

Runners, take your mark! The race begins tonight.
We are all runners and the race of 5765 is about to begin. Go ahead.
Use your imagination a little bit. The starting gun is about to go off.
Are you ready? How will you perform during the race? Will you
finish? Will you go faster or slower than the last one? Will you
enjoy it or tolerate it? What have you done to prepare yourself for
the race? What about those moments during the race that you feel
pain or tired or discouraged or without focus? What will keep you
moving forward during the race? How will you succeed?

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I asked myself these same questions seven years ago as I stood on
the starting line of an actual race, not a metaphorical one. I was
about to compete in my first marathon. I stood there wondering
what would happen between the starting line and the finish line
some twenty-six and two-tenth miles later. I wondered, 'Am I
ready? How will I perform during the race? Will I finish? Will I go
faster or slower than the last one? Will I enjoy it or tolerate it?
What have I done to prepare myself for the race? What about those
moments during the race that I will feel pain or tired or discouraged
or without focus? What will keep me moving forward during the
race? How will I succeed?'

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So, what did keep me moving? Runners do all sorts of things to
give them that extra push. Some might wear that lucky t-shirt;
others might have a very detailed order of preparation that they
follow to the letter. Sometimes these 'motivators' are found in less
quirky and more mental forms. What did I do? How did I succeed
and realize my goal of finishing the race? I did not run alone; I
brought some inspiration along with me. There were people who I
had met at that time in my life whose own lives, personal
circumstances and distinctive nature had challenged, taught and
inspired me. In an attempt to discover my own motivation at
different times during that race, I welcomed the sounds of their
voices into my mind and their unique spirits into my heart.

As I ran the race and in reflecting upon the experience, I realized
that these souls were not only instrumental in motivating me to
complete this race, but they spoke to me about some very
fundamental truths for running the race of life. Tonight we are
here to look ahead to the race that is the coming year 5765 –
preparing ourselves for all of its challenges and opportunities. As

you tighten your shoe laces and limber your muscles for the race of 5765, come run some of my race with me. Meet the people who ran with me. Let them help prepare us for the race we begin tonight.

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Imagine. The race has begun. The experience of the first few miles contains many emotions. Adrenaline pours through your body -- you feel excitement and optimism, doubt and anxiety. One of the most overwhelming feelings is the sense of community and shared destiny with so many total strangers. They may be runners of different origins, of different skill levels and various ages -- you share a history of sacrifice and sometimes pain with each person there, which all hope to turn into triumph and survival. As you look down the long road ahead of you -- you seek to draw on the strength and resolve from being a part of this community.

The week before my race I met Alex Gross, again. My community commemorated the Holocaust with a Yom Hashoah program. The speaker was Mr. Gross -- a survivor whom I had the pleasure of hearing and meeting years before. As I listened to Mr. Gross tell his story, I remembered too, why he had such an affect on me years earlier when I heard him speak. All who were listening were moved by his story of terror, pain and loss. Even so, I found myself experiencing unexpected emotions. I found hope in his story, too. All of us in that room shared a history of pain and great sacrifice -- it drew us together. Something else drew us together, as well. Our people had turned pain and sacrifice into triumph and survival. There we stood -- remembering, but living and thriving too!

Mr. Gross revitalized in my heart a sense of the power of community, my community. My heart recognized its power to offer hope, renewal and survival. The experience of knowing Mr. Gross inspired me to do the same -- to see and tackle my challenges with the same power. As I ran my race with him in my heart, I knew the strength of community in my heart and with it the burning desire to survive, to finish. As I ran my race-- Mr. Gross ran with me.

As we begin to run our race this evening may we find those who help us realize the powers of community -- hope, renewal and survival.

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Imagine. You have reached the midway point of the race. These next miles begin to get a little tougher. The crowd thins and thins even more. It is not the same throng as at the beginning of the race - the connections you make are not one of many, but one to one. You notice the individuals around you. You talk to them. They encourage you. You encourage them. You find yourself connecting to these companions. It is these one or two individuals who help carry you as the race becomes more challenging. From their running, from their stories you find yourself energized and a little bit better off, a little bit stronger.

I said good-bye to Stacie a few weeks before my race. She was a woman about my age who died a few weeks before my race. As she fought her demise, Stacie and her boyfriend, Jeff decided that they wanted to commit to one another formally. They did not want to have a makeshift wedding ceremony - removing hope by saying that they had to get married then and now. So, in an example of creativity and renewal - they created an engagement ceremony. One evening in her living room, surrounded by family and close friends they promised to share their lives with one another and to one day marry. In that moment all of us witnessing this commitment - felt the blessing of love stirring within our hearts. It was so clear in that moment how their love came to dominate her illness. We understood how love adds richness and purpose to our lives.

Stacie inspired me within my heart the power of relationship. My heart rediscovered how a relationship with another human could nurture and invigorate our souls. As I ran my race with her in my heart I remembered the powerful connections that Stacie made with so many people. The way she loved helped me to draw strength and offer strength to those who had run this far with me. As I ran my race, Stacie ran with me.

As we begin to run our race this evening may we find those people who teach us how loving someone else is one of our greatest blessings.

Runners, take your mark! The race begins tonight. Imagine. You have run most of the race. What is before you is a distance you have run on a light training day. Yet, even though your head states this obvious fact - your body and your heart do not buy it for a moment. Despite the promise of the finish line, you

find yourself needing to concentrate on every movement, every step. You toss aside all of your training and reading and mental games. You return to the basics – one breath at time, one step at a time. There is no one else to move you or inspire you. You must rely on you and you alone. In this solitude you will intimately find your true nature and your true self.

Two weeks before my race I remembered Alex. Alex died at the age of six of a brain tumor, and I remembered him as family observed his yartzheit. I met Alex immediately after my first Rosh Hashanah as rabbi in Nashville, Tennessee. Before I met Alex, I knew his story and his grim prognosis. I walked into his hospital room and visited and talked. My visit with him matched the story and prognosis I heard. After good-byes and our short visit I realized that they had missed any Rosh Hashanah celebration. On my way out of the hospital I decided that I needed to scour the hospital cafeteria for apples and honey. I returned a few minutes later to share my prize. As we shared these symbols of life and sweetness in the coming year I expected sadness and melancholy to overtake me– something else happened. As he coated himself in honey, I looked into his eyes. They were still the eyes of a six year old – they sparkled, they overflowed with an unexpected calm, a firm resolve and an inexplicable peace. That moment Alex brimmed with the confidence and clarity of life, not the fear and confusion of death.

Alex reinvigorated in my heart the ability to recognize the ultimate resource that each one of us possesses in great wealth – the divinity of our own soul. This little six-year-old boy who faced an impending doom embodied the faith and courage needed to embrace that divinity that each one of us possess. My heart recognized my own divinity and my own ability to embrace, access it and allow it to empower me to face whatever each moment life threw my way. As I ran my race with Alex in my heart, I remembered looking into Alex's eyes and seeing and feeling his own resolve and strength ... and I was inspired to find my own. As I ran my race, Alex ran with me.

As we begin to run our race this evening may we rediscover the divinity within ourselves – and allow it to empower us to overcome any challenge and ascend the greatest of heights.

Runners, take your mark! The race begins tonight.
Our race begins tonight.

As I stood at the finish line of my race my heart swelled with feelings of pride, accomplishment and blessing. I felt so blessed to have run the race, to have such individuals to know and teach me so much, to have run with the strength of community, the power of relationship and the conviction of my self. For a while my questions and their challenges abated at least until the next race.

The year 5765 is not a race – no medals at the end, no free t-shirts for registering. 5765 is simply where we will continue to live our lives. Determining how we will live – for this reason we are gathered here tonight. How will you live? What will be your determining values? Who will be your teachers? How will you participate and cultivate the lives of the communities in which you live and which give so much to your life? How will you value and nurture the relationships with those you love and add meaning to your own life? How will you honor and foster your own divinity and allow it to infuse everything that you do? The race, the year is yours to run, yours to experience. May it be a year of facing and overcoming challenge, learning and teaching, and growing and maturing. May it be a year of dynamic communal connections, loving relationships and continued spiritual growth. May it be a year that you are blessed with the wholeness of life that we call *shalom*.

AMEN.