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Dannel Schwartz writes of the ancient African legend of Yameel, the fastest messenger and most reliable runner on the African continent. Myths abounded about Yameel's swiftness of foot, his sense of direction and his uncanny ability to find any location, from the most remote tree in the jungle to the largest village. Tribal leaders marveled at his speed and recounted tales of his quick sprints through the bush from one village to another.

So it was very strange that a village elder should encounter the runner on the road one day standing almost motionless. The elder asked: "Why have you stopped in the middle of a mission?" Yameel looked down at the man and answered: "I have been running so fast that I have left my soul behind. I am standing here, waiting for my soul to catch up to me.

It is Yom Kippur, and so we pause; applying the "breaks" to life's frenetic pace, allowing our souls to catch up with us.

We usher in this most sacred day, by willing ourselves to turn away from the need to careen through life, and instead we simply stop and reflect on who we are, on where we are in our lives, and on where we should be.

Through the years we have gathered for this sacred convocation in times of plenty and stability. But this year, as we all know, is different. There is more unease inside of us this year.

Yet in times of tranquility and difficulty, this enlarged sanctuary is our refuge. There is something very comforting about our coming together, embraced by one another, and by a tradition of penetrating prayers and beautiful music. No matter the direction the winds of fortune blow, these services are one of life's constant sources of strength.

Outside these walls we have conditioned ourselves to live life as an ever-accelerating marathon. We have become captive to life's speed, by life's impatience, by the fear that if I slow down I will miss out on something really important just up ahead,

Inside this sanctuary, the quiet calm of our worship enables us to focus on our lives. Our prayers throughout Yom Kippur will encourage us to look deep within ourselves, and to ask tough questions: And tonight I want us all to ask: what we have sacrificed on the altar of our always-on multitasking never-a-free-moment, never-satisfied-always-needing-more lives? Am I focusing on the right things? Have I given enough love, enough patience, and enough tenderness to those I love? What am I missing because of life's speed and distractions and insatiable cravings?

For many of us, technology is among the worst culprits. Our constant buzzing and vibrating PDA's mean that we rarely take the time to breathe without our attention diverted away. One media critic called this particular phenomenon "Blackberry slavery."

Some of you may have seen an article published recently in the New York Times about texting while driving. A majority of those surveyed refused to refrain from checking their messages and even responding while behind the wheel. One woman, a wife and the mother of a 12-year-old boy who hates his mother's driving habits, said, "Honestly, I laugh at myself all the time. It is really possible that I am talking on the phone, e-mailing

and driving with my knees simultaneously?” The article references a study by Nationwide Insurance that polled 1500 drivers across the country. 48% felt pressure from work to respond immediately; 33% said that “the pressure to stay connected socially” compelled them to text while behind the wheel.

And here’s another rather common example: My family goes out to dinner each Sunday night. Just the four of us. A chance to reconnect, to relax, to laugh together over some good food that we don’t have to cook or clean up after. One Sunday we went to one of our favorite Italian restaurants nearby and as we made our way through the restaurant to our table, I saw another family, two teenage kids and their parents, seemingly doing what we were doing, a family dinner out. Yet at this table, each one of them was on a different gadget. The girl was actually wearing earphones. They were sitting together, but they might as well have been in separate rooms.

Outpacing our souls wears us down. It depletes us physically, and it takes its toll on our relationships. We lose the ability to stand in the present and reflect on what we do, on how our behavior affects those closest to us. We run so fast, some days we barely notice each other as we fly by.

Rabbi Larry Kushner writes about the miracle at the Red Sea, after our escape from Egyptian bondage. The Torah recounts that the sea split and the waters stood like great walls, while Israel passed through, escaping to freedom on the distant shore. Awesome. But apparently not for everyone.

According to ancient rabbinic legend, two people, Reuven and Shimon, hurried along among the crowd crossing through the sea. But they never once looked up.

"This is terrible!" said Reuven. "There's mud all over the place!"

"Disgusting!" said Shimon. "I'm in muck up to my ankles!"

"You know what?" replied Reuven. "When we were slaves in Egypt, we had to make our bricks out of mud, just like this!"

"Yeah," said Shimon. "There's no difference between being a slave in Egypt and being free here."

And so it went, Reuven and Shimon hurrying, whining and complaining all the way across the bottom of the sea. For them there was no miracle, only mud.

The question is: how do you want to live your life? If all the wrong things constantly distract you, and when the distractions become more important than people, we start to get impatient; we rush to judgment. We express rash and even nasty words to those closest to us, focusing on the negative, on only what we think is missing. And what emotional cues are we missing, in our children, spouse or parent who stands right before us when we are in such a hurry to leave them, to get to the more important thing we have next, when we turn away from them to check messages? Do we even see them at all? What opportunities for appreciation, for happiness and for gratitude, right in front of me, do I inadvertently toss aside because I don't take the time? Is this really how you want to live?

In Hebrew, the word for repentance is teshuvah. Teshuvah also means “turning”, to physically turn yourself around. Because to achieve repentance and joy in a relationship, you have to turn toward the other person. You have to be in their presence, in the moment, available to receive their honesty and to offer your love. You cannot be looking down at the mud. You cannot be looking past them. You cannot be checking a text message.

When we get married, we immediately paint a picture of our futures in our minds—a picture that looks a lot like the board game “The Game of Life.” We see every future milestone. All our predetermined professional successes. The house. The cars. And when the kids come, as soon as they emerge from the womb, or these days as soon as the picture of the ultrasound is taped to the refrigerator, we plan their futures. We see it all: the sports, the schools, the proms, the weddings, the grandchildren. It all arrays itself before us in our minds’ eyes.

But because life is not a board game, things almost never turn out quite the way we thought. We grow and change. They change, too. Life has its way of placing landmines along the way. There are disappointments, and even opportunities we never imagined. And our kids: they grow into their own selves, into their individuality; often defying the portraits we painted of them when they were born. It takes time, patience and understanding to accept the people in our lives for who they are. It means being fully present with them to appreciate them in the fullness of their lives.. But it can be a gift. To struggle to see a person anew; a gift to see the goodness is inside of them, that you had missed.

This past week I was discussing teshuva with my confirmation class, and one very perceptive young woman raised her hand and asked about that rare, tragic case, the person whose transgression was so severe, that you may never be able to allow them back into your life. And I told her that even then, continually retreating into the pain another person caused you accomplishes nothing good, even if you need to live life without them. It enables them to continue to exert power over your feelings, power they do not deserve. We forgive them, so we can wash ourselves clean of their toxic hold over us.

Yet Yom Kippur requires us to honestly ask if we are putting people into that category unjustly; if the anger become a comfortable retreat, enabling us to claim moral superiority at their expense that we don't deserve? All that energy spent resenting someone. How it consumes us, how it enervates us. What might we do with all that extra time, all that extra energy, if we could just let go of that anger? And even more, what about the 99.9% of people in our lives, all those whose love and companionship we do desire; what about the people seated with us?

It is basic human nature that each one of us is an expert on how we believe we ourselves should be treated. We expect flexibility from those around us. When we act badly, we believe we deserve their patience and ultimately their exoneration. And we want them to take the time to get to know who we are, and more, who we have become. We want to be understood, and we want those who claim our love to accept us for who we are.

The great sage Hillel taught: That which is hateful to you, do not do to any other person. Our obligation is, simply, to treat other people with the same patience, the same flexibility, the same forgiveness that we expect for ourselves.

A Hasid approached the sainted Rabbi Manachem Mendel of Kotzk with a problem. "Rebbe," he said, "my son isn't following the way of Torah. I did the best I could. I showed him the way. But he doesn't want to take it. What shall I do?"

"Do you love your son?" asked the rebbe.

"What a question! Of course I do."

"Then love him more."

Maybe he won't change. But over the years I've learned that no one really changes as a result of constant criticism, or the cold, distant glare of disappointment. So the question is, can you accept him anyway? Can you love him more? The question is: How do you want to live your life? Fueled by disappointment, bitterness and loneliness? Or exalted by appreciation, forgiveness and love.

Kol Nidre is here. The gates of repentance, renewal and even rebirth are wide open. Ours is the decision to pass through them. It requires taking the time to appreciate and even love him despite the disappointments, despite the flaws and the hurt feelings, just as we want him to find a way to loving and appreciating us. It only happens when we meet her with an openness to who she is, right now, without trying to fashion her into the person we insist they should be. And it only happens when we set aside all the

distractions, when we pause on our journeys long enough to make them our priority, long enough to allow our souls to catch up with us. And when we do, in ways that we cannot begin to fathom, the powerful transcendent force of goodness that moves in and through the world, will move in and through us.