

Vulnerability  
High Holiday Sermon - 5777  
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You can substitute the word Zumba with the word yoga, work meeting, or important event in the following story by Henna Inam, author of Wired for Authenticity, she writes:

“I was in a Zumba dance class when about half-way through the class I noticed an embarrassingly large tear in my pants right around the inseam of the thigh. I was aghast. What if someone else noticed? All the spontaneity and the joy of Zumba was gone; I spent the rest of the class self-conscious, trying my best to hide the tear, and not making very many moves (something sort of counter-productive if you’re in an exercise class. Ultimately, feigning as much nonchalance as I could, I declared to the person dancing next to me “Would ‘ya look at the tear in my pants. Any idea where I can get some good Zumba pants? And maybe a towel to walk out of here” I had expected a reaction...horror, embarrassed laugh. It was a really big tear. I didn’t get any reaction. It was a matter-of-fact “I got a great deal at TJMaxx. Whew.”

**You see, the fear of being vulnerable was big. The act of being vulnerable felt like relief.**

What a beautiful metaphor: How many of us have tears and wounds in our hearts and minds? Do we cover them up? Would we be willing to bare them to ourselves, to God, and even to others, in order to be able to see the sources of our pain? To bring healing to ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world?

Vulnerability as a positive attribute?! – Most of us would not see it so! Tonight, I want to consider vulnerability as a pre requisite for deep t’shuva-repentance, for returning to the potential that we have to be our best selves.

We need t’shuva because our world is suffering. Individuals are suffering. Even though we live with freedom, opportunity and plenty- for so many, life seems hard. It is sometimes difficult to live up to the ideals of who we wish to be. This is one reason why we gather here tonight. People sometimes suffer from their own behavior –and Yom Kippur allows us to confront ourselves.

I believe that many are living with fear and anxiety, and this fear and anxiety has to have somewhere to go. Right now it seems to manifest itself as a hardening of our hearts. As a society, we seem willing to say or do things that are actually hurtful to others, disregarding how our message will be received.

I feel the hurt in many places. I can’t tell you the number of people who are pained when others comment on their weight, hair, socio-economic level, their job, their intellect, their ability or injury, race or religion, or their political opinions. I believe that no one wants to hurt another. Most people mean well. Have you been hurt? This year or in the past? What do you do with that hurt?

We take pot shots at each other. We even seem to no longer be able to have deep authentic conversations about issues that are most important to us, including Israel or how we are governed. Sometimes we even feel a sense that Schadenfreude (feeling joy at someone else’s pain) is a new spectator sport, a sort of intellectual version of the film The Hunger Games.

We do not want to live in these narrow places. We want to live in families and communities where we can be flawed, thoughtful, reflective, loved. But, somehow fear and anxiety lead us to either shut down or to lash out.

Maybe this is not you? Or maybe it is some of the time, with family or at work, maybe it is not about how we treat others; maybe it is about how we mistreat ourselves.

As 5776 progressed, I was interested in WHY. Why the fear and anxiety, why has civility left the room, why do we think it is ok to attack people, as opposed to questioning ideas? Why do people not have filters? And in the very personal realm, why do we put ourselves down? Why is it that one can say anything? Our ancient rabbis teach us that even when one is correct, it is incorrect to embarrass another in public.

In 2010, Dr. Brene Brown delivered one of the 5 most watched TED talks, ever. Dr. Brown is a professor of Social Work at the University of Houston. Her most recent work, published this past May, is called The Power of Vulnerability. It is a powerful how-to tool for doing t'shuva. Now, I don't know about you, but vulnerability doesn't tend to be the emotional space that I want to live in. You? Yet Brown and our Tradition, including Maimonides, show us that vulnerability is a key ingredient to being an authentic, wholehearted person; the more vulnerable we can be with ourselves, the closer we can become to living a life where t'shuva, returning to our best selves, is not a once a year task, but a way of being in the world.

Brown posits that we are ALL living in the wake of the terror of 9-11, followed by multiple wars, seemingly unstoppable terrorism, and a terrible economic down turn 8 years ago where only some have recovered. This has created for us a sense of fear. Fear of instability - in the economy, for our safety, for our future. For the Jewish community add the anxiety of increased worldwide anti-Semitism, fear for Israel's safety-- and for her character, and decreased numbers of Jews affiliating, and we hit the Jewish anxiety jackpot. Of course we feel a sense of fear and vulnerability. As "Rabbi" Yoda says to Anakin, fear leads to the dark side --our dark sides.

Fear is often accompanied by a sense of shame. This leads people to ask themselves: am I good enough? At my work? At being a partner? A parent? A child? Do we sometimes feel like imposters in our own lives?

Fear also come from a culture of scarcity. We think that we do not have enough: time, things, security, money, in our lives. Or that WE are not enough.

And Fear, shame and scarcity lead people to not being able to feel empathy. And that is where things get bad. Jewish Tradition demands us to have empathy.

The answer to the famous Biblical question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is always **yes**. We are sisters and brothers with all of humanity. Last week Rosh Hashana was the not the birthday of the Jewish people; it was the birthday of the entire world.

Because we as Jews have been wounded throughout our history, and because we recognize this, we are literally commanded to have empathy for others.

Consider the Yom Kippur Martyology service tomorrow - it is a public baring of how the Jewish people have been wounded throughout history. We recite it, we make ourselves vulnerable, and then we are able to experience empathy - to feel the pain of others as our own pain.

Because we were slaves in Egypt, we care about those who are enslaved. We care about poverty because we understand that all material things on this earth ultimately belong to God and are resources for ALL of humanity. We were strangers in strange lands throughout our history, so we care about the stranger, the immigrant, - because our grandparents were welcomed here. As Emma Lazarus called them: "The tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free." We need to feel empathy for the suffering of others in order to live our values. First, we need to know and honor our own wounds.

Fear, shame, scarcity lead to lack of empathy. How do we combat these in ourselves so that we are able to dig deep and do the emotional work that is t'shuva? So we can lash out less, so we can be better?

Think about the concept of vidui – the confession that we will recite throughout this day. A modern Hebrew word that is related is Lehitvadah-ah - to bare one's self – to become naked, literally or figuratively - same root as vidui – confession. The ONLY path to real vidui /confession– and real change, is to open our souls up and be vulnerable, bare, before ourselves and God. **Vulnerability is not a weakness – it is what allows us to live with empathy and compassion for others.**

The kind of vulnerability we need is personal. Not something that we do on social media; it is found in quiet moments of personal reflection. It is about allowing ourselves to see and own the underlying reasons for why we may act in a certain way.

Our Biblical characters do this. Hagar is one of the least discussed characters in the Torah, and yet she plays a large role in the High Holiday landscape. Hagar is an important model of vulnerability.

Earlier in the Torah reading, Sarah requests Avram to have a child with Hagar, her Egyptian maid servant. A pregnant Hagar runs away due to Sarah's harsh treatment of her. After the child Ishmael is born things get very complicated for Hagar. Folks, let's remember that originally Ishmael was to be claimed as a child FOR Sarah. Instead, the child and his mother Hagar become competition for Sarah. And Sarah has Avram send them away into the harsh desert, with only a small bit of bread and water.

I cannot think of a character in the Torah who is more vulnerable than Hagar. She lives by the whim of her mistress. Then, having helped Avram and Sarah to have a child she is sent away into the hot desert. HaGar-whose very name means the stranger – is now even more estranged - in the desert, with no food, no water, no protection-and a son to care for. This is absolute vulnerability - in a physical way. And also in a metaphoric way.

Hagar must have been quite adept at helping herself to NOT be seen as vulnerable. By herself, by her son, and by God. Is anyone else here good at covering up their wounds and thus their vulnerabilities?

The Torah continues, "When the water was gone, she left the child Ishmael under one of the bushes and she sat down at a distance, for she thought, let me not look on as this child dies. But, she does see him, sitting a distance away- and she bursts into tears."

First Hagar armors up, girds herself to not be seen as vulnerable. She did not argue with Avram, and she could have done so, she just saw Avram argue with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. No, she girds herself up, does NOT show the tears in her heart, and is sent into the desert with no protection.

But as soon as Hagar is able to shed her armor, take off the Teflon coating covering her— cry - she is able to connect with herself. As soon as she can cry —and be emotionally vulnerable, as soon as she allows herself to be seen as the fragile vulnerable soul that she is, that we each are, Help. Comes. To. Her.

The Torah continues, “an angel of the Lord speaks to her saying: *al tir -ee* - don’t fear. What an amazing statement. There IS what to fear, there is no water, food, or shelter, however, once Hagar is able to go deep into herself and open up, she is able to hear the words: don’t fear.

It reminds me of our Zumba story. The fear is most painful when we do not allow ourselves to feel our emotions—to be our authentic selves. **Fear of being vulnerable often creates more suffering than actually showing our authentic, damaged, human self to ourselves or to others.**

The Torah lets us know that God hears the cry of her son and an angel of the Lord goes to help Hagar. “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.” Oh my, I just bet that the well was there all of the time. Hagar needed to be ready to be vulnerable in the world, to allow herself to feel, and to express that fear—a fear born out of a sense of scarcity – of food, of protection, and of love.

Hagar needed to cry—to allow that messenger of God to see her vulnerability—and once she was open, and in tears—she was able to see a well of sweet water to satisfy her thirst. And maybe that well is also a metaphor. Through her vulnerability, and through the work of an angel, Hagar learns that she has a well- deep within herself. A well that she can rely on deep in her heart. A well of emotion and strength, a well of love from God for herself and for others—a well that will always produce something sweet and sustaining.

You have a well of sweet sustaining emotion deep inside of you. And when we are ready to expose our fears to ourselves and to be vulnerable to ourselves and to others, we are often blessed with angels in our lives who can point us towards wells- wells of comfort, and of internal and communal resources to help us become more of who we can be.

Remember that ripped Zumba pant? What are the rips in you? In your beautiful neshama / soul? What is your story? Where did those rips come from? Here is one of mine:

This past summer I visited Camp Ramah and on Friday afternoon I stumbled on wet grass and fell. I was the rabbi in residence that weekend, and I was so excited to be there. The fall wasn’t a big deal, it was a sprained ankle, and now I’m fine. But I was not fine then. I had a clear memory of a very badly broken leg – and it’s repair from a year and a half ago after falling on black ice. The doctors at Wayne County General wrapped me up and sent me back to camp late Friday night—with two rabbi friends in tow. It was a bit of a comedy sketch.

The next morning I was determined to do everything I came to camp to do. With the help of some crutches, a golf cart, and a cute Israeli driver, I taught two classes – on one foot, sang in Ramah-Capella, stood at a memorial service for a camp alum - and managed to host all of our Beth Shalom kids

for a Kiddush. The ER doctor had told me to keep the foot up with ice. Uh huh. I needed to feel that I was capable. I needed to feel that I could do. And I did. And so it was particularly difficult for me when a few seemingly well-meaning adults made comments like: “it’s rabbi klutz” and “Rabbi, you are a mess” in the day and week that followed. I had no Teflon coating left, no armor. Maybe those folks thought they were making light of the situation but it stung, and I was sad. But with Dr. Brene Brown’s work in mind I decided to see why I was upset. I realized that one of my underlying places of fear, shame and scarcity has to do with my physical abilities – or inabilities. Once I knew this, I could choose not to lash out at the comments –and not have to put up armor either. That’s hard work. But, that is kind of work that doing real t’shuva requires of us.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is the time to shed our armor and dig deep into ourselves to discover why we may have missed the mark in some of our actions. In order to do t’shuva, to fix ourselves and the world, we have to be willing to confront that which makes us vulnerable, that which makes us human and flawed and messy. On Yom Kippur we will say the words of the confessional as one way to tap into what is most vulnerable in ourselves. We tap our hearts and say, *al het shechatanu*, we have sinned against you by *lashon hara*. Speaking ill of others. Or maybe by *achila* or *sh-ti-ah* eating and drinking.

Making ourselves vulnerable would mean to stop when we tap our hearts and to not only consider when I do this, but why I do this? What is missing or wounded in me that makes me go to that place of gossip. Do I want to fit in? Be popular? Trade in information?

There is no way that one can come to a service, tap ones heart and say poof – now I will eat better or now I will not abuse food or alcohol. One first needs to be open and vulnerable to begin to understand the underlying reasons why we might have a complicated relationship to food or drink or gossip or any other negative action.

During this day of Yom Kippur, I invite each of us to consider the list of *al hets*, the confessional, and look in our own hearts, to discover some of our fears, fears that lead us to either armor up, or lash out. Then we can ask ourselves how can I uncover my own fears and anxieties? Are these wounds, or tears in my soul, recent or have I been holding them for decades? How can I uncover my shame and my perception of scarcity so that I can dwell in a place of empathy for myself and for others? So that I can be on a path to wholehearted and holy living, not only on our Holy days, but on every day.

I pray for each of you, for each one of us, for the capacity to let go of our emotional armor, to bare our fears to ourselves. I pray for some helpful angels in our lives. I pray that tomorrow we don’t just wake up, but also to open up. And I pray for us for a year where we can allow ourselves to feel vulnerable, so that we can feel empathy for ourselves and for others, so that we can create lasting t’shuva, and be our authentic selves.