

I've never been a runner. Actually, that is a huge understatement. I have always proactively known in my deepest soul, that I cannot run. That it wasn't possible for me. The last time I tried was in college. I wanted to join the Ultimate Frisbee team - I was so psyched - and the coach began by telling us all to run clear around the campus. Everyone took off. I lasted less than 90 seconds before I walked back to my dorm, completely out of breath. I wasn't even that upset, because it just confirmed what I already knew: I can't run.

But for all kinds of reasons, it's become clear to me that I need to make some changes. Which is all the lead-up you need to know, for me to tell you that about two months ago, I finally decided that the next morning, I was going to wake up and go running. I had no gear. I had no experience. I had no stamina, as I'd soon be reminded.

There's a program for non or new runners called Couch to 5k, that guides you day by day and, seeing as I do well with structure, that was my plan.

Now pause for a second. I know we have some amazing runners in this community. I also know we have folks here whose bodies cannot make the decision I made. I just want to say out loud that there is no moral judgment about what any of us can or cannot do or choose to do. We all work differently in our sacred bodies and that is enough. And while for me, this story is about running, it's not really about running, per se.

That said, I did run that day. It was not pretty. It was grunty and gaspy, but I did it. And then I did it every other day for 6 weeks. Some days were awful. Painful. Quite embarrassing in public actually. Some days were triumphant. Even shocking to me. I had setbacks, including two weeks when I did not run at all, and then this past Sunday, a return to the park to begin to build back the ground I had lost in those dormant weeks.

It has not become easy, but 2 months ago, I was 100% positive that I could not run. It was just the hand I was dealt. But it turned out . . . my narrative was false. Powerful, but false. The pull to believe that I was not capable, was so strong, though, that it had felt like unquestionable truth.

This week, we read a story in parshat Shelach Lecha about the 12 Israelite spies that are sent ahead of our caravan in the wilderness to check out the land. At this point, all we knew is that we had left Mitzrayim, received the Torah at Sinai, and were now maybe a few weeks away from our destination of the Promised Land. So Moses asks the spies to go and bring back news: Is it a good and fertile land? How is its fruit? Who are its people? And what would it take to enter the land when we arrived?

Twelve spies went out and came back. When they returned from scouting the land, the 12 of them stood before the hundreds of thousands of people waiting to hear what they saw. Ten of the spies reported that while the land was absolutely good and fertile, the people living there were enormous and scary and no way could they enter that land. No way, not possible. Even with God's promise that they would make it there, they knew in their deepest soul, they were incapable. It was a fact.

Two spies disagreed. Caleb interrupted their report, and declared: יָכוֹל נִחַל! Surely we can. The repetitive word they use comes from the verb “to be able.” Saying the word twice in a different way: yachol nuchal - is grammatically emphatic in nature. Of course we can. Yes, it is possible. We are surely capable of this.

The ten interrupt him and shout him down with the same word, confirming their own immutable narrative: לֹא נִחַל. We cannot. They are sure.

We understand why. They're afraid of this wild unknown and clearly difficult and dangerous task ahead. I imagine that Caleb and Joshua must have felt that fear, too - the task *would* be difficult and dangerous. And: These are two ways of living in this world. With a “yachol nuchal” lens - a lens of possibility - and a “lo nuchal” lens, a lens where we concede impossibility. And it matters a great deal which we adopt. Which we decide to believe. For it will shape what happens next.

We're in a wilderness like this one, too. The tasks ahead do sometimes seem insurmountable. Unchangeable. Lo nuchal. Impossible. And it can feel like all is lost. Maybe you're thinking about the great task ahead to protect our democracy. Or the closing window of time we have to stop climate change. Or the growing refugee crisis or increasing antisemitism, islamophobia, racism, and white supremacy, or the war between Israel and Gaza. These challenges and journeys before us that loom so large. A mountain before us. And at the most difficult moments, we might also teeter on the edge of “lo nuchal,” a narrative that concedes impossibility - as if it were fact.

Caleb and Joshua begged the people to see possibility. But the pull of despair, of “lo nuchal” was just so so strong.

And so the ten “lo nuchal” spies won the day. Caleb and Joshua could not get them to see that their narrative of limitation and hopelessness was a false one. And so the multitudes weep with sadness and anger. And God tells them they will never enter the land; they will wander for 40 years instead. Like I was sure I could not run, and therefore I did not run, they said lo nuchal, we cannot make it to the land, and therefore, they didn't. When we walk the world, scout the land, assess the situation as a sure incapability - we set a certain reality into motion. And it's so heavy. A despair that pulls us down, a concession that we simply cannot have the dream we might dream.

But what happens if allow on this night for Caleb to whisper in our ears? What happens to our hearts, to our souls, to our truths, to our lives - if we were to look at the greatest challenges before us right now, and they are great, and take the deepest of breaths and say: yachol nuchal. Come at me with what you will . . . of course we are able. Of course this is possible. Whatever that “this” is for you tonight . . . what breadth of possibility might open before us if we refuse the false narrative of lo nuchal?

And I don't mean to be pollyannaish that just because something is possible means that it's easy or that's possible today, or even soon. I'm running now, but the metaphors for how hard the

challenges are, are all too available. There's a hill I didn't know was there, or my knees just can't take it, or it's so humid I feel like I can barely breathe or a twinge in my hip so I have to stop, or I don't want to wake up that early, or I have a real setback or I can't go nearly as far as I did even the day before. And it is beyond hard. That's the wilderness they were in, that's the wilderness we are in. Some days will be ugly and painful, and we will lose and have setbacks, but some days will be triumphant and even shocking. 40 some years of knowing I couldn't run, 40 years of knowing they'd never enter the land. What self-fulfilling prophecy might we avoid today?

Our tradition is right here whisper-yelling in our ears. Caleb wants us to hear him and not perpetuate the narrative of the ten spies. So let's try this, I invite you to think of the thing that is weighing on you the most right now, the thing that you are most sure we cannot change, will surely lose, or have already lost: and say to yourself: yachol nuchal. Surely, this is possible. (you can say it with some sass - I find it helps). Now turn to a person near you and say to them: yachol nuchal. Surely we can do this. It's okay if this feels a little silly. It's okay to look a little silly trying to carve out a hopeful place in this world. So . . . turn to someone near you and say: yachol nuchal. Surely we can do this. And whatever you mean, whatever you are talking about, begin to believe that. It is our narrative now. We will not wander lost for 40 years believing the falseness that we are bound to fail. That is not our legacy or the teaching of Shelach Lecha. Not tonight.

May we honor the painful lessons of our ancestors, the hopeful fire in Caleb and Joshua's bellies, the capacity we have to press on when it is hard, to challenge any narrative which would try to convince us that all is lost. May we take on together whatever may be ahead, for surely, we are able. Amen.