

**Yizkor Sermon:
Removing the Obstacle of Negative Self-Talk:
“You Are Going to Be Okay”
Rabbi Jennifer Schlosberg
September 30, 2017 | 10 Tishrei 5778**

There’s an old Jewish joke that goes like this:

What’s the definition of a Jewish telegram?

Answer: One that reads: “Start worrying. Details to follow.”

Oy vey. Oy gevalt. Oy vei ismir. We are a people that thrives on worrying. “Don’t forget your gloves and scarf, darling.” “But, ma, it’s September.” “It’s been known to snow in September.” “Here, honey, eat a piece of brisket.” “But, ma, I just had breakfast. “I know, but those Corn Flakes just aren’t filling enough. You might get hungry before lunch.” “Put a little sunscreen on that nose before you go to school.” “But, ma, I’ll be indoors all day.” “I know, but if you happen to sit near the window...”

I’m wondering why the person worrying in these jokes is always the mother...

Our haftarah this morning, which comes from the book of Isaiah expresses the excitement of the Jews after King Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their land from Babylonian in the 6th century, BCE. The haftarah begins with the following verses:

וְאָמַר סְלוּ-סְלוּ, פְּנוּ-דְרָךְ; הָרִימוּ מִכְשׁוֹל, מִדְרָךְ עַמִּי.

“Adonai says: “Build up, build up a highway! Clear a road! Remove all obstacles from the road of My people!” (Isaiah 57:14).

Of course, given that King Cyrus finally allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, the meaning of clearing the road and removing all obstacles from the road of my people was meant to be quite literal. But, considering the holiday and this time of repentance, this verse challenges us to think about how we can remove all of the obstacles in our own lives.

There has been a lot of research and debate recently among psychologists about the number of thoughts that we have per day. Some have argued that we have between

50,000 and 80,000 thoughts a day. Others say it's anywhere from 12,000 to 70,000. The differences in numbers is a result of how one might define what a thought actually is, but even 12,000 thoughts a day is a lot. One thing that is clear among most scientists, however, is that at least 70% of your thoughts each day are negative. 70%!!

הָרִימוּ מְכֻשׁוֹל, מִדֶּרֶךְ עַמִּי

“Remove all obstacles from the road of my people.”

Is it possible that we are creating the most obstacles in our lives through our own thoughts?

How many of you have tried to self-diagnose on Google and before you know it, you've got some horrific disease and instead of planning your dinner for that night, you find yourself thinking about your own mortality?

How many of you have made an innocent mistake at work, only to find yourself thinking of how you are going to find a new job after getting fired from this one?

Bad things will happen will to us. They will. But there is no sense in worrying about the bad things until they actually happen.

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“Remove all obstacles from the road of my people.”

How do we do this?

We replace negative self-talk and negative thinking with positive life-affirming mantras.

There was an article published a few weeks ago that I read on NPR. It was about the importance of helping teens re-shift their negative thoughts to positive ones. The author, Mary Alvord, who is a cognitive behavioral therapist claims that this type of therapy “teaches people how to recognize faulty negative self-talk, to notice how it makes them feel and act, and to challenge it.”

"Why didn't she text me back yet? She doesn't like me anymore!"

"There's no way I'm trying out for the team. I'm terrible at basketball!"

"It's not fair that I have a curfew!"

Alvord says that one of the best gifts that parents can give to their children is “the ability to take notice of their thoughts, to step back and view the bigger picture, and to decide how to act based on that more realistic perspective.”

It’s pretty hard to do when we tend to not do it ourselves.

I’d like to think that I’m immune to worrying. But I’m one of the worst. After all, I am a Jewish mother. And I know that it does me no good. I’ve taken a lot to yoga recently and the practice has encouraged me to better create positive mantras in my life that help me shift from negative to positive thinking.

So I’d like to introduce you to an important mantra in my life, which comes from a book that a mentor shared with me. It was written by a woman named Melody Ross, founder of an organization called “Brave Girls Club,” an online women’s empowerment group that offers retreats, workshops and the like to encourage and support women. So what is the mantra of this book? A few of you already heard some of it, it’s called “You are going to be okay.”

Allow me (read excerpts from book).

On your way out of the service today, I invite you to help yourself to one of these books. I have ordered enough so that each member family can have one, so please only take one for your entire family as you leave today. I know you’ll be tempted to take one for a friend, but...it’s Yom Kippur...we are going to work on the honor system here. In any case...

Soon we will recite Yizkor in memory of our loved ones. I know that for many of us, we often look for “signs” in nature, in our homes, in our hearts, to feel connected with those who have already passed. We turn to them for answers to questions that we are wrestling with. And often, we find ourselves, “receiving” the answers. I’ve heard many of your stories. You don’t often share them with others, but I’m humbled that behind closed doors, some of you do with me. So you often have your answers from your loved ones, whether it’s through a phone call or something you read, or a song on Pandora. But what is fascinating to me is that when we see those “signs,” let’s face it, those signs can be interpreted in so many different ways – either negatively or positively. But somehow, when we know in our hearts that this “sign” or this “message” is coming from a loved one who has passed, we interpret it positively. We interpret these signs in beautifully powerful and hopeful ways. These signs give us determination and will and faith that we are going to be okay.

In other words, the messages that we “receive” from our loved ones are not inherently positive, but it’s how we view them in that moment in positive ways.

הָרִימוּ מְכֻשׁוֹלֵי, מִדֶּרֶךְ עַמִּי

“Remove all obstacles from the road of my people.”

We have the power to think positive thoughts instead of negative ones.

A couple of months ago, I turned to my father, of blessed memory, for some guidance about something I was worrying about. I never know how he’s going to send me a message – or if I will receive one – or if I’ll be so busy that I’ll miss it. So I sat in my office, looking at his picture on my desk and just sighed.

I quickly went on with my work, pulling a book from my bookshelf that I needed to create a source sheet for my Torah on Tap class. By the way, you should come, it’s loads of fun. But anyway, there I was, grabbing Sacred Fragments by Rabbi Neil Gillman off my bookshelf. I noticed a bookmark sticking up out of the book, so I turned to that page, figuring that maybe that was the source I was looking for.

I took the bookmark out of the book and instantly, I fell to the floor in tears.

The bookmark was a bill that I received from the Waffle House. And there was my sign.

Oh, how I knew that Waffle House bill so well. It was from December 17, 2007, the day that my father died. The night prior to that, after having spent well over a year mostly-in but sometimes out of the hospital, the doctors told us that it was time to remove my father from the ventilator. He had been on it most recently after suffering from his fourth or fifth stroke. We lost track. It seemed to be the right thing to do, but it’s a decision and an action that I would not wish upon anyone. We gave the okay to have the tubes removed and four of us, my mom, my brother, my uncle, and me – we all sat by his bedside, reciting the Shema, and holding his hand until he took his final breath. It was about 2:00 am.

I stayed with my father’s body until the funeral home came to the hospital. And then I told my mom that we should grab a cup of coffee. We eventually took a ride in our car to get some fresh air, and found ourselves at the Waffle House. We ate breakfast, had a refill or two on the coffee – and then asked for the check.

And that's the same check, the same bill, that I hold today. Because over that cup of coffee, my mom and I talked about what we had just done, and how our brains told us that we did the right thing, but our hearts ached so much. I just needed my dad to tell me that he was okay.

And I looked down at the bill that our waiter handed to us. And I noticed that on the back of the check, the waiter had signed the words: "Thanks, Jay."

May seem trivial to you, but what you might not know is that my father's name was Jay.

I'm not sure I had any tears left in me at that point, but if I did, I'm sure they came pouring out. I just needed my dad to tell me that he was okay. And this stranger handed me a bill that says "Thanks, Jay."

My mom and I couldn't believe it. We eventually made our way to the cash register to pay for our breakfast. I asked the cashier if I could keep the copy of the bill and told her why. She said "of course." Then I asked her what her name was. "Margie," she said. And I turned to my mom, whose name is Marge – and I just shook my head in disbelief.

But we went on our way...got into our car. It was a bitter cold day. So my mom and I sat in the car for a minute while it warmed up. Our car was facing the window of the Waffle House and by happenstance, we both looked up at the window at the same time, and there was Jay, waving at us, saying...goodbye.

You can't make this up. If my mom didn't witness it with me, no one would believe me.

הָרִימוּ מְכֻשׁוֹל, מִדֶּרֶךְ עַמִּי

"Remove all obstacles from the road of my people."

We removed the obstacle in my father's life that morning.

Ten years later and this Waffle House bill popped up in my life right when I needed it. When I fell on the floor of my office in tears, it was not tears of sadness, but tears of love and faith and hope.

We had removed the obstacle in my father's life and in turn, he gave me the gift of knowing that he was okay. That I would be okay. That all would be okay.

(P. 21 from book:

People you love will pass away

It's just something that happens along the way

You'll miss them just about every day

But you are going to be okay...)

(p. 28 from book:

Tomorrow is a brand new day

And you are going to be okay)

G'mar chatimah tovah.