

## MY PERSONAL MARATHON TOWARD FINDING GOD

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Let me try to explain how I felt during the most exhilarating experience of my life.

Well, I should probably tell you that my body was also screaming in pain. During outdoor track last year, the hot summer sun beat down on my forehead as the penultimate lap of the mile loomed ahead. Amidst sore legs and heavy breathing, I pressed on. The clock read two minutes and thirty seconds, placing me directly on pace to run a five-minute mile. Should I go under, it would be my first sub-five mile. Dizziness kicked in on the last lap; I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold onto the pace. I took the final turn and my eyes yearned for the clock. It was going to be close. 4:51...4:52... The wind pressed against my face, and my eyelids slowly lowered. 4:54..55...56... 4:56. My heart soared as I crossed the finish line, and the emotions came flooding in.

Since freshman year, I trained off the motivation of someday running a mile under five minutes, and it finally happened. After catching my breath, I immediately embraced my friend Alex, who also ran a sub-five mile for the first time. I then thanked my teammates and Coach Crowley for their ongoing support. However, I even surprised myself with my next action: I pointed my fingers up to the heavens and thought, "Thank you, God, for making this dream a reality."

I didn't think my roller coaster of emotions had room for another passenger, but "surprise" found a seat. Even though I had dreamed of this moment for years, God had never been part of the vision. I expected achievement and celebration to take center stage, yet why had this private, intimate moment occurred nonetheless? I wasn't even convinced I believed in God at the time, never mind attempting to connect with such a being. The voice in my head was so instinctive that I didn't even think to censor myself. In retrospect, I could have never anticipated beginning a spiritual exploration into my conception of God on the same day I reached such a significant physical milestone.

Although this moment with God was surprising, it wasn't the first time I had sought God. I vividly remember talking to God every night before bed as a middle schooler. I had thanked God for my family and friends and expressed appreciation for positives in my life. It was simplistic, yet meaningful. However, over time, the subject of these conversations shifted from

expressing gratitude to demanding assistance. I pursued good luck on tests, guidance for how to win baseball games, and even for the courage to ask out the cute girl in my English class. A couple of months into these exchanges with God, I began to feel uncomfortable about the nature of our relationship. The Jewish idea of an omnipotent God didn't resonate with me. Why would God's purpose be to serve Ben Silver? I stopped the bedtime conversations under the false impression that communication with God could never be meaningful.

My post-race connection with God brought back a similar trepidation from the former bedtime conversations. I couldn't shake off the feeling that thanking God for an athletic performance inherently undermined my own perseverance. Grueling speed workouts and mental preparation allowed me to run my fastest mile, not God. Yet I just couldn't dismiss the rejuvenation of my communication with God. I had sought God as a middle schooler, and my instinctive call to God demonstrated that I still craved that connection. Ironically, the answer lay in my previous justification for rejecting God. I didn't dismiss God from my life because I couldn't comprehend the concept of God: I couldn't comprehend the concept of a *logical* God. For God to have meaning, I had to base its image on something personal in my life. What I didn't realize at the time was that it was what I *didn't* have that helped me find meaning in God.

In November of last year, I discovered that void. After track practice, my friend, Eliza, told me that her boyfriend, Jack, was always upset because his therapy wasn't going well. Her words hit me like ice water. Jack was my best friend, but I never knew of his therapy or depression. When I asked him if everything was okay, he replied dismissively, "You'd be upset too if your fantasy football team only scored sixty points this week." Our conversation barely lasted forty-five seconds. I tossed and turned in my sleep that night, burdened with the knowledge that my best friend was suffering, and I didn't have a clue what was going on.

Thankfully, Jack is in a much better place now. Yet the incident exposed an underlying theme absent in many of my masculine relationships: authentic, emotional communication involving self-revelation. Over the next few weeks, my conversations with Jack about sports, social media, and girls began to feel less meaningful. How could some of my most intimate friendships exist upon such superficial discussion? However, my inability to construct these types of relationships also stemmed from my own anxieties. I wanted Jack to confide in me, but I questioned whether I'd proactively reveal myself to him.

It was here that I finally realized the importance of God in my life. I previously rejected God because I thought such a being could only grant concrete requests that I could physically visualize in my life. What I overlooked was the emotional pleasure God could offer me.

Exchanges with God could foster the authentic discussion that I deeply craved in my masculine friendships. My image of God had evolved from a supernatural figure to a palpable personification.

As in any intimate relationship, I had to confront the attributes of God I wasn't too fond of. During HiBur, my visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum was one of the most spiritually moving experiences of my life. Visualizing evidence of the Holocaust in person was a gut-wrenching reminder of the destruction that's embedded within my identity. I'll never forget the heaping pile of charred shoes that covered the museum floor or the seemingly infinite amount of candles representing innocent lives cut short. As a sophomore, I solely blamed Nazi Germany for the Holocaust without much consideration. Yet over two years later, I found myself wondering how a figure as powerful as God could allow millions of his children to perish. God protected the Jews in Egypt, but where was God during the Holocaust? Because my relationship with God was analogous to a friendship, I had to seriously consider the notion that I was befriendng a murderer. That's a tough one to stomach.

At that moment, I felt wronged by God, as if I had discovered the truth behind the veil. How could I repair my relationship with God? Considering the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur is dedicated to forgiveness, the answer seemed pretty obvious. But I tried to no avail. Even if I had an apology from God to ponder, the word "sorry" could never properly express atonement for genocide. I needed an explanation more than an apology.

I found my answer as a visual at Yad Vashem. At the end of the museum, the corridor opened up to a breathtaking view of Jerusalem. As I took in the hundreds of buildings, streets, and fields that extended as far as the eye could see, I finally understood. Although the Holocaust produced profound physical and emotional suffering, it also demonstrated the capability of unity to triumph over evil. The Jews responded and built the spectacular city in front of me. I began to view the Holocaust as an event defined by the life of the Jewish community instead of the death of Jewish people. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive God for allowing my ancestors to suffer during the Holocaust, but finding light at the end of a dark tunnel has helped me move forward. Many Jews consider God flawless, but I don't think I could maintain a relationship with such high expectations. Personifying God has allowed me to hold God to the same standard as my friends: People aren't perfect, so God can make mistakes also.

Not too long ago, I felt apprehensive about contacting God, never mind fostering an intimate relationship with the divine. Classic Jewish characteristics associated with God -- omnipotent, flawless, servant to personal desires -- never resonated with me. But grappling with

God's identity embodies the essence of what I love about Judaism and Beth El: freedom to discover what Judaism means to me. At Beth El, discussions such as "who wrote the Torah" exist for congregants to present and consider many perspectives, not find one. I realized that for me, it's not a question of *whether* God exists, but *how* God exists. I've learned to embrace the idea that the only invalid notions of Judaism are the ones that aren't meaningful to me. God exists in a multiplicity of ways, and I've gravitated towards the one that's most tangible in my life.

I never expected to rediscover a connection with God on the day I ran a mile under five minutes. Yet nearly a year later, I communicate with God regularly. After warming up, I find a quiet location away from the track for a quick, but important conversation with God. If it's quiet enough to hear the wind rustling through the trees or birds chirping, I know God can hear me. Previously, I would've asked God for the tools to run fast, but that's not what God means to me anymore. Coach Crowley and training maximize my athletic potential. However, God functions as an equally fundamental sounding board for processing pre-race anxiety, excitement, and self-doubt. The addition of God to my warm-up provides the balance I need to race well: Coach offers logical support, and God supplements emotional support. Coach talks to me; God listens to me.

Regardless of how I prepare for the next race, I know that it will be painful. Physical and mental exhaustion are necessary for improvement in distance running. But I no longer have to endure the pain by myself. God runs alongside me and within me every step of the way.