

Rosh Hashanah Eve 2013- 5774

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Courage and healing/ *Refuah* for body and soul.

In a great forest where the trees grew tall, there was one lonely apple tree. As winter came, snow would fall on the forest floor & on the branches of the little apple tree. The big forest was all white & silent. One night the little apple tree looked up at the sky, and between the branches it saw the stars, that seemed to be hanging from the branches of the tall oak trees. 'How lucky those tall oak trees are... I'd love to have stars hanging from my branches... Then I would feel truly special.' whispered the little apple tree. A voice from God said gently; 'Have patience, have patience, little apple tree...'

Spring came, the snow melted, & tiny white & pink apple blossoms appeared on the branches of the little apple tree. People walking in the big forest, would stop & admire the beautiful flowers, & birds would rest on the branches of the little apple tree.

But night after night, the little apple tree would look up at the sky, filled with millions of stars, & cry out, 'More than anything I want stars hanging from my branches... just like the big trees.' God asked, 'Isn't it enough You offer soft shade to people, beautifully fragrant blossoms, and branches where the birds can rest & sing their songs?'

The little apple tree sighed & answered, 'I'm sorry for sounding ungrateful, but that is just not special enough.. I like how I give others pleasure, but what I would really love; is to have stars

instead of blossoms. Then I would feel truly special.' 'Patience..', said God; 'Have patience, little apple tree..'

And so the seasons changed again. The branches of the little apple tree were covered with beautiful apples. People walking in the big forest, would all stop, reach up, pick an apple, & eat it with pleasure. Still, when the night came, the little apple tree would cry out; 'More than anything I want stars hanging from my branches... Then I would feel truly special.' God asked; 'But apple tree, isn't it enough You now have such wonderful apples to offer?' Without a word, the little apple tree would answer by shaking its branches from side to side. An apple fell to the ground, from the top of the little apple tree, & when it hit the ground, it split open.

'Look', said God. 'Look inside Yourself. What do You see?' The little apple tree looked down & saw, that right in the middle of its apple was a star. 'A star! I have a star!' cried the apple tree, & God laughed gently & said; 'So You do have stars on Your branches.. You just didn't know it.' "

If we change how we hold the apple when we cut it, and cut it turned on its side, we find its star, & maybe; if we change how we look at ourselves, we can find the star inside each of us. Right inside each of us.

Shanah tovah.

Tonight I will be addressing the idea of courage and *Refuah*, the Jewish term for healing. As we are in these Days of Awe and take in the year—it's gifts and its challenges— we pray for a healing of ourselves, our loved ones, and of our world. Healing for our community and our country. And here, in this community of faith, we are together to offer one another blessings and

support. We focus ourselves tonight on the idea of healing, after all, we all have some place in need of healing ourselves, and we are all vulnerable in this world. Throughout the course of a year— our bodies, spirits— are collecting the result of a year’s doing. Tonight we begin to find the courage to heal through one year and into the next. Let us face our hurts, be daring and brave to share this together, and engage in healing.

Let’s look at some of the ways Judaism considers healing and then we can frame it in our own context for Rosh Hashanah and the days of awe. Each year, as we consider the past cycle of 12 months, it is helpful to focus ourselves on healing and repair of body and of soul. So that our souls, our *neshamot*, can get back to the good work of making a better world.

Jewish liturgy provides us with various aspects of healing. In traditional Jewish liturgy, the healing prayers are said *both* privately and publicly. During the weekday Amidah, the personal meditation, there is a passage for healing where one is able to recite individual names privately. During a service with a Torah reading, the public “*mi sheberach*” prayers are recited. One of the verses of the *Avinu Malkenu* prayer recited during this season reads, “Heal us *Adonay* so we may be healed, save us and we shall be saved.”

We are encouraged to find the space to have a balance between private and public moments of prayer. There are times when we are moved to disclose publicly our struggles and there are also times when it is appropriate to pray privately and personally. Judaism recognizes the importance of both.

In addition to the idea of spiritual healing, Judaism has always valued medical science and medical healing. In the medieval period, the Talmud notes that a person should live in a town with a physician. Medicine and seeking curing of ailments was and is an important requirement

of traditional Jewish life, it is a mitzvah, a positive Jewish act. Judaism has continually embraced the teachings and potential associated with scientific medicine.

Contemporary Jewish thought portrays healing as a process. We do not adhere to the supernatural theology of direct reward and punishment. We no longer think that a person who gets sick deserves their sickness. And, we are also taught that there is God in the healer as well as the healing. There is holiness in the process. It is clear that miracles can and do occur. Yet, healing, in our current conversation, is not necessarily the same as being cured, or as recovering from an illness. As Rabbi Richard Hirsch, editor of *The Reconstructionist* periodical wrote, “Healing might be understood as ... the affirmative response to the blessing of life and the acknowledgement of the gift of living. This is not only the cure, not only recovery, not only caring; it is healing as the worked for and worked through path from despair to affirmation, and from denial to acceptance.”

So Rabbi Hirsch helps us understand that healing is part of a larger process. Healing is part of being whole; part of being able to recognize the blessing in every moment of life. In Rabbi Hirsch's words, “**To heal is to become intoxicated with the miracle of being alive at any moment.**” We need to be open, vulnerable, to the place of need, and then we can heal.

Sometimes complete healing occurs quickly. However, some diseases may take a long time, even a lifetime to remedy. Some are never cured. But, even when living with impairment, a person can have a sense of life. There is a blessing recited every morning in the traditional prayers of *birchot hashachar*, the blessings of the dawn. It states, “Blessed are you, for making the blind to see,” in Hebrew, *poke'ach ivrim*. This is not meant to imply literally giving sight to the blind, but a metaphor for the miraculous way human beings have a divine grace and blessing to live, whether deaf or blind, with full or impaired senses. The blind do see, they have

perception, just not in the same way those with eyesight are able to see. There was a great article in the National Geographic Magazine published this summer that was about a young man, Daniel Kish, who has been blind since birth and has learned echolocation. His body in the way it is healing from this blindness has created another way of seeing. One you and I would think nearly impossible, to use sound to locate objects as a dolphin or a bat might do. With this perception, this young man is able to do many things that sighted people can do, and some that even I haven't done, like rock climbing. There is healing for this individual, even when he was not cured of his condition. And through our ability to be exposed to new challenges, we are able to achieve great things.

We also recognize that the end of agony, the end of suffering, the end of distress can also be a healing. Families heal after the loss of a loved one who lived or might have lived in anguish. Judaism thought encourages us to know that life is finite, and in the eternal cycle of life and renewal. Yet the loss of loved ones, the loss of those we care for is painful and the healing make take some time to come. When my father, Robert Klein, of blessed memory, was ill with cancer, my idea of his healing evolved throughout his illness. At first I was not even aware of this change in my thinking, and it was not necessarily something I was able to access at every moment. My understanding of healing changed from the physical realm- when I wanted him to be cured of the cancer - to the spiritual one. I began to think of healing as bringing the ethical values that my father had in life to be as near as we could for him, and for all of my family. There were times when it was hard to be present and hard to have faith. But that too is part of the process. As much as I still miss his presence, I know that there has been a healing for him and for me.

It is important to recognize that as humans, we make mistakes. Judaism has the idea that even before the creation of the world, God created the possibility of *teshuvah*, the way of repentance. This is an important concept- there is the space for us to learn and grow in the idea of *Teshuvah*.

The recognition that we humans are imperfect and so there is the possibility of learning and healing. From those shortcomings, those places we have missed the mark, come bruises and hurts from which we need to seek reflection, release, and renewal. These Days of Awe, this Season we are in, allows us the chance to recognize our mistakes, to be present with everyone else who has also made missteps, and support each other through the process. That process lends us to a spiritual healing. We try to be perfect- we strive to be perfect. It is good to have the space on these High Holy Days to recognize that we- I, you, none of us- are perfect. We attempt to avoid failure, but it is in the trying, in those failures that we as humans learn, grow, and heal.

An example here will help us understand. This past year there was a TED radio hour on the topic of mistakes. In essence, the program explored when mistakes happen, how do we deal with being wrong, and how we can face our problems. The program included quite a range of examples of mistakes including those physicians may make in diagnosing or treating patients, and what happens musically in a free form Jazz music jam. But what struck me in particular was the segment on what happens when people meet their shame and vulnerability.

Dr. Brene Brown's piece about confronting shame is right on the mark for the idea of healing and Rosh Hashanah. As a sociologist, she has focused her research on vulnerability and shame. Dr Brown states that shame is the fear of disconnection. She explains shame as the feeling that there is something about me or something I have done that I worry if people know it or see it, then I will not be worthy of association. This fear is in all of us. Yet, in order to connect most strongly with other people, we need to be truly seen, we need to open ourselves up. That means being vulnerable. Why do we struggle with vulnerability? We all are vulnerable. Waiting for a doctor's report, getting married, getting divorced, getting let go from job, getting hired. We are all vulnerable. And it is not weakness. That myth is dangerous. Dr. Brown claims that indeed facing our vulnerability could be our most accurate measurement of courage.

She argues that courage is picking up the phone and connecting with someone who has been through something traumatic. When we make the call or visit, we feel brave, we feel courageous and we are part of healing. We feel aligned with our values. From our Jewish perspective, we might say that God is working through us. That's the mitzvah part.

Now consider the opposite—the times when we have not made the call or visit to someone who needed our voice, our hand, our help. And the next time you see the person, you feel embarrassed or shame. And sometimes there is not a next time, because we avoid those people out of a strong sense of embarrassment. That's the shortcoming part. Vulnerability is courage. Vulnerability is coming through times of uncertainty and emotional risk. It is essential for us. Then to be human is to be vulnerable. As we learned earlier, according to our tradition, vulnerability is built into the fabric of the universe. That is why it—*teshuvah*- repentance— is open to us. Dr. Brown states vulnerability is about intimacy and trust. It is the place from which creativity and change begin. Being open to change is being vulnerable. Being open means growing and healing.

In order to find our way back to wholeness and healing, we need to recognize our vulnerability. We are here today at that edge. And we are here to be open and supportive of our new beginning. Be brave in your awareness and be brave and be daring.

In so many ways, this impacts us not just at a personal, individual level, but as a community as well. We at Temple Beth El need to make sure we have the space to have healing from our hurts, our bumps and bruises along the way. Have we made mistakes as a community over the year? We have. But from that we learn. Have I made mistakes? I have. As my rabbinate develops I hope to continue to cultivate an appreciation for the best ways to communicate and to be a spiritual director with you the members of the congregation and to develop the tools to help me.

As the world grows in understanding the greater shifts and demands on society, I, too, should be continuing to engage in developing aspects of myself personally and professionally. I believe that it is important to recognize that we are imperfect beings. We can all recognize the ways in which we can improve. We learn from our mistakes, our past, to chart the better path. But we are here today as a community to walk into a new year with renewed faith, clean slate and clean hearts.

Temple Beth EL, this Jewish community, this Reconstructionist congregation, is a great community but also one that has its imperfections, and just as any entity or being, we too need the ways to heal and to find renewal. In that TED radio program on mistakes, physician Dr. Brian Goldman points out that in the field of medicine, mistakes are common, but many physicians are afraid to admit them, to themselves, to their patients, and even to fellow doctors. Yet, he argues that in order to practice medicine better, these mistakes must be recognized so that we can learn how to correct them. We have to make mistakes. We all do. Understand them, recognize them, and build from there. Be kind to your self, to your soul, to your family, to your neighbor. And be kind to your community.

The main Torah and Haftarah readings on the High Holy Days remind us of the fractious stories of Hagar and Ishmael, of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac without Sarah's consent. We learn of Hannah in the Haftarah, the first woman to offer private prayer, accused of drunken folly and desecration of the Temple because of her non-traditional manner of prayer. We learn and study these episodes so we can bring about a healing of our world. So we can be reminded of the mistakes and misperceptions of our ancestors, so we do not forget or repeat them. And so we know that just as much as great people and ancestors made their errors, so too can we learn from their vulnerability. It is hoped that this will help bring about a healing in our

understanding of how to repair our own relationships with family, with community, with the world.

Our prayers, melodies, and Torah study are not just comfort food. They nourish us with the way in which we are brought to think about our relationships. We are encouraged to deepen our connections with people and not to just dismiss them. Why do we read such heart wrenching stories on Rosh Hashanah, a very public time of the year? Why do we encounter the story of Hannah, who is not only a woman, but an outsider to the Temple, and is accused of not offering true prayer?

I believe we read them for healing. So we understand the wounds of the past so we do not remain in a state of wounded-ness, and so we can regain perspective on our lives. Stories about how we treat our children, how we sacrifice them or nearly sacrifice them when we think and believe that we are following the right path. Lessons of how to keep our spirituality open and fresh, like the story of Hannah.

Judaism teaches us at this time of year that we are to strive to mend these places of hurt, but also to find balance in our own lives. We know the recipe. *Teshuvah*, *utefillah*, *utzedakkah*; prayer, returning, and acting righteously. We can move ourselves from one point to the next by focusing on the places we need to work to find balance. Our job is not to right every wrong or to fix every problem, but to begin at home, to begin with the self, and to try to bring one's self to a deeper connection.

Each year during the High Holy Days, we consider the beautiful words of the Jewish liturgy. Words that have evolved as the foundations for our fixed prayers for thousands of years. We say words about life and happiness, blessing and health. We state that it is good to be alive and to praise life and living. Yet we recognize that as each year passes that life is not to be taken for

granted; and at Rosh Hashanah, we should recognize that we need healing for ourselves, our faith, and our earth.

Even the Hebrew word for year, *shanah*, is at its root, *shin-nun-heh*, a word for change. There is something the same and something new about each year. Each year we face ourselves and say, “We will be different this year. Not for anyone else but for me. I should be the best me I can be this year. To return to my true self, as we say in our liturgy, I stand here, ready for what will be the same and ready for what will be different, and the healing that now begins. *Hineni muchan umezuman*.”

I know that curing is not guaranteed; therefore, I pray for healing, that we may be whole in order that we may be our highest selves and bless life with our whole selves. We pray for healing of our souls that we may not to just have the cure from temporary ills, but to have a greater understanding and relationship with the world and its inhabitants.

So healing is a process, much like *teshuvah*. It is made up of our awareness, our vulnerability, and our ability to dare to try something new and possibly scary. May we proceed to healing and wholeness. To *refuah shelemah*. May we all be present together in fullness and health in body and in spirit. And may all those who suffer know the blessing of God’s love, the stars within, and may they have *refuah shelemah*, complete healing of body and soul. Not just a peaceful healing, but a whole healing— of our community, our country, our people, our world. May our journey from now to Yom Kippur increase our courage, spirit, and strength.

As we bless the source of life, so we are blessed.

And the blessing gives us strength and makes our vision clear
and the blessing gives us peace and the courage to dare.

Shanah tovah.