

Truing the Wellness Wheel:
Finding *Shleimut* in a Broken World

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In high school, I worked afternoons as a bike mechanic. My father was not particularly handy and couldn't teach me how things worked, so this job was my first opportunity to learn how an assortment of parts becomes a functioning system--a working bicycle. The most difficult task to learn was how to true a wheel. This is the term given for ensuring that all of the spokes of the wheel are properly aligned. If one spoke is overly tight or loose, it can throw the entire wheel out of kilter, causing the wheel to waver. Left unattended, it becomes impossible to steer the bike where it should go.

Thinking about wellness, or *shleimut*, this image seems appropriate. Judaism also offers an image of wellness that looks like a well-adjusted three-spoked wheel. I want to explore that with you today, because for too long, my wellness wheel was out of true. I was heavy. Forty pounds too heavy to be exact.

What made me realize how out of true I had become was not my weight, but a video.

A year and a half ago, Laura and I marked our 20th wedding anniversary. That's long enough to learn some things, and long

enough to forget some things. As part of our celebrations, we rewatched our wedding video. Seeing old friends and listening to their sweet comments was lovely. Laura was a beautiful bride, inside and out.

But what struck me more than anything was...*I was cool!!!*. That may sound like a self-absorbed reflection on a day of introspection, but there you have it. *I was cool*. There was an ease and vivaciousness to my speech patterns and interactions. I was full of life and energy. I was radiant with blessing. If that's not cool, what is?

Yet when I looked in the mirror, I saw someone heavy with responsibility glancing back at me. I wasn't exactly unhappy. I was weighted with the relentless gravity of my life.

That wedding video revealed how unhealthy I had become, from the inside out.. How did I get here? More importantly, how could I find my way back to that boyish groom who was radiant with joy? I hunted for the answer for the past year and a half.

As we begin to explore this idea, a caveat is in order. Wellness may be a noun in English, but that is misleading. When we think or talk about wellness, we are not referring to a destination. Wellness is a dynamic process. It's a verb, a series of actions, pointing us toward stages of greater personal alignment. We will get to what that means; before we do it's important to

acknowledge that wellness doesn't look like one thing. You won't find an image of true wellness on the cover of a magazine, or on your bathroom scale. Your wellness is not mine or anybody else's. That is as it should be, for if wellness is a process of alignment, we would expect to discover lots of variety, even as there are some common features to *shleimut*.

I want to be explicit about something else, namely, why it is so important for us to discuss wellness today. When we talk about *teshuvah* or *tikkun*, about repentance and repair, we are also talking about a form of wellness. When you look in your mirror, do you see someone radiant with blessing? Or do you see something, well, a bit less grand than that? Wellness is part and parcel of the work of the High Holidays.

There is another crucial reason: Our society is in a period of rapid change and upset. Social unrest. A divided America. Issues about equity, race, and economic opportunity. Opioid and substance abuse. Divorce rates. Accelerating climate change with more frequent super storms. Around the globe, the liberal world order that had ushered in nearly a century of relative calm and prosperity has given way to authoritarian forms of government. A pandemic that does not end, and that leaves us even more isolated than all those previous issues...

Any one of these challenges would be unsettling enough to produce within us some dis-ease. Bundle them together, and

you create a river of misery. Patience and kindness to others diminishes as people's internal reserves are worn down. One of the ways we know this is how often a word is used. From 1800 through the Great Depression, the word "resilience" wasn't used much.¹ Since then, the frequency of use has increased by orders of magnitude, spiking in the last decades. Based on research,² it's reasonable to say that people today are less resilient and more anxious than in the past. The increased usage of the word resilience signals how much need we have for it, just as the word water will occupy most of the focus of a person crossing a desert.

As Steven Covey reminded us in his best-seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, in order to be proactive, we need to focus on those areas where we can make a difference. Yes, we can and should all invest some time in the political and social challenges of our time. We should give *tzedekah* and volunteer. Simultaneously, the area over which we have the greatest control is our personal wellness, which is a key component for resilience.

Moreover, as we become healthier, the scope of our capacity to influence the larger world grows. I have a deep-seated faith that if we all focused on our personal well-being, it would create a

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https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=resilience&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cresilience%3B%2Cc0

² For one small example, see

<https://sacsconsult.com.au/blog/are-young-people-less-resilient-than-they-used-to-be/> and referenced research. There is a plethora of data on this topic.

large-scale shift towards recovering some of the joy and purpose that all of us deserve.

So let's address what wellness is. The Talmud offers us a good starting point by analyzing a verse in the book of Genesis in which the Torah states that "Jacob came whole, *shaleim*, to the city of Shchem."³ According to the Talmud, Jacob experienced three types of wellness: physical, financial, and spiritual well-being, which from a Jewish perspective means achieving the sort of wisdom that leads us to mental and emotional well-being.

This is the Jewish wheel of wellness. Just like a bicycle wheel, when we don't true the spokes of well-being, we veer off course and the journey of life becomes that much more difficult. Most of us need a wellness tune-up, whether that is for our physical, emotional or financial well-being, or for all three. We need to get true.

So yes, part of wellness is focusing on our physical well-being and making healthier choices for our bodies, aligning our physical and spiritual beings so we may operate more effectively in our day-to-day and into older age. That may look different for

³ In the Talmud, there's this profound story which defines Judaism's notion of *shleimut* or wellness (Shabbat 33b) at the same time that it provides us the tools we need to achieve *shleimut*:

Rabbi Shimon said: Since a miracle transpired for me, I will go and repair something for the sake of others in gratitude for God's kindness, as it is written: "And Jacob came whole to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram; and he graced the countenance of the city" (Genesis 33:18). Rav said, the meaning of: And Jacob came whole, is: Whole in his body, whole in his money, whole in his Torah. And what did he do? And he graced the countenance of the city; he performed gracious acts to benefit the city...

an Olympic athlete than it does for a middle-aged rabbi, but we all have that responsibility. Let's not forget, when the Torah stated that Jacob arrived *shaleim*, completely well, he already had a permanent limp after wrestling with a stranger at the bank of the Jabok river. Jacob had a chronic, debilitating injury, yet he was well. The Torah doesn't body shame. It looks beneath the surface.

Financially, Jacob had just suffered a terrible financial loss. In order to restore his relationship with Esau after stealing the birthright from him twenty years earlier, Jacob makes costly reparations to his brother. While the Torah doesn't give us a clear accounting, it reads as though he gave away a third of his wealth.

As for his wisdom and mental well-being, let's not forget that Jacob has just received a name change from Ya'akov, a follower of what is, to Yisrael, someone who struggles with God.

The sort of wellness, then, that the Torah ascribes to Jacob is not a manicured social media presentation. Things are not easy for him. His life entails physical, mental and financial struggle. If we accept the example of Jacob as a typology or model of being human, then we are able to recognize that the external conditions of his life—chronic pain, financial loss and existential struggle—did not limit his experience of his own essential wellness, his own *shleimut*.

This close reading provides us with a changed perspective on wellness as a process and a way of viewing our lives through a positive lens. Over the past two years as I labored to get back to a wellness version of myself locked in a wedding video, I sought guidance and perspective from books, apps, people and our tradition.

One important feature of wellness that became clear is the need to develop a realistic assessment of our personal capacities--which change throughout life. Creating an unreasonable expectation of what wellness looks like is an invitation to further dis-ease.

Like Jacob, how do we feel *shaleim* with our losses and limitations? Let's turn to Reinhold Niebur's well-known Serenity prayer, because it provides effective guidance. Here is his less-known but original version:

*(Father,) give us courage to change what must be altered,
serenity to accept what cannot be helped,
and the insight to know the one from the other.*

Wellness is a dynamic process of staying balanced and true while the world spins, and the first quality that we need, according to Niebur, is courage. So what is courage? What does it require from us? At the heart of courage, we find a sense of trust, hope, and personal agency that together can give us a

sense of purpose. We have to believe that things can be better. That's hope. We also need to nurture a sense of personal agency. We need to trust that within our own spheres of influence that we can be a positive force for change. Watching that wedding video, I came to realize that I could reclaim who I had been and that if I got there once before, I could find the tools to do so again.

Simultaneously, everybody encounters the limits of their power and agency. Some things are not ours to address, and if we keep tilting at those windmills, we will sicken ourselves. In that process, we may even come to believe that we have less agency than we do. Let me repeat that. If we imagine that we are limitless, we will end up in a place of despair where we don't productively exercise the choices we *do* possess. Serenity is a spiritual tool by which we accept the world we can't change. It allows us to be "sameach b'chelko," to be happy with our lot. It lets us accept things as they are, and achieve serenity, a one-ness with God and ourselves.

Finally, wellness requires that we know where the line between personal agency and serenity exists. We need to achieve clarity. I'd like to think that is how Jacob could have suffered physical and financial setbacks, along with inner turmoil, and still be *shaleim*, still achieve wellness. Within the context of his life, Jacob possessed wellness. He *chose* to wrestle that spirit-being at the Jabok river. He *chose* to return treasure to Esau. He

embraced a life of struggle because it was better than following the societal conventions he had inherited.

If we take care of our physical and mental selves and observe our agency in action, that can lead us to clarity. For others, clarity comes first, such as hitting rock bottom, and that clarity leads people to take corrective action in other areas of their lives.

We need to develop a sense of trust and purpose. We need good food and exercise. We need community; and we need love. If we give ourselves those spokes, if we “true” them, we will reach a higher level of wellness.

A final teaching from one of my spiritual directors, Cathy. She once told me that “wellness is the ability to see the good in all other beings and recognize the great interplay.”

When we balance our internal interplay of wellness, we are primed to see the great interplay of connection in the world at large, and thus to recognize our role in making external changes as well. Teshuvah and Tikkun. Return and repair. Truing our souls. Truing our lives.

May we each dedicate this year to our wellness. May we feel like a beloved child of God. May our eyes twinkle with joyful contentment. May our relationships be richly fulfilling. May we feel useful and connected to the great web of life. May all these

blessings provide us the resilience we need to face this moment. May the face you see in the mirror be radiant with blessing. And may we all be cool again.