

KN 5772-2011-STEPPING OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONES

By Rabbi Lisa Malik

When my daughter Rivkah was 3-years old and I was dropping her off at preschool one morning, one of the other moms asked me if would like to join her at the gym for a Spinning Class. I had never gone Spinning before so, to be honest, the thought of it didn't thrill me. In fact, it terrified me. Although I had been going to the gym once a week to lift weights, I hadn't been to an exercise class since Step Aerobics went out of style in the 90's. The mom who extended the invitation to me was at least 5 years younger than I was.....and in much better shape. But, I thought, "What do I have to lose?... except weight." So, I said, "Sure. I'll go Spinning with you." That's what I said, but my thought-bubble was filled with lots of other contents. I was thinking about how difficult the class was going to be... and how embarrassed I was going to feel. I was imagining several embarrassing scenarios involving my inability to keep up with the other, more experienced Spinners. It's one thing to go to the gym on your own and work out at your own pace, but it's a little more difficult to work out at your own pace in a class setting.

It was with these thoughts and anxieties that I headed to the Philadelphia Sports Club with Cara. And sure enough, those thoughts and anxieties stayed with me for most of the class. From the beginning, when I couldn't figure out how to adjust the height of my seat, I felt self-conscious, thinking that everyone was looking at me. Everyone seemed able to keep up with the instructor except from me. I had to stop many times during that hour to drink, to breathe, to convince myself to go on.... And, at times, it felt like torture. But I persisted.

After it was over, when I was drenched with sweat and felt at least 2 pounds lighter, I have to admit that I felt proud of myself for venturing to do something that was against my natural inclination & that was obviously challenging for me..... I was proud that I had **stepped outside of my comfort zone.**

Now, I have to admit, after that first grueling experience, I didn't go to another Spinning Class for another 6 years. But... being **pushed out of my comfort zone** in that extreme way did make a difference in my approach to physical exercise. From that day on, I started to go to the gym twice a week. It wasn't much... but it was something. And, over the next few years, **I kept striving to push myself even further out of my comfort zone at the gym-** trying out new classes ranging from Jazzercise to Zumba to a high-cardio version of yoga known as Intensati. My version of 'pushing myself' might have seemed a bit 'wimpy' to people who are more athletic, but, for me, it was an accomplishment.

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You should know that **the gym**, in general, is **not a comfort zone** for me. In high school, I was the one who was usually last to be picked for sports teams because of my limited athletic abilities and experiences. And for those of you who were at my interview or who have gotten to know me over the past two months, another area in which I typically feel "**out of my comfort zone**" is the **kitchen**. Kind of ironic, considering that I supervise the *kashrut* of our synagogue's kitchen. Perhaps if I were a male rabbi, this wouldn't seem incongruous at all. But as a female rabbi, I sometimes feel the pressure to be both Rabbi and Rebbitzin. And aren't Rebbitzins supposed to cook and share their fabulous kugel recipes with the other women in the community?!

As with exercising in public, cooking in front of other people makes me nervous...and VERY self-conscious. I have trouble talking and measuring ingredients at the same time. I have been known to inadvertently substitute a teaspoon of salt for a tablespoon of sugar. One of my former congregants, while trying to teach me how to make brisket, once said to me, "You call that chopping onions?! At the rate you're going, this brisket won't be ready until Tisha B'Av!"

One day, 5 years ago, shortly after Dorothy made that comment to me, I decided that it was time to confront my shortcomings and to **step out of my comfort zone in the kitchen**. So, I made a Rosh HaShanah New Years' resolution that year: I decided I was going to start making challah. Over the summer, I had tasted some delicious challah at my friend, Sharon's house, in New Haven, CT. She had gotten the recipe from Rebbitzen Perel, the wife of the local Chabad Rabbi. So, one Friday morning, in the privacy of my own kitchen, without anyone watching me or judging me, in between working on my sermons and responding to phone calls from congregants, I made challah for the first time. (PAUSE) And it was a disaster. The dough was so sticky that I had trouble kneading it. It stuck to my hands and the counter. So, I added some oil.. and that only made matters worse.... (PAUSE) But I didn't give up. Week after week, I kept trying. Sometimes with my kids. Sometimes on my own. And one day, my challah came out OK... not thrilling, but adequate.

And within a few years, it actually started to taste delicious... so much so that when I didn't have time to make challah from scratch and had to serve store-bought challah on Shabbos, my family protested.. loudly. My challah became such a hit that I built up the confidence to start a Challah-Making class... which entailed my cooking in public.. But, this time, the communal kitchen experience did not intimidate me as it had in the past. In fact, my challah improved even more after other members of the shul shared some kneading and braiding tips with me. Some of the participants even learned a thing or two from me. But mostly, I learned from others who were way my experienced and skilled than I am in this domain. My goal had never been to become an expert baker or chef. I had just wanted to grow in some way by moving beyond my natural inclinations to avoid the kitchen. I had just wanted to become 'good enough' in the kitchen and to accomplish something by **stepping out of my comfort zone..** which I did and it felt terrific.

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Now that I have shared with you two of the areas that are not my comfort zone, the gym and the kitchen, most of you must assume that you know what **my "comfort zone" is**. If you guessed that my comfort zone is **Jewish** living, learning, and teaching, you are right.. to a certain extent. But this wasn't always the case. Twenty one (21) years ago, back in 1990, when I first became the Education Director and Principal of a Religious School in San Francisco, there were some areas of Jewish practice that were definitely **out of my comfort zone**.

In particular, I didn't know how to put on **tallit** or **tefillin**. Growing up in an Orthodox community in Brooklyn, only boys put on tallit & tefillin, not girls. But I was now living in an egalitarian Conservative community in California where both men & women read Torah, and where both men & women were encouraged to be equal participants in all aspects of religious life of the community. While I didn't judge other women for wearing tallit & tefillin, I personally felt uncomfortable with these ritual items.

I was motivated to start wearing a **tallit** when one of the students in the Religious School turned to me after Sunday morning services and asked me, "Why do all of the male teachers wear tallitot, but the female teachers don't? Aren't men and women supposed to be treated equally in our synagogue?" Although I was able to explain to him that many women, including myself, just didn't feel comfortable wearing a tallit because we didn't grow up that way, his question continued to haunt me. And, so when I went to a Jewish educators' conference a few months later and spotted a beautiful, and very feminine, ivory and pink silk tallit at one of the booths in the exhibit hall, I decided to try it on. It certainly did not feel like a male garment. And I didn't feel that I was breaking any religious laws. Somehow, it just felt right. So, I purchased that tallit and started wearing it during davening... not all of the time, but once in awhile. Wearing a tallit every time I davened did not become comfortable until many years later.

As for **tefillin**, that's another story. I must admit, that to this day, wrapping tefillin is **somewhat out of my comfort zone**.

The very first time I put on tefillin was shortly after the time I purchased my first tallit. But, my intention, at the time, was just to try it... once. I was motivated that morning by purely pedagogical objectives. Quite a few of the parents in the Religious School had approached me over the years with comments such as, "I feel so embarrassed that my child can read Hebrew and I can't. I feel foolish and out of place every time I come to services because everyone knows what they're doing and I don't. I just know I'm going to look like a fool at my child's Bar Mitzvah ceremony; everyone will be able to tell that I don't know anything and can't even follow along in the prayer book." Although I empathized with each and every parent who shared these types of comments with me, I couldn't quite personally identify with their feelings of inadequacy in the synagogue. As an educator, I wanted to truly understand and know how they felt. So, I wondered, "Is there any situation I can imagine feeling as uncomfortable as some of the school parents feel in services?" I already knew Hebrew... and I couldn't unlearn it just for the sake of empathy. However, there was something in the service that I didn't know how to do.. and that was how to put on tefillin; wrapping tefillin was as unfamiliar and foreign to me as reading Hebrew was to some of the Religious School parents.

So, one morning, I went to minyan and approached Elliot, the husband of one of my friends. I sheepishly asked him if he could show me how to put on tefillin. And he did, very patiently, although I do believe he was chuckling a bit inside. I could see it in his eyes; I was a total klutz. First, I wrapped the arm-tefillin too tight.. and it felt like I had cut off my circulation! Then, Elliot helped me re-wrap it, this time a bit more loosely....too loosely.. Within 10 minutes, the tefillin box had slipped down my left arm. So, I re-wrapped once again.. And by this time, we were up to "Aleynu" in the service; morning minyan was over.

This entire experience was very definitely **out of my comfort zone**. Thankfully, I accomplished my objective and was able to TRULY empathize with those adults in my community who felt uncomfortable in service. But, I had no intention of putting on tefillin again any time soon... I didn't try it again for 9 years... when I started rabbinical school at JTS.

All women who decide to become rabbis, or who otherwise decide to take on the responsibility for observing all of the mitzvot, are required to take on the mitzvah of tefillin as well. So, during the summer before my first semester at JTS, my husband, Adi, re-taught me how to wrap tefillin. I was still **out of my comfort zone**. But I had no choice, not if I wanted to fulfill my dream of serving God and the Jewish community by becoming a Rabbi, not if I took my mitzvah obligations seriously. So, for the first 2 years at JTS, I put on tefillin, but I did so reluctantly, and in private. Do you know where I used to put on my tefillin? in the coat closet in the hallway right outside of the Women's League Seminary Synagogue. It wasn't until the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of rabbinical school that I was able to come out of the closet... literally. One time, it just started to feel comfortable. One day, I was able to start wrapping tefillin in public.

Twenty one (21) years ago, I had to **step outside of my comfort zone** to put on tefillin for the first time. But, over time, it became more comfortable. In fact, it feels 100% comfortable when I am davening by myself because it enables me to feel bonded and connected to God in a very special way. It is only when I am in situations where I am the only woman wearing tefillin or when people look at me with a horrified or judgmental look in their eyes, that I feel **uncomfortable**.

I would guess that many of you who are here today, male and female, also feel **uncomfortable** with the idea of wearing tallit or tefillin. And, there might be other areas of Jewish religious practice that make you feel similarly **uncomfortable**.

For some, your **comfort zone** may not include observing **Shabbat** in any way, shape, or form. Or perhaps the idea of **keeping kosher** fills you with a sense of dread or discomfort.

For yet others, you may feel uncomfortable **visiting people in the hospital or comforting mourners during shiva**.

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But, we are now at the **beginning of a New Year, 5772**. So, now is the ideal time for each of us to think about the ways in which we can **step out of our Jewish comfort zones** in the coming year.

If you are most **comfortable** with coming to services at least once a week.... but not to participating in any other activities at TBA, this year, think about **stepping out of your Jewish comfort zone by** coming to a Men's Club event or by joining the Social Action Committee.

Or-if you are most **comfortable** with the educational aspects of Judaism & have tended to stay away from other synagogue events, think about **stepping out of your Jewish comfort zone by** coming to a Sisterhood event or by attending minyan once a week.

Or perhaps you are most **comfortable** with the social aspects of Jewish life & have tended to avoid Continuing Adult Education classes. In the New Year ahead, think about **stepping out of your Jewish comfort zone by** engaging in some Jewish learning this year.

Or-think about **adding a Jewish religious practice to your life** that is **out of your comfort zone** & see where that journey takes you. If you used to only come to shul 2 times per year, perhaps 5772 will be the year when you come to shul 3 times per year. Perhaps 5772 will be the year when you try out some new holidays, such as Simchat Torah and Purim, two of the most fun-filled days on the Jewish calendar. Or perhaps this will be the year when you buy your own lulav for the first time or start doing Havdalah with your family and friends on Saturday nights.

In Emet V'Emunah: The Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, the **ideal Conservative Jew** is described as one who is **"willing, learning, and striving."** We may not all be on the same rung of the **ladder** of Jewish learning or observance. But the important thing is to be somewhere on that ladder-**"willing, learning, and striving"** to enter into a relationship with God, to study Jewish texts, to do more mitzvot. In the words of Emet V'Emunah, **"No matter the level at which one starts, no matter the heights of piety and knowledge one attains, no one can perform all 613 mitzvot or acquire all Jewish knowledge. What is needed is an openness to those observances one has yet to perform and the desire to grapple with those issues and texts one has yet to confront."**

"Grappling with new issues & texts," and **"stepping out of your comfort zone"** may sound intimidating to some of you. But know that **you are not alone**. Know that you are **in good company** in feeling **uncomfortable** in some arenas of Jewish life. A few years ago, at my congregation in Philadelphia, one of my conversion students attended a **Learners' Minyan** that my husband taught. When I asked her to tell me about her experience, she said, "I was surprised to see how many Jewish people were there. **I thought I was the only one who felt out of place** in a traditional Jewish prayer service." I heard a similar comment from a congregant who was a Jew-by-birth. He said, "It was **reassuring to find out that I wasn't the only one** who feels like I don't know what I'm doing in services-when to stand, when to sit, when to kiss my tzitzit.. and what the prayers all mean. Together, we are learning **how to feel more comfortable in services.**"

In 2006, I attended a retreat that marked the culmination of a year-long course of study in the rabbinic PEER program with 17 other rabbis from around the country across the denominational spectrum. This professional development program was sponsored by the organization STAR, an acronym that stands for Synagogues: Transformation & Renewal. At the retreat, each of the STAR PEERS was asked to write a letter to a younger version of ourselves in which we had to express our strengths, weaknesses, and our vision of our rabbinate. All 18 of us, all of whom were used to public speaking in our professional lives, became incredibly shy when asked to 'put ourselves out there' in front of our colleagues in such a personal way. We had to "**step out of our comfort zone**" to write these letters. We are all comfortable writing about Judaism, Torah, Israel, and God. But we are not that comfortable writing about ourselves in this way.

One of our facilitators commended us on our honesty and candor in sharing our dreams and vulnerabilities with each other. He acknowledged how difficult and RISKY it must have been to express ourselves so candidly. Then he said something that really struck me,

"It's great that you all took risks when you shared your letters with each other, because

YOU NEED TO TAKE RISKS IN ORDER TO GROW

THERE IS NO GROWTH WITHOUT RISK-TAKING."

As I move towards the conclusion of my sermon, I would like to tell you a story about **Reb Zusya**. Reb Zusya used to spend about 3 hours a day studying Torah and another 3 hours a day studying Talmud. One day, when the rabbi was sitting and studying, his students looked over his shoulder and saw him studying a certain page of Talmud. The next day, they saw that their rabbi was studying the identical page of Talmud. The following week, they saw him on the same page still! /It bothered them & they finally asked their rabbi, **"Why are you still on the same page?!"**, to which their rabbi responded, **"It feels so good and comfortable here. Why should I go elsewhere?"**

Like many of us, this rabbi reached a point in his life where it was easier to study the same page over and over again, and not move on to new challenges and opportunities. For some of us, **'staying on the same page'** may mean doing something innocuous like always eating at the same restaurant. We know the menu so well- what's good, what's not so good- and we fear that a different restaurant might leave us dissatisfied or bewildered. And, so back we go, time after time, to the same place, not because the food is sensational, but because it is familiar. "It feels so comfortable. Why should I go elsewhere? **Why should I take a risk** trying out a new restaurant?"

It sure is **comfortable to stay on the same page.**

But many of us are **on the same page** concerning matters of far greater importance than where we go out to eat.

Perhaps we are in a job that gives us little satisfaction or inadequate compensation, but we stay where we are because we are **afraid to TAKE A RISK** and venture out.

Perhaps our lives are in a rut- we find ourselves doing the same things over and over, week in and week out-and we're **afraid to try something new** or go someplace different.

Perhaps our relationship with God and the Jewish community has been stagnant and we'd like to develop a deeper and richer spiritual life but **we feel unmotivated to do** so or we are **afraid** for one reason or another.

Yes, **it's often easiest to stay on the same page**, where "it feels so good" and so comfortable. **"Why go elsewhere?" "Why take a risk?"**

It's Erev Yom Kippur and we have already recited **Kol Nidre**. But, powerful as that prayer may be, **we didn't stay on that same page of the prayer book** for the whole evening. We **moved forward**. This Yom Kippur, may we be inspired to **move forward** in our lives in more significant ways.

Perhaps we should follow the advice offered on the magazine cover that is posted on my office door. It is a picture of Moses holding a stone tablet that reads, **"Thou Shalt Try Something New."** Let's take these words to heart in this New Year.

May we each **try to step out of our comfort zones** and work towards making the year **5772** one of **spiritual growth** by **"willing, learning, & striving"** to be the best that we can be.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah!