

At the Gates

Georgene Johnson lived in Cleveland, Ohio. She was forty-two years old, and she was trying to have a good attitude about being forty-two years old. So she started running and exercising to keep in shape. She said, "I'm not going to look like I am forty-two, or at least I am going to look like a good forty-two." She did well in her running. She was running farther every day. She thought she would try a little competition and entered a 10K race. (That's about six miles.) Nervous about her first race, she got up early and arrived at the start of the race. To her surprise there were a lot of people milling around, stretching, getting ready. All of a sudden, a voice on the microphone said, "Move to the starting line." This was it. A gun sounded and they were off, like a huge wave, hundreds of runners, sweeping her up. She was in the race.

After about four miles it occurred to her that they ought to be turning around and heading back to the finish line. She wondered why they didn't turn around. She stopped and asked an official, "How come the course isn't turning around?" He said, "Ma'am, you are running the Cleveland Marathon." Twenty-six miles. Her event, the 10K, was to begin a half-hour after the start of the marathon.

Now, some of us would have stopped right there and said, "That's it, I'm going home." But to her credit, she kept right on going and she finished the race. She said: "This is not the race I trained for. This is not the race I entered. But for better or worse, this is the race that I am in."

I am sure many of us have had the same experience, if not in a marathon then facing one of life's many surprise challenges. Was it a relationship that changed into something different? Was it a job that presented new economic realities? Was it a health matter? One thing is certain: Life just has a way of doing that to us, picking us up and putting us into situations that we didn't train for, we didn't volunteer for, we didn't want. But for better or for worse, this is the situation we find ourselves in.

Welcome to the rabbinate in 2026!

Our challenges are overwhelming, from learning new tech to security challenges, and from understanding new generations to being caught in the middle of political quicksand. There is a real fear that such challenges will lead to fewer rabbis in a time when we need more, not less, spiritual leadership. And yet I hope that each of us is called to finish the race we've started. It's not only that we don't want to be quitters. It's also that people are counting on us. And maybe we feel that we are obligated to God as well. After all, our lives are a divine gift. What gives us the right to dictate the character of that gift?

So, let's assume that we are going to finish the race we started. Fortunately, help is out there, by way of good advice. I am hoping the material in this issue, from the practical to the spiritual, will be a source of inspiration.

In the 1960s, a sophomore at Harvard named Kent Keith wrote a short essay called "The Paradoxical Commandments,"¹ prompted by a feeling he had when attending an awards ceremony at his high school: He realized that he felt happy about his service to his school and that he didn't need to receive any rewards. His good feeling about helping others was the reward; the meaning and the satisfaction were part of him, irrespective of any external recognition. These paradoxical commandments were forgotten by their author but somehow they started to circulate in the world. They even wound up on the wall of Mother Teresa's room in Calcutta. A few years ago, Mr. Keith was chilled to read in a book about Mother Teresa that his words were cherished by her. He then discovered that thousands of people world-wide treasured these words.

I think these commandments—while not as central as the Ten—are a good way to sum up my message. When it comes to finishing the race, such words can help us keep our balance and our direction. They can remind us why we entered the race in the first place, and why we should see the race until the end. Here they are:

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.
Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you have anyway.

And so, I challenge each of us to put on our Nikes, keep on racing, and know that, despite the frustrations and the failures, we are helping to make this world a better place, engaging in acts of holiness and kindness, and growing toward the goodness that sustains us in blessing and is the hope for our future.

And let's know that God is there, too, wherever we go, cheering us on and helping us give the best that we can. Amen.

—Rabbi Edwin Goldberg, DHL

Note

1. A copy of the original essay, as well as the author's reflections on them thirty years later, can be found at www.kentmkeith.com/paradoxicalcommandments.