



**Rosh Hashanah, 5771**  
**The Lonely Archer**  
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One of my favorite hobbies is listening to sermons from preachers of any and all faiths. This summer I heard a sermon from Joel Osteen, the preacher at Lakewood Church in Houston, that I have not been able to get out of my head. His sermon was about running your own race.

He addressed women in his congregation who dreamed of being size 6. They work out all the time. They eat broccoli. They have a light yogurt for lunch, a light salad for dinner, they regularly say no to dessert, and still no size 6! Yet they see other women who are thinner and fitter. And Joel Osteen's message to them is: the women who are size 6 have their own genetics. In other words, their genes, with a "g" are not your genes. So their jeans, with a "j" are not your jeans. But no matter. Your job is not to be more fit than them. Your job is to be as fit as you can be. Run your own race.

He addressed economic concerns. You are a school teacher. You are doing fine, but you don't live large. Meanwhile, your friend in the financial services industry just told you where he is going for vacation, and you didn't even know such a place existed. OK. The financial services people are running their race. They get the market and securities and financial instruments. That is not you. You are a teacher. You get students. You get the thrill of transmitting learning that you are passionate about to the next generation. Let the banker run the banker's race, and the teacher run the teacher's race.

Pastor Osteen capped off his talk about running your own race, appropriately enough, with an analogy to cars. He said he was recently watching the Indianapolis 500 and was

admiring the sleek, superfast race cars that were whirling around the track at incredible speeds. But the fastest race car can only hold one passenger, the driver, and it can only do one thing, whirl around the track. He has an SUV that he uses to carpool his kids and to schlep his groceries. His SUV is great for carpool and schlepping, but would not be good at the Indianapolis 500. The race cars are great for the race track, but they couldn't take his kids to school or go to the local grocery store. Each car, like each human being, needs to run its own race.

I heard his sermon during the summer, and it had immediate resonance for me. As you may know, there are any number of folks in our community who bike the Pan Mass Challenge. I cannot bike at that level, but during their summer of training, I would occasionally tag along and join them for their rides. It was inevitably quite humbling. Biking as fast as I can bike, I go maybe 14 to 15 miles an hour. Most of them are going 18 to 20 miles an hour. I am always behind them, sometimes so far behind that they have to double back to get me. They say things like, oh, don't feel bad, going with you allows me to increase my mileage. That makes me feel particularly proud. Other times there will be one kind soul who stays back and bikes at my slower pace. I could see they were doing it just to be nice. So I would say, you don't have to bike with me. You can go on and join the others. Really? They would say. Absolutely. Go ahead. And then they were off. And when I could no longer see the last kindly biker as they would trail off into the distance, and I would feel bad that I cannot keep up with anybody, I would hear Osteen's sermon. Run your own race.

But of course his mandate to run your own race has resonance far beyond making peace with how fit or how fast we are. It has resonance for making peace with *who* we are. For the first time in my life, I paid attention to Genesis 21:20 which we read after Abraham has expelled

Ishmael and Hagar. “*Vayehi elohim et hanaar vayigdal vayeshev bamidbar vayehi roveh kashat.*” God was with Ishmael and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an archer.

*A what? An archer? Who does archery in Abraham’s family?*

Abraham does not do archery. He wouldn’t know a bow and arrow if it hit him in the face. Abraham was a spiritual man, a man of God, a man whose new and powerful belief in one God revolutionized humanity. But Ishmael was not a man of God. He didn’t do God. He did bows and arrows.

His brother Isaac does not do archery. Isaac is a peaceful shepherd. He has flocks. He takes walks in nature. Like his father Abraham before him, Isaac continued digging wells and feeding his cattle. But Ishmael was not a shepherd like his brother. He did bows and arrows.

Sometimes running your own race, finding your own voice, discovering your own passion, makes you an outlier in your own family. You look around at the other people in your life, and no one is quite like you. Ishmael was an archer, but in his own home that meant being a lonely archer.

*To be a lonely archer is hard for the archer. Why is no one in my family like me?*

*To have a lonely archer is hard for the father of the archer. Abraham must have asked himself: archery? Where did that come from? That is not how we raised him!*

The Torah is famously silent about the interior lives of Abraham and Ishmael. The Torah yields only two facts.

One, Abraham expels Ishmael.

Two, when Abraham dies, Ishmael comes back to bury him. Ishmael and Isaac, estranged brothers, the archer and the spiritual shepherd, are briefly and wordlessly reunited to lay their father to his eternal rest.

What happened in between the expulsion, in Genesis 21, and the burial of Abraham, in Genesis 25? The Torah does not say, but there is a midrash from Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer that portrays Abraham as not being able to get Ishmael out of his mind. I miss Ishmael. I must see Ishmael. I am going to see him! But Sarah objected! Abraham, he is an archer. He is my son. He is an archer. He is not like us. He is my son. He *is* us. So they strike a compromise. Abraham will go and see his son the archer, but he must stay on his camel. It is going to be a brief stay. He is not even going to get out of his car. He will do a quick check in and go back home.

So Abraham packs up his famous camel and goes to see Ishmael. He gets there mid-day, and Ishmael is not home. No surprise, he is outside doing his archery practice. Abraham cannot get off his camel. That is the deal he made with Sarah. But Ishmael's wife comes out to see him. Abraham introduces himself to her as her father-in-law who has come for a visit with his son Ishmael. When Ishmael's wife tells Abraham that Ishmael is not home, Abraham says he is thirsty and hungry. Could I get some bread and water? His daughter in law fetched food and water which Abraham consumed, still on his camel. Even from his camel, he could see Ishmael's home, that it was filled with a kindly wife, children, blessings. Ishmael had his own home and hearth, different from his father's, but beautiful in its own way. Abraham offered a prayer: "Master of the Universe, please continue to bless and protect Ishmael, my son, the archer, whose home, and whose life, have a beauty of their own." Abraham went back home to Sarah.

When Ishmael returned, he learned that he had just missed his father, but his wife told him about Abraham's blessing, and Ishmael understood that parents always have mercy upon their children.

This midrash is so real. It speaks to so many truths about the lonely archer.

When one member of the family does not share the values of the others, there is tension. Abraham and Sarah quarrel about what to do about Ishmael. I must go. You cannot go. I must go. Then you must stay on your camel. Tension.

But parents never stop thinking about their children, never stop loving their children, and never give up on their children.

And when you have a son who is an archer, and a father who is not an archer, a father who is a man of God, and a son who is not a man of God, what you have is profound love and longing and distance, all at the same time. Abraham is so close to Ishmael, and so far away, at the same time. At his home, but not at his home. With him, but not with him. There, but not there. The father and son are very different from one another. Nothing can change that. But they love one another. Nothing can change that, either. Abraham can see that Ishmael's life has its own beauty and joy and purpose. Ishmael knows that his father blesses him and prays for him. Can we do the same for those in our lives? And for ourselves?

Sometimes running your own race means being slower than the other bikers, not as wealthy as the bankers, and not as thin as those who wear size 6. But at other times running your own race means finding your inner archer, even when you are a lonely archer. That means being at peace with who you are, and who you are not. In the new year of 5771, may all the lonely archers, and their loved ones who are so close and yet so far away, come to an ever deeper love, and for this, let us say, Amen. Shanah tovah.