

High Holy Days 2012

Vulnerability

A story. It's the mid-20th century. A child of immigrants "makes good," moves to the suburbs and joins "The Temple." It's newly built, a beautiful synagogue, designed by none other than Frank Lloyd Wright. It's a far cry from his parents' synagogue in the old neighborhood or the *shul* in Pinsk, Poland where they came from. The *Yamim Noraim* approach and he thinks, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could all be together for the Holy Days?" But his parents seem less than enthusiastic; they like their *shul*, their rabbi, and all their friends will be there. Undaunted, he decides he'll take them for a visit. Once they see how beautiful The Temple is, they'll surely change their minds and want to come. So, the next Sunday, he picks them up from the old neighborhood and takes them to "The Temple". He shows them the beautiful sanctuary, modern *Aron Hakodesh*, the stained glass. There are many "oohs and aahs," but he senses that something is wrong and so he asks, "Nu, what do you think?" This was their response, "It is lovely son, but can we cry here?"

"Can we cry here?"

In ancient days, the rites of *Yom Kippur* occurred in the great Temple in Jerusalem. These were truly *Yamim Noraim*, for the people believed that the very future of the nation hung on the success or failure of the animal sacrifices made at that time. At the center was the *Cohen Gadol*, the High Priest who acted as a surrogate for the nation. In Orthodox and Conservative congregations tomorrow afternoon, they will read in their prayer books descriptions of the ancient Temple service.

Picture this: The *Cohen Gadol* is sequestered before *Yom Kippur*. A group of sages help prepare him for his duties – God forbid he would falter! They quiz him on the laws and procedure for the great day, reminding him of the sacred trust his people have put upon him. And then the *makhzor* reads: "The *Cohen Gadol* was moved to trembling and began to cry and they too wept with him."

"Can we cry here?" This question speaks right to the heart of what the *Yamim Noraim*, and especially *Yom Kippur*, are about: vulnerability; the stark recognition of our humanity, our fragility, our limits, in the face of the Infinite.

On *Yom Kippur*, first of all, we fast, making us physically vulnerable. We sing and – some of us - beat our chests: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu....we have sinned, we have transgressed: a pretty vulnerable moment if we are present in it. We say over and over again, Al Chet sh'khatanu l'fanekha, the sins we have committed before you.... It's a long list! Can you imagine if someone dropped in, with no sense of the context, what they might think? "These Jews are one depraved group!"*

We say the long list together because while no one has committed all those transgressions, most of us have hit something on the list and in this way, no one has to stand alone - in their vulnerability. Like all human beings, we are limited, prone to

err, vulnerable--and that is, by the way, also precisely what makes us lovable. Think about it: perfection is admired, but not loved.

Kol Nidre... What a communal cry, the sound of a soul in pain.
For all that this past year could have been, should have been, but wasn't;

For the actions we took in haste;

For the challenges we failed to face;

For the times we did the best we could, and it wasn't good enough.

Broken, broken open--that's how *Kol Nidre* feels to me, another very vulnerable place.

"Can we cry here?"

Vulnerability is not just key to *Kol Nidre*; it's essential to the act of prayer itself.

Many years ago now, when I was in my 20's, I wrote Rabbi David Hartman, one of the great Jewish thinkers of our time and a mentor to me, a letter. Part of what I said was I would like to pray but I don't know how. He wrote that "A longing to pray, which is in itself, recognition that we are not self-sufficient, that we need help, is an act of prayer. Before we can pray we have to believe that we have a need to acknowledge our vulnerability.

To pray, to feel God's presence, to transcend ourselves in any way there needs to be an opening. Thus, Leonard Cohen sings: "There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."

The *Kotzker Rebbe* was once asked by his followers, "Where is God?" They were dumbfounded. "*Rebbe*, you taught us 'God was everywhere!'" "No," he responded. "Only where you let God in."

Admitting our vulnerability, learning to live with "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" is letting God in. It is also key to a meaningful of life. Why? Because that's how we connect to others and connecting to others what makes life worth living. ([Daring Greatly](#), Brene Brown, pg. 34)

Over the summer a friend of mine suggested I check out a TED Talk by Brene Brown, a well-known social worker, author and lecturer. Do you know what a TED Talk is? The subject sounded intriguing, so I gave it a try. Wow, it was as if she was speaking right to me! More importantly, I quickly realized that she was teaching me what I already knew but struggled to articulate: how to connect to people; how to build community. In essence, how to create a meaningful, or what she calls, a "whole hearted life."

This is her story:

Brene Brown was happily doing research on human behavior specifically, “connection,” because as she puts it, “Connection” is why we are here, it is what gives purpose and a sense of wellbeing.”

The Torah says it this way: “*Lo tov heyot adam levado* – it is not good for a person to be alone.”

Brene Brown found that those who can connect have a sense of self-worth and that sense of “being enough” allows them to lean into the messiness of life, to become vulnerable. While vulnerability can seem to be about shame, fear, and our struggle for worthiness, it is also “the birthplace of joy, creativity, longing and love.”

Pretty much all of the emotions come from a place of vulnerability; feeling happy risks the possibility of disappointment; loving opens us to rejection.

Brene Brown is a research scientist. Up until this point, she operated under the motto, “What you can’t measure, does not exist.” Her goal was to tidy up the messy nature of human relations. She thought the way to live was “to control and predict.” Vulnerability?!? She hated even the word let alone what it demanded. “Vulnerability?” *Oy Veh!*

What happened next? She had, as she puts it, “a little breakdown”. As a scientist and a self-confessed perfectionist, “vulnerable” was the last thing she wanted to be. It took about a year for her to regain her equilibrium. She says it was like a street fight between her and vulnerability. She lost, but won her life back. From that “broken, broken open” place, she did *t’shuvah*; she re-oriented her work to study “vulnerability.”

Let’s take a look at what she discovered. She asked her subjects to complete the sentence, “Vulnerability is....” **Think for a moment: what would you say?** [pause] These are just a few of the responses she received:

Sharing an unpopular opinion
Standing up for myself
Asking for help
Saying no
Starting my own business
Helping my 37-year-old wife with stage four breast cancer make decisions about her Will
Initiating sex with my spouse...
Calling a friend whose child died
Falling in love
Admitting I am afraid

Being accountable
Asking for forgiveness
Having faith

Ah...vulnerability is not what you thought. I bet you were thinking vulnerability is just being weak or narcissistic, or without boundaries; letting it all hang out, wearing your emotions on your shirt sleeves. Not true.

Vulnerability is about courage, authenticity and faith. Being vulnerable is being real, showing up, living your truth. It's also about reciprocity.

A wise person is not vulnerable in all situations; one must deserve the gift of our vulnerability. Vulnerability happens in relationship. In fact, it defines our deeper, more meaningful connections with other people.

The 20th-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber is helpful here. Many of you will remember that he taught that there are two types of human relationships: "I/It" and "I/Thou". In "I/It" relationships, the other person is merely a means to an end...(talking on your cellphone while making a transaction). In "I/Thou" relationships, you see the other as *btzelem elohim*, in God's image like yourself.

It's like the African greeting: "I see you." I love that greeting! I, like everyone else, want to be seen as a human being first not as "The Rabbi". That's why when people say to me, "Nice to see you rabbi", I often reply, "It is good to be seen." Think about it; how often do people really "see" you? How often do you really "see" the people in your life?

This is the question Ellen Bass addresses in her beautiful poem "If You Knew." It goes like this:

What if you knew you'd be the last
to touch someone?

If you were taking tickets, for example,
at the theater, tearing them,
giving back the ragged stubs,
you might take care to touch that palm,
brush your fingertips
along the life line's crease.

When a man pulls his wheeled suitcase
too slowly through the airport, when
the car in front of me doesn't signal,
when the clerk at the pharmacy
won't say *Thank you*, I don't remember
they're going to die.

A friend told me she'd been with her aunt.

They'd just had lunch and the waiter,
a young gay man with plum black eyes,
joked as he served the coffee, kissed
her aunt's powdered cheek when they left.

Then they walked half a block and her aunt
dropped dead on the sidewalk.

How close does the dragon's spume
have to come? How wide does the crack
in heaven have to split?

What would people look like
if we could see them as they are,
soaked in honey, stung and swollen,
reckless, pinned against time?

You know, synagogues are all about connecting and synagogues that know how to do this well, generally thrive. Shomrei Torah certainly strives to be a place of connection for all who enter our community. It's not easy. For one thing, it's a really vulnerable moment when a new person walks into a synagogue for the first time. I've watched countless folks enter our doors over the years, some successfully, some not and I have counseled many to give it time. Overall, I think we do a great job, but I also know we fail sometimes, never through malice. Still we can and have let people down. This is true for me, and I am sorry if you have not been "seen" by me. Let me know and we can start fresh in the New Year.

I have been the rabbi for over 300 *b'nai mitzvah*. There is a moment towards the end of the Service when the parents say a few words about their child. It's often moving but a bit unpredictable; you just never know what parents are going to say, and I have been tempted over the years, to take out this part of the Service. Many synagogues have. But I want it to stay, because it is often the most poignant moment of the whole morning. At that point in the experience, parents are pretty open and vulnerable and it comes through in their words to their kids; get out the Kleenex!

But it is not just that we cry. What really makes it so powerful is that it is precisely when the community connects to the child, the family and the enormity of the life cycle event we are witnessing.

That's when we get it; that's when we realize what it means to be on the threshold of adulthood! That's when we realize that time passes whether we notice it or not.

That's when we sense our ancestors in the room with us. In other words, the parents and the child's vulnerability is our gateway to the heart of the Service and the family.

One last story about the *Baal Shem Tov* also known as the *Besht*:

As the Holy Days were approaching, he held auditions for who would have the honor of blowing the *shofar*. It was a big deal to blow the *shofar* for the congregation of the *Besht* and many people "tried out," and some were very good! Finally, the last man approached the *bima*; he was shaking before he even reached the first step and he collapsed into a puddle of tears before he could get through even half the *shofar* calls. He felt like such a failure and was about to slink away when the *Besht* said: "You shall blow the *shofar* for us this *Rosh Hashanah*." The man was stunned. "Why me?" he asked.

The *Besht* answered him with a parable:

"There is a King who lives in a palace. The palace has many chambers all of which are locked. The King resides in the innermost chamber."

The "King" of course is God but how do we get access? How can we "break through?" According to the *Besht*, an open vulnerable heart acts like an ax and brings us right into the holy of holies, whether it be in relationship to God or to those created in God's image, you and me.

Tomorrow we will read these lines from the Torah: "I have set before you life or death...choose life that you and your descendants may live." Choosing life means embracing our vulnerability. Choosing life means being willing to take risks in our relationships, in our work, in almost every aspect of our lives. Choosing life means things like showing up for Shabbat Services because you know you need it, even though you've never been before and are likely not to know anyone there, or investing in a relationship that may not work out, or being with a friend while he or she waits for a call from the doctor,
Or... You fill in the blank here.

Where do you need to really show up with an open, vulnerable heart in the New Year. Where!?! In your marriage? Your family? Your work?

The time is now; there is no time to lose!

To live is to be vulnerable, to live life fully, to choose life, is to embrace our vulnerability.

"Can we cry here?"

That is a choice we have to make