

A Runner's Passion

By Joseph Benun

I was eight years old and my parents were attempting to get me to go to the pizza store.

“But why can't I stay home with Daddy?”

“Because Daddy is going jogging and the rest of the family is going to go eat.”

I was having a fit. Eventually, my mother, sick and tired from frustration, departed only to leave me and my dad in the house. I stubbornly managed to coax my dad into allowing me to go jogging with him, though I had no idea what jogging actually was

I slipped on a pair of muddy sneakers, whose latest adventure involved scaling the school playground, and were now going to experience something entirely different. And on that note, I went running with my dad through the local park.

It was a frigid December day. The park's water fountains and bathrooms were closed. A couple of miles rolled by and I felt surprisingly fine. My goal was to surpass my dad's prediction that I would be able to run one or two miles. I remember telling myself that whatever my dad planned on doing, I was going to do—which was six miles. After every mile I asked my Dad, “Did you think I would make it this far?” And every time I would receive the same answer, “Haha, no Joe.”

Exceeding my father's expectations fed my desire to trek forward. About an hour later, I had finished. I then took my first sip from a chilled Gatorade bottle and thought, “Wow, now I'm a real runner!” As a kid, I was under the impression that only real athletes could drink the legendary Gatorade beverage. After that first sip, I passionately guzzled down the thirst-quencher and it was then that the seed of my future was planted.

Twenty-four hours later I was back to the same old me: more interested in the latest cartoon show than actually considering running again. It was not until five years later, however, that I realized that the episode was not as trivial as I had thought. I was an eighth grade student in Hillel Yeshiva when I met the school's new gym coach from Israel, Shlomo Weiss.

Shlomo introduced me (or should I say reintroduced me) to running. He told me about the JCC Maccabi Games. The games are a simulation of the Olympics for Jewish teens from around the world. The event takes place annually in four different venues. The plan was for me to participate in track and field meets, but in the end I decided not to attend the games that year mostly because a close friend of mine decided not to go. A year later, however, I made up my mind to participate, come what may.

I was so excited! Not sure what to expect and with six months to go, I started to train. My father, enthusiastic to encourage my new-found hobby, bought me my first pair of running shoes. They were bright white with orange stripes. I was eager; just as a child wants to play with a new toy, I wanted to get the most use out of my new sneakers.

I then began to run a couple of times a week. I started to eat well, slowly cutting out unhealthy foods. First to go was ices, then ice cream, and eventually my sister's home-made, melt in your mouth, deliciously chewy, sugar cookies. Now, I'm a health nut and practically a vegan.

The novelty of running, though, began to wear off and I started to make excuses why I could not run on any given day. The excuses ranged from a sprained finger to a bruised bottom to being just plain "sick". And when I did run, I would make it quick and painless.

One day, after a run of just one mile, my dad had a stern talk with me. He told me that my strategy was not going to work. I could not just run one mile a few days a week and expect to see an improvement. "There are no shortcuts," he told me. My ego was crushed and I painfully admitted to myself that he was right. Luckily, I still had a couple of weeks left till the Maccabi Games. With a different outlook, I whipped myself into shape.

Before I knew it, I was on my way to Vancouver, Canada. Turned out, I wasn't such a bad runner, garnering 7 medals- five gold, one silver, and two bronze in various track and field events. I realized from my training that nothing is served on a silver platter, if I wanted something I had to work for it. My eating habits began to evolve with this new outlook and my academic performance started to climb.

One year later and I was again off to the games, this time in Orange County, California. I won five medals and the lesson that I learned the year before was further etched in my mind. I had become a health fanatic cutting out any white flour, artificial sugars and meat. Not only that, but with my increased training I learned to budget my time while still maintaining (and slightly improving) my scholastic abilities.

The notable difference between my first Maccabi Games and the second was that now I had the "runner's high" and wanted to race every chance I got.

I started train seriously for every upcoming meet. Since my school, Flatbush Yeshivah, does not have a track team, I compete in local races. Typically I would win awards for my age group, but occasionally, I would garner an award for overall performance.

As perverse as this may sound to some, I enjoy pushing my body to the limits and running is a great way for me to test these limits. In the Long Branch half marathon, for example, I lost my drive to continue about two-thirds through the race. (Scientists think this occurs as a result of low carbohydrate stores.) My body was screaming at me to stop or at the very least, walk. It was at that moment, that I tested my true limits not necessarily physically, but mentally.

With about two miles to go, my vision had become increasingly blurry, possibly due to a lack of oxygen; however, I endured. Upon finishing the race, I collapsed on a spectator, was rushed to the medical tent on a stretcher and was hooked up to an oxygen tank (due to a bad case of hyperventilation). Nevertheless, when the dust cleared, I was the same old runner, fervent to take on another race.

Running has taught me self discipline; it has transformed me from a slacker into a diligent student, from an unhealthy child who would succumb to cravings, to someone who can resist even the tastiest treat. I currently do not eat refined sugars, refined grains, meat or fish. I exercise four to six days a week; I run for four and bike or swim the other two days.

My average workout takes about 40 to 45 minutes, not including the time it takes to get ready to run. Still, I need to reach a certain mindset before putting myself through any sort of running-related pain. This running routine can become difficult when I leave at 7 a.m. for school, get home at 6 p.m. and try to remain diligent in my studies in a dual curriculum school—and this is where my time management skills come into play.

If I could take just one value, though, fostered by my running experience, it would be this: “There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.”

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