set in, the reality of sweat and volcanic ash in his face and teeth, his arms turning to jelly when he came to a point on the mountain when the rocks were so big there was no way for him to overcome them himself and he didn't know if he could go any farther, this moment of reality could have been the end to climbing Kilimanjaro. Reality always sets in, yet Chris kept the dream in mind. He realized that it was ok to have the porters carry him over the terrain; he remembered his dream of climbing the mountain.

I, too, have had experience with dreams and reality. Since the Friday night of my Bat Mitzvah, it has been my dream to become a rabbi. But just like any other dream, reality set it. I would love to tell you that reality of rabbinical school was juggling exams, papers, internships, a job and family. Yet, that was actually only a small part of my reality.

I have an unfortunate way of remembering 4 out of my 5 years of rabbinical school. During my first year in Jerusalem, as I was crossing King David street in the cross walk when a motorcycle white-lined through the stopped cars and barreled over me. Thank goodness, after many hours at the hospital, I was ok. Yet, the hard part of my recovery came later at my apartment in a foreign land with no family. It was then that I wondered if I could continue, yet I saw the strength of my school community for the first time.

My second year of rabbinical school back in Los Angeles three months after marrying Adam, I was awoken at 3:00 am to what I thought was Adam having a heart attack. While on the phone with 911, I realized it was a seizure, and hours later we discovered it was caused by a mass. A day later, it was determined the mass was a brain tumor that need surgery, and weeks later we were elated to find out that it was indeed benign. In short, that was an incredibly stressful, horrible time in my life. There were many sleepless nights, many prayers and subjects in class that brought tears to my eyes, but my dream of becoming a rabbi was stronger than ever. Reality was hard; reality is still scary surrounding health. But the dream was stronger.

My third year, while struggling with reading out loud in class, I was instructed to get tested for learning disabilities. No surprise to me, I discovered that I am dyslexic. Although this diagnosis seemed to support a theory I had come up with a long time ago, it was not easy to hear. How would I deal with reading out loud every Shabbat? How would I tackle mass amounts of Hebrew? In reality, I still struggle with this today. But the important part is that the struggle has not over powered my dream.

Then the summer before my fourth year was horrible, my father, who had suffered from heart disease and diabetes my entire life, suddenly died. My sister, mother and nieces had just arrived by car at my house in LA for a three-week vacation when the call arrived. Within hours, we were all on a plane and, as we were landing over Houston, I can remember the sight of Fourth of July fireworks going off simultaneously all along the skyline. There is nothing easy about losing a parent.

These years of study and struggle were tough. One of my childhood rabbis once told me you don't go to rabbinical school for rabbinical school, you go because you want to be a rabbi. I know that if I had ever, even for a second, let go of my dream, I would not be standing here in front of you today. Reality is too hard without the driving force of a dream.

One of my favorite Hassidic tales provides us with two sayings to live by. It says that everyone should carry around two pieces of paper, one in your right pocket and one in your left pocket. On one you should write, "I am nothing but dust and ashes." The other one should say, "The whole world was created for my sake."

When you forget to dream, and dream big about making your impact on the world and helping to create a better place, you should take out the paper that reads, "The whole world was created for my sake." Remember that you are created in the divine image. You are bzelem Elohim.

Our actions really do matter. It is up to us to help make the world a better place. It is our duty to take this task seriously by being a good friend, a good neighbor, a good, parent, a good mentor, a good congregant and a good person. "The whole world was created for my sake" doesn't mean the world is here to serve us but rather that each one of us has a unique role to help form the world into a better place.

Yet as we are doing our part in the world and reality sets in, when our career takes a turn for the worst, when we have job loss, when we are in the hard part of a relationship, when we encounter sickness or death, or when our dream seems unachievable, we need to take out that other piece of paper. We will read, "I am but dust and ashes." This saying will remind us that we are only

human. This saying will put our hubris into perspective. "I am but dust and ashes" reminds us that often it is not about making everything perfect.

For Chris, it was not about beating others on the slopes or climbing Mt. Kilimajaro alone, but rather about keeping the dream alive. We need to stay in the race. Reality will set in, and we will encounter hard times, but if we keep the dream alive, reality will not overcome the dream. For Chris the bumps in his path would have made the summit unattainable. For me the motorcycle, dyslexia, Adam's brain tumor and the death of my father could have made today impossible. Yet, because we kept the dream alive, dreams became reality.

May we have the strength and courage to continue when our dreams confront reality.

May we be blessed with the promise of the future even in the midst of reality. May our dreams this year be as sweet as honey.

Shannah Tova Umetukah.