

Learning Torah on One Foot

In Jerusalem, beating a path toward Yom Kippur

BY ILANA KURSHAN SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

I was leading services in synagogue on Shabbat, trying to place all my weight on my left foot, when the irony of my situation suddenly dawned on me. Here I was, standing there with a broken foot and reciting Psalm 34: “God guards all [my] bones; not one of them breaks.” I smiled in spite of myself and hoped that no one noticed.

I’m not exactly sure how I fractured my third metatarsal, but the x-ray results were unequivocal, as were the doctor’s instructions: “Minimal walking, and no running for six weeks.” This charge has proven both frustrating and debilitating. For the past two years, my feet have traced a continuous path throughout the streets of Jerusalem. Only rarely do I lift my feet from the surface of the ground—not because Eretz Yisrael is holy, but because I am a lover of texts, and my reading and learning have

always been intimately connected to walking. Whenever possible, I read novels set in Jerusalem and then visit the places described—the YMCA stadium where David Grossman’s *Rhino* used to watch soccer games in “Someone to Run With”; the old Arab house where Batya Gur’s *Zahava* was brutally bludgeoned in “Murder on Bethlehem Road.”

My study of Talmud, too, connects me to the geography of the city. The streets in my neighborhood are all named for the sages whose statements comprise the skeletal structure of the Talmud: Shimon ben Gamliel; Yohanan ben Zakkai; Elazar Hamodai. When I wake up each morning, I go for a walk or a jog with my iPod, listening to a *Daf Yomi* (page-of-Talmud-a-day) lecture while I get my exercise. Sometimes it is difficult to follow the line of the argument without the Talmud page in front



For Kurshan, listening to Talmud while walking the streets of Jerusalem blurs the distinction between past and present.

of me, but I follow the directional cues of the text: I take a left on Rabbi Akiva and then a right on Hillel, and note how, in a moment of concession, Rabbi

With the start of Elul, I began missing the Yom Kippur service on my way home, singing the *Hineni* and the *Vidui* aloud as I retraced the steps I have

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and then a right on Hillel, and note how, in a moment of concession, Rabbi Hisda turns into Rabbi Meir at a quiet intersection.

Each week I photocopy the portion of the Torah that I will be reading in synagogue the following Shabbat so that I can practice chanting aloud from the pages while walking to work. When people ask me why I learn my Torah reading while walking, I cite the Talmud in Tractate Eruvin: "A person who is walking along a path and does not have company should occupy himself with Torah." At this point in my life, I often find myself walking alone; I feel fortunate to have Torah as a constant companion.

singing the *Hineni* and the *vivavi* prayers aloud as I retraced the steps I have taken over the past year—the street corner where I inadvertently left my cousin waiting for me for a half hour; the coffee shop where I really shouldn't have stayed out late gossiping with friends. I planned to continue preparing this way until the holidays began. But now, with the fractured metatarsal, I'm stuck at home. A person cannot learn while walking if she has only one good foot.

We are, of course, in the season of good and bad feet. Our lives hang in the balance—will we put our best foot forward or stumble over the obstacles in our path? Will we be inscribed for life or death? The liturgy of the *Al Chet*, the

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Teshuvah begins with self-examination; we are required to think long and hard about all the ways in which we have not behaved in accordance with God's commandments.

long confessional prayer recited many times on Yom Kippur, links most of the sins to the parts of the human body: "For the sin of wanton eyes; for the sin of being stiff-necked; for the sin of the evil tongue." And then, of course, there is the line that involves feet: "For the sin of running with our legs towards iniquity." At least I can't do that one in my present state.

I hope that my foot is healed by Yom Kippur, a day that involves long hours of standing and self-affliction. But if I'm still hurting, I can rest assured that I'll be in good company—the Babylonian sage Ravina (also a big walker and traveler) had an injured foot on Yom Kippur as well. As we learn in the Talmud (Yoma 78a):

The head of the Jewish community was invited to the city of Hagerunya to visit the beit midrash of Rav Natan. That morning, Rafram and the other rabbis went to Rav Natan's class, but Ravina did not attend. The next day, Rafram came to question Ravina in an effort to exonerate

Rafram: Why does Rav Ashi say this?

Ravina: Because a sandal is more likely to fall off, leading a person to pick it up and carry it [which is forbidden].

Rafram wishes for Ravina to be forgiven, which is the theme of Yom Kippur. And Ravina seems to have a good reason for staying off his feet—or so I'd like to think, since it's my excuse as well. Like Ravina, I'm going to have to stay home a lot in the next few weeks. Perhaps this will enable me to turn my gaze inwards and focus on the *teshuvah* that is incumbent upon us before Yom Kippur. As we recite in the Yom Kippur liturgy, "God searches all the inner chambers of the stomach and checks the kidneys and the heart." God, then, is the ultimate x-ray machine, and we would do well to follow His example.

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Rav Natan's class, but Ravina did not attend. The next day, Rafram came to question Ravina in an effort to exonerate him in the eyes of Rav Natan:

Rafram: What is the reason that you did not come to the class?

Ravina: My foot was hurting.

Rafram: Then why didn't you put on shoes and come to the class?

Ravina: It was the top of my foot that was hurting, and shoes would not have helped.

Rafram: Well then you should have worn sandals.

Ravina: There was a pool of water on the path, and I would have had to cross it.

Rafram: Could you not have crossed it wearing sandals?

Ravina: No, I hold like Rav Ashi, who says that a person may not cross a stream wearing sandals on Yom Kippur.

about all the ways in which we have not behaved in accordance with God's commandments. According to Kabbalah, these commandments, which number 613 in total, are intimately connected to the human body: there are 248 positive mitzvot, which correspond to our 248 organs; and 365 negative mitzvot, which correspond to our 365 sinews. Our challenge is to use our bodies to do good, repairing the breaches that keep us apart from one another and from God. We hope and pray that with every step we take—whether on one foot or on two—we are bringing about wholeness and healing in a fractured world. **WJD**

Ilana Kurshan studies Talmud and works as a literary agent in Jerusalem.

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