

"Be Yourself" -- Yom Kippur 2016

Rabbi Ed Elkin

I was a student in my fifth and final year of rabbinical seminary, preparing to leave the cocoon of school and go out into the real world, to actually apply all those things I'd been learning, and work as the rabbi of a congregation. The process of getting a job was well-organized, but still anxiety-provoking. The first stage involved congregations which had openings sending representatives to the school in New York to conduct interviews with interested students over a two day period. There was then a culling -- those candidates who they liked best in the first round were then invited to come to visit the synagogue and the community for another round of interviews before an offer was made. As in many fields, certain students in the class would be perceived as "stars" and would be sought after by many congregations. Others would get few interviews and would have little choice about where they ended up.

In the meantime, classes went on -- but in the week leading up to the interviews everybody became quite stressed out and it was difficult to concentrate. I remember one of our warmest and most beloved professors, Rabbi Kravitz, finally gave up on teaching our class and decided to help us process what we were going through. As part of this discussion, he imparted some sage counsel to us about the interviews -- "I have one piece of advice for you," he said. "Be yourself. Unless you're a jerk -- then be someone else."

Rabbi Kravitz's advice is funny, partly because "be yourself" has become in our culture such a key marker of what a human being should be aspiring towards in this life. At university commencements, that chestnut is up there with "expand your horizons" and "never give up" as life wisdom thought to be useful for new graduates.¹ But what Rabbi Kravitz told us is also funny because in fact there are situations, job interviews being one, when many of us intuit that being ourselves, *really* being ourselves, is maybe not the right thing to do in order to achieve our goals. Not necessarily because we're jerks, but because we come to believe that the situation requires us to be someone else, or present a certain persona which may at best capture part of who we really believe we authentically are, but certainly not all.

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¹ Adam Grant "Be Yourself is Terrible Advice", New York Times Sunday June 5, 2016.

On the High Holy Days every year, many rabbis, myself included, habitually teach that the true meaning of these days relates precisely to this theme of authenticity, of being truly ourselves. We say that, all appearances to the contrary, the purpose of these days is not actually about coming to services, or about fasting, or about any of the rituals of the yom tov season. It's rather about the spiritual work we do inside ourselves. It's about teshuvah, which is translated as repentance but which literally means "return". The idea behind that metaphor of return is that this time of year we are supposed to strip away the persona we present to the world, and go back to some very authentic essence of our selfhood that has gotten lost along the way. In the absence of a belief in original sin, that original self is understood to be good. The person who returns in this way has accomplished what the yamim noraim are actually about because they have become more authentically who they are, they've taken off those masks that people tend to put on; by contrast, the person who performs the rituals of the holiday without going through this process of teshuvah, has somehow missed out.

Many Jewish texts emphasize this High Holy Day theme... the Hasidic story is one genre that has a particular focus on authenticity. I'll share with you just one example: According to legend, every year before the Days of Awe, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, held a competition to see who would lead prayers on the holiest days of the year. Now if you wanted to daven for the great Baal Shem Tov, not only did you have to know the prayers like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of kavannot – secret prayers that were said just before you got up on the bema so that your davening would have the proper effect in the supernal realms. All the prospective daveners practiced these kavannot for months. They were difficult and complex. There was one fellow who wanted to be a shaliah tsibur for the Baal Shem Tov so badly that he had been practicing these kavannot for years. But when his time came to audition, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy man, and he choked. His mind froze completely. He couldn't remember even one of the kavannot he had practiced for all those years. He couldn't even remember the prayers themselves, or what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Baal Shem in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously – how utterly – he had failed this great test, his heart just broke in two and he began to weep, sobbing loudly, his shoulders heaving and his whole body wracking as he wept. All right, said the Baal Shem, you're hired.²

That's the story, and there are many more like it in the genre of Hasidic tale. But what is the moral? What are we supposed to take from it? Why did this

² Quoted in Alan Lew, [This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared](#), pp.98-99.

poor guy, who failed his audition so spectacularly, get the job? I don't think it's because the Baal Shem Tov felt sorry for him. The message seems to be that in those tears, the Baal Shem Tov saw that he was being "himself". Being a shaliah tsibur wasn't about getting the prayers right, it was about connecting with and revealing one's own authenticity as a human being, about being oneself in the moment. This message fit right in with the Hasidic movement at its origins, which was so much about rejecting outward piety and instead focusing on the inner religious life of every single Jew, no matter how learned or how ignorant.

It's a great story, and it fits right in with the teshuvah theme of the Holy Days. But as someone responsible for organizing services, I couldn't help wondering – what actually happened when that guy got up to daven for the congregation on the Days of Awe? Isn't there actually a price to be paid if our shlichei tsibur are "themselves" if that means they break down in tears rather than reciting the prayers? How about doctors or firefighters? How authentic do we really want them to be, and how much do we just want them, indeed *need* them, to put their fears and insecurities and personal problems aside and just do their jobs, as competently as they possibly can?

And what about our politicians? I wrestled mightily with whether to refer to the American elections these holy days. In the end I couldn't resist -- everyone I know is following it so avidly and either has an opinion or is trying to discern what it all means. Among the many different narratives that one can tell about this campaign, this issue of authenticity has come up repeatedly. One candidate has been faulted for a perceived lack of authenticity, for not revealing her true self to the electorate. The other candidate is popular in some circles specifically for his supposed authenticity, for telling it like it is without worrying about "political correctness", and in other circles he's faulted for showing us too much of his real self, not reining in his true nature enough to appear and behave "presidential". Clearly wherever you stand, there is something about the issue of authenticity that is on people's minds this year.

We make conflicting demands on our politicians, and I think this goes for both sides of the border – we want to know who they *really* are, what they really believe. If we catch our politicians in some inconsistency, or if we conclude that they lack an essential self other than the ambition to get elected, then that becomes proof of their lack of authenticity, and becomes a disqualifier for leadership. If on the other hand their humanity is revealed to us, (and of course they are indeed all human beings with the weaknesses and foibles that all human beings are subject to), that also disqualifies them in our eyes because if we can see it then they obviously lack the self-control or discipline to keep it from us. These conflicting demands are obviously impossible for any human being to meet, which is why we so often bemoan

the paucity of good leaders to choose from. We expect our leaders to have solutions to every problem – providing good jobs for everyone, fixing income inequality, defeating ISIS, stopping the carnage in Syria, rolling back global warming, meeting challenges in health, education, housing, race relations, etc. Now there are important things that can be done about many of these problems, and important debates to have in society about the pros and cons of potential solutions, all of which have costs, and ideally voters will make their decisions based on those debates on issues. But we make our politicians promise us the moon, with no sacrifices on our part, and if not we won't vote for them -- so I think in a way we force them to be inauthentic even as we blame them for being so. I'm led to wonder by this campaign what authenticity in politicians really means, and whether it's as important as this cultural moment has determined.

I bring a similar question to the story about the Baal Shem Tov. How important is authenticity in a shaliah tsibur? I'm not sure that I'd make the same call as he did. I'm not sure that a prayer leader having a meltdown serves the congregation, or even the leader herself, however pure and genuine that meltdown might be. It's an extreme example, I know. I do understand the point, I appreciate that ritual should not only be about external performance. But at the end of the day, I think I actually need that person to "be someone else" in that moment, to be perhaps at least a little inauthentic, enough to get through the task at hand.

When I was a kid, I was a stutterer, and I was also extremely shy. Public speaking was a nightmare for me, any speaking was difficult. For all kinds of reasons I decided to go into a career that was hugely social, and demanded a lot of public speaking. Neither came easy, but I worked at it and worked at it until I became reasonably comfortable with it. But along the way, there were many times when I was forcing myself to do something that didn't feel authentic at all. I was slapping on a smile and putting on a face to the world that didn't match what was going on inside, because I had settled on a particular goal that required it. Was I being a fraud? Was I somehow betraying the real, essential, Ed? Is there even such a thing as the essential, bedrock self? The rabbinic system of teshuvah we have inherited seems to be predicated on it, but that idea comes with a cost.

The psychologist Carol Dweck has shown that merely believing that there is such a thing as a fixed bedrock self which consists of some combination of one's abilities and one's convictions can interfere with a person's growth.³ She calls that a "fixed mindset". Children who see abilities as fixed give up after failure; managers who believe talent is fixed fail to coach their employees. Dweck contrasts the fixed mindset with what she calls a "growth

³ www.mindsetonline.com.

mindset”, in which people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Too rigid a concept of what one’s essential self is becomes an anchor, that keeps us from sailing forth in ways that would be very beneficial to ourselves and those around us.⁴

But overcoming the pitfalls of a fixed mindset can lead us to places which at least initially feel inauthentic. One of the areas in my life where the issue of authenticity often comes up is in the performance of ritual. Ritual has become a key player in the discussion around authenticity, and in this context it doesn’t fare well. If we do something in a ritualistic way, the implication is that it’s become a habit, or external pressures are leading us to perform it instead of a genuine impulse welling up from our soul. And therefore rituals are often appraised as being somehow suspect. In our culture, the adjective “empty” often appears before the word “ritual”.

Here’s an image that may resonate for many of you: you’re out for a social evening with those very close to you, family or close friends. The evening begins with a wonderful dinner, and then, out of some vague sense of family tradition and obligation, you all go off after dinner to participate in a basically empty religious ritual. Or perhaps you are by yourself, but you attend this empty ritual because you have very pleasant associations of having done so with your family and friends back in Winnipeg or Montreal or New Jersey. Or perhaps it is not so empty for you. Perhaps you feel a great deal at this service, but you’re really not sure if it’s you, or the service; if it’s the ritual itself or that peculiar pain you’ve been feeling in your soul lately. Or perhaps you feel very little, but every year you harbor the hope that you will feel something this time, even though you never really do, and you always feel a little disappointed about this. But you don’t really mind attending this ritual. After all, it’s tradition, and even though you are a bit sleepy, the music is lovely and the officiant is sometimes mildly interesting when he speaks. But basically you go not because you anticipate that anything significant will happen but rather because this is what you do every year at this time.⁵

If any part of this description feels familiar to you, then you are not alone. Every ritual contains within it the possibility, even I would say the inevitability, of emptiness, of inauthenticity. And it’s not just religious rituals. Think of the rituals of saying “please”, “thank you” “how are you?”, and most relevant for this time of year, “I’m sorry.” How often do we say “thank you” not because there is genuine gratitude welling up in our soul, but because that is the polite thing to do, or because we’ve learned from a young age that doing so will yield up more of the things that we want? How

⁴ Grant, NYT.

⁵ Lew, pp.99-100

often do we ask others how they are, both parties knowing full well that an honest answer is not only not expected but not even desired? How often do we say we're sorry not out of genuine remorse but because the interaction calls for it, or to get out of a difficult or awkward situation? These are rituals, necessary for the social world we inhabit, often nothing more.⁶

One way to understand Kol Nidre is as an explicit affirmation of this reality. According to the Kol Nidre, the things we promise, the words we say – we don't really mean them. We declare them in advance to be בטלין ומבוטלין null and void. We begin our holiest day of the year with a celebration, sung in full voice, of human inauthenticity.

I'm reminded of the song in the musical "A Chorus Line" called "I Feel Nothing" in which the aspiring performer Morales recalls attending an improv class, and the teacher gave the students a situation in which they're supposed to be on a bobsled, and it's cold and it's snowing – and then he said "Go." And everyone else in the class is saying "whoosh" – "I feel the cold, I feel the snow, I feel the air". But Morales, she dug right down to the bottom of her soul, and she felt "nothing". The hit was double – the emptiness she herself felt, and the perception that everyone else was succeeding at having the experience the teacher wanted, they were on that bobsled and she just couldn't get on. Of course, the song leaves one with the suspicion that Morales may have been the only honest one, the only authentic one, the only one who was actually "being herself" in a room full of phonies. To that I would observe that at least part of becoming an actor is precisely about learning how to "be someone else" – and actors can grow so much from that experience.

Some of us consistently feel nothing when we perform religious rituals like prayer. Others of us feel something genuine is happening when we perform rituals, some of the time. I don't think anyone feels it all the time. I'm a rabbi, I do a lot of rituals, and I certainly don't feel it all the time.

So what is the goal? What does teshuvah actually mean then? In 1970, the literary critic Lionel Trilling distinguished between authenticity and sincerity.⁷ Instead of searching for our authentic inner selves and then making a concerted effort to express them, Trilling urged us to start with our outer selves. Pay attention to how we present ourselves to others, and then sincerely strive to be the people we claim to be. The way we present ourselves to the world, he says, is not to be condemned as a manifestation of phoniness. It is often an expression of who we would actually like to be in this world. Now we can't always live up to the highest standards of who we

⁶ Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, Michael Puett and Bennet Simon Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity, pp.7-9

⁷ Lionel Trilling Sincerity and Authenticity Harvard UP, 1972.

would like to be— that gap is where our High Holy Day work resides, in the sincere effort to close it. We often look around and see role models of people who we wish we could be more like -- professionally, socially, ethically, intellectually, spiritually, physically – and we’re often painfully aware of the gap between ourselves and them. That’s okay. Our pain is another part of our work on the High Holy Days -- to think about who our role models are more consciously. There is no fixed authentic self that we’re trying to get back to, there is only the self that we are growing into over the span of our whole lives, and we can make choices about what kind of self that will be. We don’t have complete control, but our choices can make a big impact. That’s what we’re going back to at this time of year, to an honest conversation with ourselves about where the ship of our lives is going, and how we can best steer it. What kind of person do we really want to become? It’s not easy, but at least according to our faith we’re not alone as we do it. God is on the deck with us, holding us, as we muster the courage to ask ourselves these questions.

If Trilling’s distinction between sincerity and authenticity is helpful, then when it comes to candidates for political office I don’t think I really need to judge their authenticity. I think we can make a reasonable presumption that a good part of what makes politicians tick is huge ambition and huge ego; otherwise they wouldn’t put themselves through everything that running for office in our time demands. That’s okay; they’re human beings – I’m sure they and their psychologists have a lot to talk about that’s none of my business. What I want to feel before I cast my vote is that I’m choosing someone who will, for whatever inner motivation, make a sincere effort to do as much of what they say they want to do as they can, within all the real-world limitations in which they operate. If I don’t share the expressed goals, or I don’t feel that they will make a sincere effort to achieve those goals, I shouldn’t vote for them. But I don’t have to know what is going on in their deepest neshamah. The late Shimon Peres, lionized at his death, was at times during his long career perceived as a hawk, at times a dove. Which was the real Shimon Peres? I don’t know. He was a human being, filled as we all are with contradictory impulses. In an election, we’re not voting for the mashiach -- God will name the mashiach and it won’t be a democratic vote. Our politicians are all flawed human beings, some way more flawed than others for sure, and none of them has all the answers to what ails us.

When it comes to ritual, I don’t think the goal is for every word in the High Holy Day machzor to resonate in everyone’s soul in such a way that being in shul feels like a totally authentic experience. How can the machzor ever meet that bar, given that most of it was written centuries ago in a time and place so different from our own, and given how diverse we as individuals are, and how different even every individual feels on different days? Sometimes we’re just in shul simply because we sincerely believe that that’s

where a Jew should be on that particular day. The prayers aren't touching us, we're distracted by our tzuers or by the people we run into, we're at most mouthing the words or singing the songs, but it's Yom Kippur or it's Shabbes and the kind of person we want to be is in shul on those days, or is fasting on that day. That's okay. If in the midst of everything else going on, if there is one moment of connection to something that happens in the ritual – one reading, one melody, one moment of feeling part of something bigger than oneself before it all falls apart again, one confession that does feel true, one sentence in the rabbi's sermon that really makes you think – then you've achieved something very real while you've been here. If there's more than one such moment when you participate in a ritual, even better, but I wouldn't expect it. And if the rest of the time you're bored, then I'd suggest one of two strategies: either -- ask yourself, is the kind of person I want to be someone who is bored, someone who is cynical about the possibility of being touched? Are there things that I can do, not the service officiants, me, to become more engaged by the experience of the ritual? Or, second strategy, accept that the cycle of feeling connected and disconnected is part of what this ritual, indeed all rituals, consists of – and just float along on the waves for a while, never giving up on the possibility of connection and meaning, but not expecting it to always be there and crashing when it isn't.

I actually disagree with Morales from *A Chorus Line*. She sang, "I Feel Nothing" – but I think she actually felt quite a lot when she attended that improv class. I think she was roiling with emotions and feelings about her experience. Negative feelings for sure, but that's okay, we can learn a lot from our negative feelings. Feelings of being alone, alienated, jealous, afraid, inferior, superior – I'm picturing they were all part of the mix for her. Recognizing and becoming aware of those feelings, instead of denying them, is a great place to start our spiritual work this Yom Kippur. If some of these feelings accompany your experience in shul because you don't feel connected to the ritual, or to the God-talk, or you don't feel entirely comfortable in the community because you think everyone else is feeling it and you're not, then that doesn't render your presence here hypocritical or inauthentic. It just means you've chosen to engage with the negative feelings rather than withdraw, you've sallied forth into the arena to see what you can learn and how you can grow. Kol HaKavod – good for you.

Oprah was once quoted as saying "I certainly had no idea that being your authentic self could get you as rich as I have become. If I'd known that, I'd have tried it a lot earlier." She's poking fun of course, at the contemporary quest to drill down to some fundamentally true self. That quest is a feature of our particular cultural moment, but not only. Human beings have been trying to understand themselves for a very long time, that's part of what makes us human. Literature, art, psychology, science, philosophy, religion – all have contributed to the effort. My purpose this Yom Kippur is not to

delegitimize the human quest for self-knowledge, or to promote dishonesty and phoniness as virtues, but rather to provoke a conversation about whether a shift of focus or framing question might be more helpful to us in our ongoing effort to become more aware, more conscious as we walk through the world. Instead of articulating the project as trying to understand who I “really am”, how most authentically to “be myself”, what might it offer me to ask the question, what kind of person do I want to become?

In a similar vein...because of my position as rabbi, I’m often asked questions that begin with the words “What does Judaism say about...?” It’s a natural question. Society has challenges. Individuals have challenges. We’re heirs to a very ancient tradition. What wisdom does it have to bring to these often difficult and troubling situations? What makes it hard for me to answer a question posed like that, however, is that Judaism is so vast and so multi-vocal that it is very difficult to respond to that question simply, because it implies the existence of a core authentic Judaism. But I can find quotes from Jewish sources to support one position or another on pretty much every vexing societal or personal issue. Physician assisted dying, helping refugees, peace in the Middle East, the Iran nuclear deal, how best to help the neediest in our society, security vs. civil liberties, climate change, all the key societal questions we face. Beyond very broad generalities, though, I don’t know that I can say that there is one authentic Jewish response to any of these, as much as we may want there to be one to guide us. Saying that one response is authentic implies that all the others are inauthentic. Is this a helpful distinction? Is not the real question for us, the honest question, what do we *want* our Judaism to say? How can the texts and stories of our tradition help us grow towards a position that we can both be sincerely challenged by and feel we can live with? This is a pretty radical approach, and many Jews would find it to be quite threatening. I don’t. To choose just one example to illustrate, I acknowledge that there is no one authentic Jewish position on what Israel should do to achieve or advance peace and security in the year 5777 and if only I work very diligently I’ll find out what it is. There are authentic texts pointing in one policy direction, and other authentic texts pointing in another policy direction. I, as someone who cares very deeply about Israel, have a responsibility in that context to study all those texts and consider them thoughtfully and then, holding them all, make choices and work sincerely towards the goal that I think is the right one. And at the same time pray a lot.

I’d like to close these Yom Kippur reflections by honouring Elie Wiesel, who as you know died this past year. Wiesel was of course most famous for his work on the Holocaust, but he published several other books as well, and one of my favourites is called [Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters](#). Wiesel’s grandfather had been a fervent Hasid, and he passed on his knowledge of Hasidic lore to young Elie before the war. Elie Wiesel

honoured his grandfather and that whole lost world in this beautiful book. Wiesel opens with the most mysterious figure of all, the founder Israel Baal Shem Tov, the sage in the story of the davening audition which I told earlier. The Besht, as he was known, is mysterious because he left behind none of his own writings. There remains of him no portrait, no document, no signature constituting irrefutable evidence that behind the legend there was a man, a face, a consciousness. In the absence of hard evidence, some historians deny his existence altogether. But there are those amazing legends, which often contradict each other in their portrayal of him and his ideas, but which have enriched Jewish life so immeasurably.

Here's Wiesel: "Each of his disciples saw him differently; to each he represented something else. Their attitudes toward him, as they emerge from their recollections, throw more light on themselves than on him. This explains the countless contradictory tales relating to him. The historians may have been troubled, but not the Hasidim. Hasidism doesn't fear contradictions; Hasidism teaches humility and pride, the fear of God and the love of God, the at once sacred and puerile dimension of life, the Master's role of intermediary between man and God, a role that can and must be disregarded in their I-Thou relationship. What does it prove? Only that contradictions are an intrinsic part of man."⁸

What Wiesel teaches us about the Besht can, I think, be said of ourselves as well. We're not just one thing, that if only we could access that thing, that core, then we can walk authentically through the world, then we can "be ourselves". Each of us is constituted of many contradictory things. We're kind and mean. Generous and stingy. Selfless and selfish. Peaceful and violent. Joyful and sad. Vindictive and forgiving. Confident and insecure. Introverted and extroverted. Proud and ashamed. Hopeful and cynical. We're jerks (not that we need to show it, as Rabbi Kravitz taught me that day) – and we're really noble too. There are times and places when it is appropriate, indeed necessary to let all those contradictions show, and it does feel so good to be able to do so, to drop the mask, to have the meltdown if that's what we're feeling, to yelp for joy if that's what we're feeling. Part of our life-work is figuring out when and with whom those times and places are, and when and with whom it'd actually be better not to be ourselves as we are, but rather ourselves as we would like to be. There are so many Yom Kippur choices to make about how we are going to live our lives, which of our many contradictory qualities we're going to show to the world, and which we're going to allow to determine our actions and our aspirations. Let's get to work.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

⁸ Souls on Fire, p.9.