

All I Really Need To Know I Learned from Coach Kozak Yom Kippur 5782 (2021) Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Good Yom Tov and Shanah tovah.

Throughout the pandemic, like just about everyone, I searched for something to do other than sit at my desk and work. One of the things I found was exercise videos on a [Youtube channel called Hasfit](#), where, like any good exercise instructor, Coach Kozak mixes exercise instruction with words of reflection and encouragement. Like any mediocre rabbi, I am always looking for sources for ideas for a *drashah* (sermon), even in exercise videos. So, just as Robert Fulghum shared the lessons he learned in kindergarten, I'd like to share some of the lessons I learned from Coach Kozak about improving physical fitness, which I think apply equally to our current High Holiday effort to achieve better spiritual fitness.

The first lesson comes from something Coach Kozak says in just about every video. "Make this workout your own." It is important to tailor one's exercise to one's abilities. We have to challenge ourselves enough so that we achieve as much physical benefit from exercise as we can, but not so much that injure ourselves or become discouraged by what we aren't able to achieve. The same is true when it comes to our efforts at self-improvement. If we don't challenge ourselves, we won't achieve the spiritual improvement and fulfill the mitzvot (commandments/good deeds) that we could. On the other hand, if we try to go from zero to Moses in one High Holiday season, we are bound to either give up quickly or to burn ourselves out along the way. Even Moses had to pace himself, as Yitro (Jethro) taught him when he criticized Moses for spending too much time tending to the needs of the Israelites. "לא טוב הדבר אשר אתה עשה. נבל תבל ... גם אתה גם העם הזה כי כבד ממך הדבר לא תוכל עשהו לבדך ... what you are doing is not good. Both you and the people will wither, for this work is too much for you, you cannot carry it alone!"¹ This may also be one of the reasons that we start off Yom Kippur with Kol Nidre, a subtle warning that with the best of intentions we can set our sights too high, leading us to fall short of our commitments.

Lesson Two: You can't achieve maximum improvement in any one muscle group without strengthening other related muscle groups. For instance, Coach Kozak says "So many times people focus on only working their abs, but you definitely need that lower back strength at the same time or else your abs are only going to be able to get so strong without them."² I think the many types of mitzvot we have are like the muscle groups. Strength achieved in any one area of mitzvot helps us gain strength in other areas as well, and we have to flex all of our personal development muscles at the same time to achieve maximum results in any area.

¹ Exodus 18:17-18.

² <https://youtu.be/QbriVENsGeA> at approximately 2:16.

Simon the Righteous famously teaches: “על שלשה דברים העולם עומד על התורה ועל ועל גמילות חסדים the world stands on three things, on [study of] Torah, on worship, and on acts of kindness.”³ The three categories feed off of each other. Study of Torah teaches us how to understand and worship God and how to behave most kindly and justly toward others. Worship inspires us to turn to Torah to learn God’s will and to put those expectations into action with our acts of kindness. Thus, study of Torah and prayer are the exercise that put us in the best intellectual and emotional shape to do God’s will. Our acts of kindness in turn hone our understanding of Torah and give meaning to the relationship with God that we express in our prayers.

Similarly, Hillel taught, “אם אין אני לי מי לי וכשאני לעצמי מה אני” if I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am [only] for myself, what am I.”⁴ In order to do the most good in this world, we also have to take care of ourselves. That is another lesson from Yitro’s chastising Moses – Moses wasn’t taking care of himself, and, ultimately, that would burn him out, which would hurt both Moses and the people.⁵ And perhaps when Hillel goes on to say “ואם לא עכשיו אימתי” if not now, when?” which seems to be a bit out of left field, he means that we have to keep our eye on both goals – taking care of ourselves and taking care of others – at the same time, at all times.

By the way, this idea also relates to the relationship between our physical and our intellectual fitness. There is lots of evidence that exercise is vital to our brain function, and many fascinating studies show how exercise has direct benefits for brain function.⁶ This means, by the way, that if we want to achieve maximum wisdom and understanding of Torah so that we can make the best decisions best fulfill the mitzvot, we have to work on keeping our bodies in shape as well!

A final line from Coach Kozak that struck me is his comment that achieving fitness is “not about how bad you want it, it’s about how hard you’re willing to work for it.”⁷ This led me to think about the term *kavanah* (intention, fervor) that we hear a lot about. We often talk about *kavanah* in terms of prayer and, at least for me, I have tended to think about it in terms of how strongly a person is hoping that God will answer her or his prayers. But Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that the goal of prayer is not for us to get anything out of God, but for us to align our will with the will of our Creator:

The main ends of prayer are to move God, to let him participate in our lives, and to interest ourselves in Him. What is the meaning of praise if not to make His concern our own? Worship is an act of inner agreement with God.⁸

³ Mishnah Ethics of the Fathers 1:2.

⁴ Mishnah Ethics of the Fathers 1:14.

⁵ See text accompanying footnote 1 above.

⁶ See e.g. “[How Exercise May Help Keep Our Memory Sharp](#)” New York Times August 25, 2021.

⁷ Coach Kozak says something along these lines in many videos, including https://youtu.be/LHOjov_ZhXk at 18:13.

⁸ Quest For God Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1987. p. 18.

If that's true, then *kavanah* is not about how hard we *want* anything from God, but how hard we are willing to work to achieve God's aspirations for us! Are we willing to set aside the time for prayer to align our will with God? How much time are we willing to dedicate to study of Torah in order to understand God's will for us? How much energy are we willing to put into acts of loving kindness, caring for everyone around us while all the while taking care of ourselves as well?

This Yom Kippur, as we evaluate our lives and work to improve our spiritual wellbeing, let's take some good advice from the world of physical fitness. Let's make this exercise our own, by honestly evaluating what we can achieve and challenging ourselves to do the hard work to achieve it. Let's take the time to consider all aspects of our lives that make us who we are and dedicate ourselves to doing the work to strengthen each aspect – dedicating more time to the study of Torah and finding the best sources of Torah learning, finding new and deeper meaning in our prayer, evaluating the best ways we can care for others, all the while keeping ourselves healthy and happy. May this be a year in which all of our physical, intellectual, and spiritual muscles grow together and strengthen each other.

Shanah tovah, and a meaningful fast to all.