

## Using Judaism to Overcome Burnout

Delivered on Kol Nidre by Rabbi Rachael Klein Miller

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Welcome to your spiritual home. Within these walls, we do the important spiritual work of the High Holy Day season. Within these walls, children play, laugh, and explore. Within these walls, we study, learn, and grow. Within these walls, we escape the noise of the world. Within these walls, we exhale the days that were and inhale the breath of our continued existence.

In these final hours of the High Holy Day season, the Gates of Repentance open wide, we continue to explore our relationship with the Divine, we meditate on our Jewish journey of the past year, and we contemplate our participation in Jewish life for the year ahead. The Jewish calendar gives us this space and time to reflect, to set goals, and to take aim for something higher in the year ahead.

There is a Hasidic tale that speaks to the issues of how we aim and set our goals. Many years ago, in the days of the Shtetl, there lived a nobleman's son who was a student at a military academy. One of the sports in which he was an expert was taking a bow and arrow and striking the bull's-eye. He spent hours, days, weeks, months, and years of his life training to hit the center of the target. Along the way he missed celebrations: his child's first steps, his wife's 40th birthday. He missed out on time with his family: weeknight dinners and walks around the village. He missed out on the chance to travel: never making it outside his village for anything more than an archery competition. He missed out on all kinds of other opportunities in the pursuit of his skill. Yet through all of his training and dedication, he became so skilled that he went on to win many gold medals and accolades for his marksmanship.

One day, the nobleman's son, now an officer in the military, was riding his horse to another village. Along the way, he passed through a town in which he saw hundreds of arrows that had perfectly struck the bull's-eye. They lined all of the barns in the village, bull's-eye, after bull's-eye, after bull's-eye. The officer was so amazed by the marksmanship of this archer that he halted his horse and called out from the middle of the road, "Who has this expert shot? A hundred perfect bull's-eyes! That's incredible! Even I could not do that!"

Just then, a young girl walking by, looked up at the officer on his tall horse and giggled, "Oh, that's Yankle, our town fool!"

"I don't care what he is," interrupted the officer. "Whoever can shoot a hundred perfect bull's-eyes must have trained for many years and won every gold medal in the world! I must meet him and shake his hand!"

“Oh no, no, no, you don’t understand,” laughed the young girl, “Yankle doesn’t aim for the bull’s-eye first and then shoot — he shoots first, and then he draws the bull’s-eye around his arrow.”

In these tales, we always have something to learn from “the town fool.” Usually it’s that everyone else has been foolish, while the town fool has something to teach us. In this case, Yankle turns the system upside down. What the little girl in the story doesn’t emphasize is that Yankle actually hits the target every time. He’s aiming for the barn! Sure, afterwards he goes in and puts the bull’s-eye around the arrow, maybe because he feels pressure from everyone around him, but his success is in managing his expectations and enjoying the chance to shoot his arrows. It’s not about medals. Yankle teaches us that there is more than one way to find success.

In today’s world, there is so much pressure to hit the bull’s-eye. Today’s society is so focused on measured achievement: If kids don’t hit stages of development, young parents may start to panic; if a middle-schooler isn’t doing well in math, they’ll never become the accountant you dreamed them to be; if a high school student isn’t achieving top grades and excelling at multiple extra-curricular activities, there is this sense that their whole life might come crashing down. The focus on measured achievement extends to adults, who are in jobs that put pressure on employees to rise to certain markers and then rise again, and again, and again.

What has resulted are high levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Friends, the statistics are astounding. We’re talking about a 71% increase in psychological distress for young adults 18 to 25.<sup>1</sup> But it’s not just young adults, anxiety levels are up across all generations.<sup>2</sup> This is a recent phenomenon of the last decade. All of this anxiety and stress has led people to feel a deep sense of burnout not only in their jobs but in their personal lives as well. Don’t get me wrong, many people love what they do. I’m one of them. Yet the hours we all spend working, whether in paid positions or as the head of our household, when those hours continue to pile up and up and up, and we don’t set boundaries or manage expectations, the result of this recipe is burnout.

Compared to decades past, we’ve never been more accessible with phones in hand, ready to answer that call, text, or fifteen emails that “just can’t wait.” These digital devices combined with the regular work load plus social media present the optics that everyone is watching what we do — and what we’re *not* doing — all of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Neighmond, Patti. “A Rise In Depression Among Teens And Young Adults Could Be Linked To Social Media Use.” NPR, 14 Mar. 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/03/14/703170892/a-rise-in-depression-among-teens-and-young-adults-could-be-linked-to-social-medi>.

<sup>2</sup> “Americans Say They Are More Anxious than a Year Ago; Baby Boomers Report Greatest Increase in Anxiety.” American Psychiatric Association, 7 May 2018, <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/americans-say-they-are-more-anxious-than-a-year-ago-baby-boomers-report-greatest-increase-in-anxiety>.

Through self-optimization, technology, and new skills, we have increased our efficiency, but it has come at a great cost. Like the military officer from our story. We've missed celebrations and holidays, we've missed time with family, we've lost sight of the things that, when we look back on our lives, we will realize were actually the most important.

Today, our teens and even pre-teens are deeply struggling with school-life balance. Adults are struggling with work-life balance. Many of us feel like we need to be like the officer from the story. The officer who puts in countless hours to win prestige and accolades at the tremendous personal cost of what really matters. The stakes feel so high, and the pressure so great, that many have resorted to controversial means to pass tests and to achieve success.

We see this most acutely in our youngest adults, who, under tremendous pressure are trying to navigate this new landscape. Statistics tell us that 51% of high school students have admitted to cheating on a test and 74% have copied another student's homework.<sup>3</sup> Some teens are so worried about hitting the bull's-eye that they will turn to any means necessary to reach the next level of success.

But it's not just teens. We all watched the public fallout from adults, specifically celebrity adults, who forged achievements and accomplishments for their children to get into particular universities. Many people fear that everyone else is doing it anyway, that if they don't jump on the bandwagon, they'll be left in the dust.

We've seen these social pressures and cheating combine over and over and over again for professional athletes who turn to doping to reach the next level. Despite folks being caught year after year after year, the cycle continues. There is an ingrained perception that their method won't get caught, that everyone else is doing it, or that in some work around way they have convinced themselves that it is "okay." Many of these individuals are the very people our children and teens admire (or at least used to). Lance Armstrong, Tyson Gay, Maria Sharapova, Marion Jones, Alex Rodriguez, just to name a few.

In the business sector, we have also seen these social pressures, the quest to reach the next level marker, and the desire for profitability over everything else. In 2015 there was the Volkswagen scandal, in which the leaders of the company signed off on and installed software, a defeat device, to evade the regulations on emissions testing for their diesel-powered cars. Their CEO doubled down on the lie, but it was eventually discovered. At the highest levels of Volkswagen, they knowingly produced and sold cars that distributed dangerous levels of nitrogen oxide, which create serious smog and health problems. Profitability was placed higher than human life. Profitability was

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<sup>3</sup> Elhrich, Thomas. "Cheating In Schools And Colleges: What To Do About It." Forbes, 22 Aug. 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ehrllichfu/2013/08/22/cheating-in-schools-and-colleges/#1d47576e37aa>.

placed higher than ethical business dealings. Profitability was placed higher than serious damage to the air we breathe. There was a deep focus on the current moment in time and very little outlook on the future impact of those choices.

Teens, parents, elite athletes, and major corporations have all been a part of the battle to aim higher — to prioritize “success” over everything else. It’s time to reevaluate. It’s time to reprioritize. Many in the next generation won’t make it if society doesn’t slow down, if we don’t individually and communally change our priorities. I believe that our Jewish tradition holds the key to uncovering this track, to renewing a sense of purpose that reprioritizes the things that matter the most in life.

Tonight, I’d like to get personal. There have been times in my life where I too have had lapses in judgment. Thankfully not to the scales I’ve just described, but still times in my life in which my priorities, when looking back, were not aligned with what I see today as the more important things in life. I imagine many of us here tonight can relate to such stages in our life. I’m not speaking of one-off instances of lapsed judgments, but prolonged periods of time where I was the only thing that mattered and winning and success were my only goals. For me, these prolonged periods revolved around a deep focus on achievement and aiming ever higher: Working out to reach that next stage in the gym, to reach that accolade to be in the top 5 fastest soccer players out of the state of Kansas, to be one of the first players in my city to sign a Division I scholarship, and unfortunately that list goes on and on.

Winning was everything. Even in little for-fun practice games, I had to win. This went into personal relationships too: I had to win that game of cards, I had to win that ping-pong match that meant absolutely nothing, I had to catch more grapes in my mouth than a friend: I mean, I was really unbearable. This extended to academics as well: I often stayed in to study, and study, and study because this was the most important thing in my life at that moment. I had to achieve the top grade, I had to succeed. I had a “be the best” mentality.

Looking back, obviously, the hours spent getting an A on that Latin 1 exam really benefited my overall character and life trajectory ...Sure, I learned the value of hard work and discipline, but looking back, the cost was too high. My work or study-life balance was pretty terrible. By the end of my first semester in college, I recognized that my body and mind weren’t going to make it through another season as an elite athlete. Despite all the training in the world, I would later discover that a bone shape defect in both of my hips had ended my career. I was stressed, anxious, and depressed. I didn’t have anything deeper than a surface level friendship with anyone, but hey, great grades! When I moved to Los Angeles to continue school I made some amazing friendships, but I spent the next two years without ever really putting-in serious time to give back to the surrounding community. I hadn’t studied anything outside of my academic path in years. I hadn’t even read a book for fun since Harry Potter. I remained on the perfect path for a crashing burnout of epic proportions.

As I continued to make it through general ed classes and dove deeper into my Jewish studies major, I began to uncover new answers to life. I started to understand that I didn't need to be the officer who hit the bull's-eye every time, rather, Yankle's way of life had more lessons to teach me. With a limited number of hours in a day, I recognized that I should spend more of them focused on something other than myself or my studies. I started to understand the more important things in life — that Judaism places a deep value on community, family, spiritual development, having a prayer practice, self-care, taking time to rest and recognize Shabbat, and much more.

Now, understanding is different than action. I entered rabbinical school in a pretty good place but found myself spiraling under the pressures of balancing the course load with internships and work. As I neared the end of the program, after work with a great therapist, a loving husband, and a serious community of real friends and mentors, I finally dug myself out of the depths of anxiety, depression, and complete and utter burnout. As I started to put into action the lessons I had learned from my Jewish studies, I realized how tempting the program had made it for students to be like the officer and to invest so much time into our studies that we sacrificed our other needs. The program was missing the lesson of Yankle, the lesson that there is more than one way to find success in life.

Jewish texts certainly emphasize the importance of providing a livelihood for our families which is a call for us to hold jobs and to work and be an ingrained part of society. But a complete focus on our studies or careers doesn't leave us with tons of extra time to work on really vital parts of our life's work: Our relationships with our spouse, children, family, or friends; our spiritual growth, or our time to give back to others. When we spend more time at the office or buried in work or social media on our digital devices, our relationships with other people, our spiritual growth, and our time spent giving back to others are usually the first things that get cut out of our life's routine.

What has continued to carry me out of the depths of burnout is a reevaluation of priorities. I have made it a priority, which even as a rabbi, one has to do, to continue to deeply study Torah and Jewish texts. I've taken a deep dive into Mussar, Jewish Spiritual Ethics and I have found my work-life balance restored. Through a deep focus on Jewish values, I have been able to refocus my energies in a way that betters myself, my relationships, and hopefully this community.

I've gone down this path of sharing tonight because I believe in the power of Judaism to bring out the most beautiful parts of our lives. I've experienced it myself and want to empower others to use this amazing tool that our tradition has gifted us. But we can only become more fully aware of its power through continued study and practice.

Judaism commands us to study regularly. In our V'ahavta prayer, we are called to :

וְשִׁנְתֶם לְבַבְכֶּם וְדַבַּרְתֶּם בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ

“Teach Torah to our children. Speak of Torah to them when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we get up.”<sup>4</sup>

If we’re not modeling this study, how will they know what to do? No matter our occupation, the kind of study that we do here in the synagogue will work our brain in a whole new way. Prioritizing this kind of Jewish exercise will awaken your soul and the secrets of living a meaningful life will be revealed. I truly believe this. Not at every session, but with consistent study, you will come to understand something deeper about your existence and your purpose that extends beyond the American-cultural obsession with our job as our core purpose. Your relationships with others will improve and your relationship with yourself will improve.

As the Chassidic Rebbe, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk teaches, “If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise, they will not themselves study Torah but will simply instruct their children to do so.”

There is so much pressure in today’s society to strike the bull’s-eye with our achievements. But Judaism doesn’t expect us to do this, it just asks us to pick up the bow and arrow and to take aim, it asks us to be like Yankle. As long as we pick up the arrow and shoot, we create our own bull’s-eye.

We must aim toward something, toward a goal, toward a cause. As Torah teaches us, “humanity cannot live on bread alone.” We need more than the mundane routine of our life: wake up, eat, work, repeat. Spiritual fulfillment is found in the process of engagement — committing to being present in the moment, and being open to the experience. More than our work lives and perhaps even more than our relationships with our loved ones, the spiritual journey is a forgiving and personalized path. But we limit ourselves, we limit our Judaism, and we limit our ability to grow when we do not engage in the work — when we do not exercise our Jewish muscles. We may be exhausted in the other areas of our life, but when we put in the work for Jewish and spiritual growth, I believe the work-life balance and our relationships with family evolve and strengthen.

In the front pages of our Machzorim, Rabbi Sarason, a beloved teacher of mine from rabbinical school, reminds us, “The Hebrew word for sin, *cheit*, literally means missing the mark. It refers to our actions, [but] not to who we are.”<sup>5</sup> As we close out these Days of Awe in deep self-reflection, we must each take an accounting of our souls and ask ourselves: How do my actions align with who I feel like on the inside? Who do I want to be in this world? Have I decided what is important in life? Do I spend enough time on the things that are important in life? Can I aim like Yankle or will I aim like the officer?

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<sup>4</sup> Deut. 6:7

<sup>5</sup> p. xxi

*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha*, for the sin of cutting corners in our school or work lives.

*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha*, for the sin of cutting corners in our relationships with loved ones.

*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha*, for the sin of cutting corners in our spiritual lives.

Unlike work or school, no one in our Jewish community is testing us on this journey. Like Yankle, no one was testing him. No one is holding deadlines above our heads. This is about us and our relationship with our faith, our community, our God. This is one of the safest places to develop and to grow.

In her book, *Einstein and the Rabbi*, Rabbi Naomi Levy teaches us, “It takes sight and courage to find your voice. We spend so much time in life trying to imitate other people or trying to live up to the projections people put on us. Or the projections we put on ourselves. Too often we heed the call of the ego and ignore the call of the soul.”<sup>6</sup>

Heed the call of your soul this year so that you may aim higher in your Jewish engagement and spiritual development. Let down your ego that pressures you to put in more and more hours at work or school, that asks you to answer that email during dinner, that compels you to constantly be reaching for the next marker. There are those who will become like the officer, draped in gold medals for their achievements, but the cost is steep.

Tonight is Kol Nidre. If we are ready to make changes, we can be released of the vows we made to ourselves or to God that don't align with our renewed sense of priorities. We can reprioritize our time and efforts for the new year. We have this sacred space and time to reflect, to set goals, and to take aim for something higher in the year ahead.

May each of us find those quiet moments for self-evaluation. May each of us recommit to our Jewish learning with an eye for its power to bring us out of the depths of chaos when burnout is in full swing or we can feel it brewing. May each of us be open to the profound words that we will recite as a sacred community on this day, and may we all be inspired toward change and growth. May we find our bow and arrows, even if we have to pull them out of the depths of our soul, and may we be like Yankle, taking aim for something greater, paving our own path, succeeding in our own ways.

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<sup>6</sup> p. 183