

Kol Nidre Yom Kippur 5776
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ICCJ

PMA

איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו.

In the Mishna, Ben Zoma asked Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot. I am a wealthy woman. I won the lottery. Winning the lottery is an amazing feeling. I won the lottery seven years ago when I joined the ICCJ community. Although there were no millions involved in this lottery, there was something so much bigger.

Who knew that a girl from Toronto could feel at home at a congregation in Queens?

This community has been there for my family over and over again.

But this past year you raised the bar. You have made me the envy of all of my colleagues.

Throughout a challenging pregnancy you were patient and caring and flexible.

Once our daughter was born you have been

- so wonderful
- so generous with gifts, handmedowns, time and advice
- interested
- caring

- invested
- and some of you act like I am invisible when Ariella is in the room, which is FINE because I could spend my whole day staring at her as well.

And so from the bottom of our hearts, Aaron and I (and our parents and families who do not live nearby) thank you. We thank you for helping us through this major transition in our lives. You all made our particular transition easy, and you continue to do so every single day.

Transitions are not always easy. In the Talmud, Rabbi Ishmael teaches, *"Kol Hat'khalot Kashot"*: While Aaron and I are doing ok, Rabbi Ishmael teaches that all beginnings are difficult. Rabbi Ishmael was on to something when he stated that beginnings are hard. I can't say that this was a revolutionary idea, since it is obvious that many beginnings are difficult. But Rabbi Ishmael's wisdom was to make explicit what we experience. By naming how tough it is to begin something new, he normalized it and enabled people to stop hiding behind fake confidence and enthusiasm. After Rabbi Ishmael we could start to admit upfront that change is not easy.

Throughout our lives, we are always beginning. New school. New job. New relationship. New pets at home. New route to drive. New iPhone. New place to get coffee. New stage of life. There are endless transitions to navigate.

Many transitions are *scary*.

Many transitions are *hard*.

But transitions are what life is made of. From the beginning of time we have been transitioning. The *Maharal* of Prague explains that beginnings are difficult because all beginnings represent a *shinui* – a change – and *change is inherently difficult*. There is an inertia that drives our daily lives and propels us to continue on the path that we have been travelling. A new beginning requires us to challenge what we know and to actively choose a new way of thinking and acting.

If we go back to the beginning, Adam lived alone and then Eve joined him. They lived in the Garden of Eden and then packed up their stuff when they were banished. They were a duo until the kids arrived. If you have ever expanded your family or moved, then you know how disruptive that can be.

So much has changed from the biblical world to the post modern world. The only constant has been change and transition.

There are two ways to approach change. One is with NMA, a negative mental attitude, with fear, and the other is with PMA, a positive mental attitude.

We all know people who subscribe to each approach. Who do we prefer to be around?

Tonight I want to introduce you to Ilana Garber.

Rabbi Ilana Garber is not yet 40 years old. She has two young sons; one with special needs. She is an assistant rabbi at a large Conservative congregation in suburban Connecticut. She did not officiate at Rosh Hashanah services.

In April of this year she wrote a blog post that went viral. She explained

So yes, I have cancer. For right now we know it's lymphoma....

And I'm scared and I'm sad and I'm fearful and I'm worried and I'm devastated. But I'm also determined and I need your help. If you're reading this you are joining my team.

No walks, no fundraisers, just the same determination we Garber girls (and guys) have used in everything else.

We've got friends who are like family and family who are like friends who are helping and organizing and arranging... and I hope the international gates of prayer will be open and that you will join me in prayer and song and hope.

This will not be an easy journey, and I will cry a lot.

But what I ask of you to the best of your ability, is that you turn your sadness into action, and into determination. No tears at my side, please.

With my father we talked about a PMA, a positive mental attitude and that's what we need here. We are going to beat this together! We just have to... We have no choice....

Cancer killed my father, but it will not kill me. I am blessed by years of medical advances, technology, and so much more. It's not my time yet. Just time for one helluva battle. Let's go, troops!

Who in this room would have been able to write that?

Ilana first introduced me to the term PMA, positive mental attitude. Coined by Napoleon Hill, Positive Mental Attitude (PMA) is the philosophy that having an optimistic disposition in every situation in one's life attracts positive changes and increases achievement. It opposes negativity, defeatism and hopelessness.

While the Arts often portray Jews as kvetchers, our tradition is very in line with the values of PMA. The early architects of PMA believe that we can clear away the negative cobwebs that clutter our minds, the negative feelings, emotions and prejudices. We can sweep them away as they begin to develop.¹ We can choose whether our attitude will be positive or negative.

The Hasidic sage Rabbi Simcha Bunim taught that every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). If we convince ourselves that we are only dust and ashes, that is how others will treat us. While humility is important, it is

¹ Success through a Positive Mental Attitude, Chapter 3

also important to think positively of ourselves at the same time. The world was created by God so we can play and dance and sing in it. The world was created so we can be God's partners in creation and continue to build, not so that we can stay under the covers feeling sorry for ourselves.

When we sit on our sofas feeling sorry for ourselves, or remain in a negative foul mood, we can cripple ourselves. That is a far cry from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav who said mitzvah gedola lhuyot bsimcha tamid, it is a big mitzvah to be happy.

Each year on Tisha B'Av evening, we read the book of *Eicha*, of Lamentations. *Megilat Eicha* speaks vividly of the pain and despair following the destruction of the Temple. The concluding verse of Lamentations is "*Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha, v'nashuva*, תְּחִיבֵנוּ יְיָ: *Take us back God and renew our days as of old.*

But that verse from *Eicha*, from Lamentations is **not** a universal message. *Eicha* represents a specific time of deep sadness when we became homeless and lost Eretz Israel. A more universal Jewish message is found in **Kohelet**, the megilah which we will read on Chol HaMoed Sukkot where we find אַל־תֹּאמַר מָה הָיָה שְׁהַיָּמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ טוֹבִים מֵאֲנִי *Don't say how has it happened that former times were better than these, for it is not wise for you to ask questions like these.*

We are supposed to look forward and think positively

At the same time, ours is a tradition that knows **we have something to live for**. The Psalmist wrote אֶל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי, לְעֵת זְקֻנָּה; כְּכֹלֹת כֹּחִי, אֶל-תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי. *Don't cast me off in old age, when my strength fails, do not abandon me.* (71:9) There is a reason that verse made it into our High Holy Days liturgy.

It can be read in many tones. I always read it with triumph, as *DON'T cast me off when I get old. Just because I might lose my strength, I still have it.* That is PMA. That is a positive mental attitude.

I want to introduce you to another person.

My Great Auntie Kitty. Auntie Kitty has PMA. From all that I have heard about her, PMA is what enabled her to reach the 100 year milestone a few weeks ago. Auntie Kitty was determined to reach her milestone. She spent the 10 weeks prior to her centenarian mark in the hospital, but she made it. Her family was all around her to celebrate her life. And, since she lives in Cockfosters, England, Queen Elizabeth even **sent her a little note** to say mazel tov. According to my father who traveled to England to celebrate with his aunt, she enjoyed her milestone immensely.

Don't cast me off when I get old. 100 is old. Auntie Kitty's PMA enabled her to outlive her siblings and I would assume, most of her peers.

There are so many people who would get Ilana's news and give up and give in to fear.

I do not think everyone who gets really sick at age 99 and 10 months would be able to hold it together to emerge with hair done, makeup on and a smashing outfit 2 months later. It would be really easy for Ilana and Auntie Kitty to enumerate their misfortunes. Oh, I have cancer. Oh, my body is giving up on me. But they don't.

They used their PMA. Ilana and Auntie Kitty could easily have given up on life. But instead they are cheerleaders for living.

I am not sure if Ilana and Auntie Kitty completely follow the advice of our sage Shammai who says (Avot 1:15) *that it is our duty to receive every person we meet with a smile every single day.* וְהָיוּ מְקַבְּלִים אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסִבְרַת פְּנִים יְפוּת. They have been physically ill and don't always have the ability to use the muscles to form a smile. But even without smiling, their PMA is their anchor.

There is a story in the Talmud (Taanit 22a) that relates that Rabbi Beroka used to spend time in the market at Bet Lapat where Elijah often appeared to him.

Once he asked Elijah "Is there anyone in this market who has a share in the world to come?" Elijah replied, "No."

While they were talking, two men passed by and Elijah remarked, "These two have a share in the world to come."

Rabbi Beroka then approached and asked them, "What do you do?"

They replied, "We are jesters, when we see men depressed we cheer them up."

The jesters may indeed have a share in the world to come, but one thing is for certain: Their share in this world is full to overflowing with glad tidings of happiness and delight. They are shiny, happy and positive people. They don't stay indoors with the drapes closed tight saying "woe is me."

What Ilana and Auntie Kitty have in common is that they are part of a religious community. Ilana is a congregational rabbi and while one could not call her observant, Auntie Kitty has a relationship with her rabbi and he baked the cake for her party so he could attend the celebration.

The authors of PMA write many times in their book that *man's greatest power lies in the power of prayer*. I asked Ilana what prayers keep her going and she told me that she really loved the prayer that begins with מוֹדִים אֲנִיחֵנוּ לְךָ in the Amidah.

Ilana told me that she specifically found the last line to be meaningful

לָךְ מֵעוֹלָם קִיְּוִנוֹ לָךְ. וְהַמְּרַחֵם כִּי לֹא תִמּוּ חֲסִדֶיךָ. *You are good with everlasting mercy: You are compassionate, with enduring lovingkindness, We have always placed our hope in You.* For Ilana, *mayolam kivinu lakh* is about hope in God and in herself. Hope is the magic ingredient in motivating yourself and others². Instead of feeling sorry for herself through rounds of chemo, Ilana uses PMA.

For me, the verse from tefillah, from our liturgy, that ensures my PMA reignites in the morning is the very first line. מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁחָזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשַׁמְתִּי בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֶמוּנָתְךָ *I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.* Every morning is a do over. And every morning is a start, a fresh start.

The architects of PMA believe that every time you meet a problem and tackle and conquer it with PMA, you become a better, bigger, and more successful person. Auntie Kitty may not live until 120, but Ilana will come out of this setback knowing who her supporters and friends are, a better mom, a better spouse and a better rabbi.

When we encounter change and transitions in our lives, whether it is as major as a new child, serious illness or the realities of old age, or it is a first world problem- the frustration that accompanies new technologies, we are fortunate that our tradition provides us with words and paths to easily reach PMA.

² Success Through a Positive Mental Attitude, page 153

One such path is found at the beginning and ending of Psalm 27, the special psalm we read at this time of year. אוֹרִי וַיִּשְׁעֵי מִמִּי אֵיכָּא הַ מְעוֹז חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְתָּח | לְדָוִד הַ The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear? The lord is the strength of my life. Whom shall I dread is how the psalm begins. The psalm ends with קְוֵה אֶל הַ חֲזַק וַיֵּאֱמֶץ לְבָבְךָ וְקְוֵה אֶל הַ : Hope in the Lord and be strong. Take courage, hope in the Lord. If we know that God is there for us, and watching over us, there is no reason to even entertain a negative mental attitude. It will be ok.

As we spend the next 23 hours engaged in prayer, fasting and getting hungry I want you to take some quiet time, whether it is on your way home tonight or during the break from our prayers tomorrow afternoon, to reflect on the way you interact with the world and how you view yourself.

Do you usually exhibit a negative mental attitude or are you generally thriving and flourishing and encountering life and all its joy and messiness with a positive mental attitude?

How do you think other people see you?

If you think you mostly have a negative mental attitude, what can you do to change that?

What do you need?

How can I, your rabbi, help you?

PMA in the face of transition and adversity can be life affirming.

Once again, a blog post from my teacher, Ilana Garber, the Rabbi who is not officiating at services tonight, that she wrote just before Rosh Hashanah:

This year, I've learned to appreciate my blessings. I've worked hard to not only count my blessings but to make them count. I want to experience and engage in the High Holidays with my young children in the way that's right for them. Instead of hosting large meals late at night with people who may be strangers to my children, I want to sit around our dining room table...and really ask my children what they are thankful for and how they want to change in this coming year.

Instead of rushing off to run services, leaving my husband and children hours before the family programs begin, I want to help them get dressed in their nicest clothes, clip ties on their shirts... and ask them what it means to get dressed for shul on these special days.

And this year—just this one year, I hope and pray—instead of being the somewhat untouchable one up on the bima, I want to be the one to welcome them back into our home after services, with hugs, warm challah, apples and honey, and a deep appreciation that we have all reached this special, momentous, healthy occasion.

And I will pray that good health continues for us all, that my children's wonder and questions continue to flow even when, God willing, I return to my routine work and life,

and ...that there will be many more in which we find balance to experience God's blessings in living an engaged and active Jewish life, together.

Rabbi Ilana Garber is a role model for me on facing transitions with a PMA. So many of you sitting in this room are as well. There is a lot of bad stuff going on in many of your personal lives. To those of you fighting the good fight with PMA, yasher koach. To those who aren't there yet, let me help you gather the tools to get there.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life and may all of our lives be full of joy, happiness and PMA.