



## MIRACLE ON 67TH STREET

**By:** Jerry Gross

Date: Wednesday, October 28 2009

This time of year could have been the sixth anniversary of my death. Instead, I'll be performing a miracle in a few weeks on the streets of New York City.

Let me explain.

In the fall of 2003, I was celebrating Sukkot in my normal fashion; praying in shul, spending time with my family and friends in the Sukkah - and eating a lot of food. I went to bed the first night of the holiday, which was also Shabbat, on a full stomach - nothing out of the ordinary for me. What happened next certainly was.

In the middle of the night I started choking in my sleep. Thank G-d I woke up. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be writing this story. My family called 911 and Hatzalah, and I was rushed to the hospital where I was stabilized. Doctors said that acid reflux from all the food I ate caused severe inflammation of my epiglottis - the flap of tissue that sits at the base of the tongue on top of the windpipe. It swelled so much that it cut off my breathing.

To say I was scared is a big understatement. I was very grateful for all the people who helped me that night, but also embarrassed and ashamed - for all these people had to desecrate Sukkot and Shabbat by using the phone and driving just to help me recover from a problem caused primarily by my eating.

That next day I knew I had to change. I wasn't a bad person, mind you. I tried to be a loving husband, caring father, hard-working businessman and active member of my community in Brooklyn. But I was also 60 pounds overweight and had little exercise other than walking one whole block to shul on Shabbat.

What happened over the following six years is a clear sign in my life that G-d takes care of those people who try to take care of themselves. For as the Rabbis say, if we open up the door just the size of the eye of a needle, then G-d will push it so wide that 10 chariots can go through.

I first tried losing weight on my own with little success. I thought I had the resolve but lacked the consistency and commitment needed to control myself. I knew what to do - eat well balanced meals in the appropriate amounts at the right time of day - but just couldn't pull it off. I actually gained some weight.

I wanted the result of weight loss but wasn't willing to change my behavior - to honestly look inside myself and see why I was still eating in a way that sent me to the hospital in the middle of the night.

About six months later, I "just happened" to meet a guy in shul, Tzvi Goldberg, who said he

volunteered his time to help people lose weight. I figured it was worth trying. During our talks and emails he helped me stay focused on what was most important in my life (my health and family) and how to stick to a program of healthy eating. I was moved by his chesed (kindness) and genuine concern for me. I now had some outside accountability for my eating and I started to lose weight. I was thrilled.

At the same time, I also started being exposed to the fundamental Torah obligation of taking proper care of our bodies and how important this issue really is in Jewish law. I read the book The Art of Healthy Living by Rabbi Jonathan Rietti, and I began learning Maimonides Laws of Knowledge, where he spells out in detail the commandment and approach to proper eating and a healthy lifestyle. Here I was, an Orthodox man who learned in yeshiva, and I was addressing this topic for the first time.

I was blown away and very motivated. I started appreciating all the wonderful foods G-d gives us in this world and realized I didn't have to find enjoyment in junk food and overeating. I began remembering what my Rebbe, Rabbi Avigdor Miller would always say about appreciating HaShem's gifts like apples and oranges. It finally clicked.

It wasn't just that I started losing weight, my whole outlook and lifestyle changed - for the better. G-d was certainly leading me in the right direction - as long as I kept on putting one foot in front of the other.

A little while later, I started something else in my life that "seemed" completely unrelated. I signed up for Partners in Torah and was asked to learn with a Physical Education teacher in St. Catherine's, Ontario named John Snider. Now what in the world did I, an insurance salesman in Brooklyn, NY have in common with a Canadian gym teacher?

We enjoyed our weekly phone calls, learning the Torah Portion of the Week and schmoozing about ourselves and families. It was exhilarating for both of us. At the same time I had joined a local health club to start exercising but wasn't finding it so rewarding. By this time, I had dropped 60 pounds and wanted to help keep it off with some weight training. John, being the gym teacher that he is, suggested that I try the treadmill to vary my routine. I was grateful for John's suggestion and he was grateful for our learning sessions, which he said helped him increase his Jewish observance. He started saying the Shema every day and bought a kosher pair of Tefillin. But then our sessions started to peter out and John and I lost touch.

During the fall of 2006, I heard that a friend of mine was running the New York City Marathon so I thought it might be interesting to go watch and cheer him on. My only contact with marathons up to that point was being annoyed at the inconvenience of the road closings and traffic jams. What I saw that day amazed me. People with prosthetics were running. Senior citizens were running. I'd never seen anything like it. I couldn't stop thinking about the tremendous accomplishments these people were achieving. All this made me think again about John, the gym teacher in Canada who gave me tips for the treadmill.

So I called him shortly after the marathon to reconnect. I told him I couldn't believe what I had seen and asked him if he runs marathons like that - 26 miles without stopping. He said that was kid stuff compared to the Ultra Marathons he runs. For his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, he ran a 50-mile race. Whoa!

It was so good to speak to John again. And I'd felt bad about the fact that we had lapsed in our weekly learning. So I made him a deal. I said, *'John, I'll teach you Torah, and you teach*

*me how to run!*" And he took me up on it.

I left the gym and started running outside for the first time in my life. It was invigorating and fun. I was hooked. Summer or winter, Marine Park or Prospect Park, it didn't matter, as long as I could get off of the crowded city streets. I started running less than a mile and slowly built up - two miles, three, then five. I began entering short races to increase my endurance and to satisfy my curiosity as to how fast (or slow) I was compared with other people my age. It didn't matter where I ended up, as long as I could finish. I was loving it and felt great.

Which brings us to the final piece of the puzzle and the miracle I'm hoping to perform on November 1.

A couple years ago, I saw an advertisement for Soveya, which immediately intrigued me. Here was an organization that was, for the first time that I had ever seen, providing a structured Torah approach to weight loss and nutrition for Jews who were struggling with their eating. It was run by Rabbi Eli and Mrs. Zakah Glaser who had unbelievably lost a combined 250 pounds and were now trying to help other people find success with their weight-loss goals.

Also, they had just started a national program for Jewish Day Schools to help end childhood obesity through a positive and proactive Torah educational approach. Well, needless to say, this hit me very close to home. To make a long story short, I'm now helping to implement SWITCHH (Soveya Wellness Initiative To Create Healthy Habits) throughout the United States, Canada and abroad. To date, 45 schools are running the program.

And I'm running to raise money for SWITCHH. For, you see, on November 1, I will be running in my first ever 26-mile race - the New York City Marathon. I've done the qualifying races and have earned my number.

But I want to earn something much more important. I want to garner as much support for SWITCHH as possible. The more schools become involved in the program, the more students, teachers and parents will become aware of the dangers of childhood obesity and the clear Torah directives toward proper health and nutrition. This is the primary health epidemic of our generation. I know first-hand.

I've never run 26 miles before. For a guy from Brooklyn who six years ago was 60 pounds overweight and as energetic as a turtle, this will truly be a miracle. John, my partner in Torah, will be running along side me for support and encouragement - especially for around the 18<sup>th</sup> mile when they say you run into the "wall" and your legs feel like lead.

I hoping to finish in about five hours; so when you see a 51-year old grandfather with a Soveya T-shirt crossing 67<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West sometime between 3:30 - 4 pm, you'll know who it is.

I'm excited and nervous at the same time - kind of like the way the Rabbis say we should enter Rosh Hashanah. But I'm doing it anyway. Not for the adulation - it's taken a while for my wife and kids to wrap their brains around my new hobby.

I'm running the NYC Marathon to show appreciation to HaShem who has guided me so clearly during these last six years in "seemingly" unrelated ways. I'm running to show other

people that if an ordinary guy like me can change my life for the better, certainly anyone can.

But mostly, I'm running so Jewish children can grown up with positive and fun lessons about taking care of their bodies and eating well - and not have to learn those lessons the hard way, like me.

*To support Jerry in the NYC Marathon and to learn more about SWITCHH, click [www.oveya.com/NYC\\_MARATHON.html](http://www.oveya.com/NYC_MARATHON.html) He welcomes everyone to come to the finish line in Central Park to cheer him on.*

Copyright 2008 www.JewishPress.com