

RDB:

I want to talk today about failure & resilience, about seeing the good in others and how important it is to change the way we experience our lives.

I feel the best way to do that is to talk to you with my daughter Maytal. Maytal's example, as a teen, shows how much damage we are causing each other in the ways we judge and are judged, in how we measure others and ourselves, always feeling that we are lacking.

This can be a moment of change, to let God in, in ways that can connect us with something wonderful. By talking together, we believe we can more fully illustrate the unneeded pain we are causing ourselves, and offer a few solutions.

Maytal:

When I was young, when we were young, we were told we could not fail. Everything we did was a chance to try something new, try that strange green blob our parents call broccoli, and if we don't like it, that's okay. Good for us for trying. We were told to try out dancing, and piano, and soccer, and find our passion. For everything we didn't like, gymnastics, ice-skating, violin, book club, that was okay. Our siblings, our teachers, and our parents were proud of us for doing our best and trying our best and narrowing down our likes and dislikes to find what we love.

It's a very encouraging world when we are young, we are rewarded for failure. It seemed that world was just as proud of me for trying and not liking, nor being any particular sort of prodigy at piano as it was of me for receiving praise from teachers for my writing abilities. Both took great effort, and both felt equally rewarded, in their own different ways.

But as we get older, the world starts to change. Risk-taking not only ceases to be encouraged, it begins to become taboo. I remember asking a student in my eighth grade math class for studying tips because she seemed to be finding the class much easier than me. She said, "Oh, I need an A in algebra to get into college, so I took it already over the summer." She was proud that she was doing well in a class she had already taken because because the A she would get in Algebra was more useful to her chances of getting into college than the B or even C she might get in geometry, the higher math lane. The risk of failure outweighed the benefit of her learning something new.

And it's not just re-taking classes to avoid bad grades that becomes expected behavior, in high school we're even discouraged to do the same passion exploration we all tried when we were younger. If you never found your true passion, or if your true passion was video-gaming, or listening to music, or something that couldn't be put into an application, you need to find a new hobby, even if you hate it. If you're all athletic, sports are your ticket to success, and you will play a sport for all of high school, no matter how late it makes you stay up, even if it means you can't play that video game, or listen to your music. If you wanted to take ceramics because making a cup in a class seemed kinda cool, you are told, "don't" if you get a B it will kill your 4.0 and you can kiss Harvard goodbye. So you never touched a pottery wheel, and you never

took AP lit because even though you'd always kinda wanted to read Hamlet, you knew you would kill it in AP physics C.

We're told we need to get somewhere, and we are given a checklist on how to reach our destination. Any straying from the road means getting lost, it doesn't matter if we discover beautiful flowers along the way.

We are told there are so many ways to fail. A B is a failure. Not being involved after school is a failure. Rejection is failure. A salary lower than six figures, is a failure.

RDB:

Maytal, as I hear you, my first reaction is fear and concern for you and a whole generation. I see the pain you put yourself through when you get results you don't like on a test. It feels like your future taken away before it has even begun.

And it makes we want to cry. Because you, and all your peers, have so many gifts and so much to offer the world. This is just the beginning for all of you in figuring out what is possible, how you are going to be a blessing.

And yet, I realize this is only a symptom. We are all afraid of how we will be judged if we fail; frightened to risk showing our true selves to others.

Yet even God has failures; even God, in creating, had to start over.

Our Rabbis teach: Before the world was created, God alone existed, one and eternal, beyond any boundary, without change or movement, concealed within Himself. When the thought arose in Him to bring the world into being, His glory became visible. He began to trace the foundations of a world before Himself, and in this way God brought a heaven and earth into being. But when God looked at them, they were not pleasing in His sight, so He changed them back into emptiness and void. He split and rent and tore them apart with his two arms, and ruined whole worlds in one moment. One after another, God created nearly a thousand worlds, which preceded this one. And all of them were swept away in the wink of an eye.

Failure exists as a divine necessity. God, in order to create our world, had 974 failed attempts. Each time, God learned better how to express the divine will and to create a place that would be pleasing to God. When we praise God who created all, we are praising a magnificent Creator who is magnificent because of failures. When we praise God who created all, we are praising even that which remains broken and imperfect in the world, realizing that we are commanded to accept the good with the bad.

When I was young, when we were young, we were taught to be critical of others and ourselves. The way to grow was to notice and call out failings. When I was young, when we were young,

we were taught that criticism was more effective than compliments. I was taught, we were taught, to first see the failing and only later if at all to see the successes.

Criticisms are silencing. I remember when my Zeide starting taking piano lessons in his mid 70s. I think he was inspired by Mom and sister taking lessons, and plus he liked their teacher. So it was fun; she would come over once a week for the lessons, he would flirt a bit, and practice the piano. Then my uncle, a fairly talented pianist in his own right, came to visit. My Zeide was so excited to play for him. So he sat him down and began to play. After playing whatever entry level piece he had prepared, his son, my uncle, said, "After a year, that's all you can do?"

My Zeide never played the piano again.

Maytal:

We are told by others what failure is, we define ourselves by metrics that other people give us. We are told to get to college, to get high paying jobs, we're told to reach destination but we're never told what to do when we get there. And we rarely question the idea of success we are told. Why do we never take risks? To avoid failing.

RDB:

Rosh hashanah is the birthday of the world. The day on which God created. Yet, says the Talmud, we too create worlds. We too have the power to fashion and bring into being. All too often, we get limited by measurement and grades and judgements and lose track of our creative capacity. We get on the wrong road and get lost in failures and lose the inner resilience to see what may grow from failure. We shut God out and pay the price. then at Yom Kippur we read that God opens the way, solu solu panu derekeh. God wants to be let in.

It reminds me of a story.

Long ago, not so long as to be out of memory, but long enough to be quite a far ways in the past, there was a Yeshiva that had fallen on hard times. Membership had waned and dwindled in the light of antisemitism, and love of learning had given way to love of material wealth. And so the Yeshiva had lost one student, then another, then another, until it was just the Rosh Yeshiva and five students.

The Rosh Yeshiva was in despair. What could he do to save his dying house of learning? How could he bring back all the enlightenment that had filled the same halls to bursting only a decade prior?

Confused and out of his depth, the Rosh Yeshiva turned to another for help. The Yeshiva was situated in a forest on the edge of a mountain. Deeper still in the forest lived an old Hassidic rabbi, one who had been beloved for many years and had moved up the mountain to make way for the town's new rabbi.

The rabbi welcomed the Rosh Yeshiva into his hut, but when the Rosh Yeshiva explained the reason for his visit, the rabbi could only give his sympathies. **“I know how it is,”** the rabbi sighed, **“the people want only what they can see and touch, they don’t want to dance, don’t want to learn.”** So the two leaders wept together, and they studied Torah and Talmud and talked of deep things. The time came for the Rosh Yeshiva to leave. **“It has been a blessing indeed to meet you after all these years.”** The Rosh Yeshiva said. **“But I am still unsure of what to do for my yeshiva, for my students. Is there no advice you can give me, no wisdom you can impart, to save this house of learning?”** “No, I am truly sorry.” The rabbi replied. “The only thing I can tell you is that I know that the messiah is one of you.”

When the Rosh Yeshiva returned to his house of learning, his students gathered around. “What did the rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the Rosh Yeshiva answered, “we only wept and studied together. The only thing he did say, and it was cryptic too, was that the messiah is one of us.” In the days and weeks and months that followed, the students pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible truth to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us us here at the yeshiva? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Rosh Yeshiva? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Rosh Yeshiva. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Reb Iliana. Certainly Iliana is a holy woman. Everyone knows that Reb Iliana is a woman of light. Certainly he could not have meant Reb Eli! Reb Eli gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Reb Eli is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Rebi Eli. But surely not Reb Nechamiya. Reb Nechamiya is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Reb Nechamiya is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I’m not that important, am I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the members of the Yeshiva began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each rabbi themselves might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the Yeshiva to picnic on its tiny lawn, to pick some of fruit from its trees, even now and then to go into the Yeshiva to study or meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old students and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly

knowing why, they began to come back to the Yeshiva more frequently to picnic, to play, to study. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger people who came to visit the Yeshiva started to talk more and more with the old Rabbis. After a while one asked if she could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the Yeshiva's walls were full to bursting with enlightenment, and the joy of knowledge wafted beyond the house of learning to fill the land beyond.

When the Rabbis only saw a failing Yeshiva they were trapped. But when they began to see each other, wholly and fully, something changed. God was invited in and infinite possibility replaced a finite ending. They rediscovered their own hidden creative power through the respect they found for each. Perhaps they needed the false starts and failings, the seeming dead end, before their own creative power could emerge. They learned - and we can learn - that there were more worlds still to create and those worlds are uncovered by noticing the good. There is a road to this creativity. What felt like failure ended up inviting a transformation that brought goodness to a whole kingdom.

Maytal:

I want to encourage everyone here today to be a little selfish,. I don't mean go and think the whole world belongs to you, but I want to encourage us to feel like we at least belong to ourselves. I want us to treat ourselves with the respect we would if we really were the Messiah. We're not part of some great big machine moving forward and we need to keep up or get left behind, we aren't handed a checklist and we're bad people if we don't meet every mark, we're all individuals, and we should all have different goals.

RDB:

When we try to force ourselves onto the same path as everyone else, we extinguish our own unique creative capacities and our capacity for joy. We force God out of our lives. But we can be taught, I am trying to learn, that when we are afraid and only see the negative, when we are judged and graded, we lose sight of our inner wholeness. Our authenticity is damaged as we painfully struggle to meet these external judgements.

There is another way, a new path. When we realize God's creation includes failures, 974 new starts, learning, we are reminded of the wholeness we need to bring into our world. That is the key to something wonderful in each of us. We can find our own truest selves, we can let God in, and in so doing unlock real joy in our lives.

Maytal:

It's easy to get caught up in a comparison trap, especially here in this area. It feels like the person who invented "the-next-big-thing" lives just two doors down, and we often wonder, "why haven't I accomplished anything yet?" But there's an old Hasidic story about a man named Reb Zusia. Reb Zusia was nearing the end of his life and his students gathered around. They asked him, "Reb Zusia, are you worried?" And reb Zusia said, "I am not worried that they will ask me 'why were you not more like Abraham? Because I am not Abraham. I am not worried that they will ask me 'why were you not more like Moses?' because I am not Moses. I am only worried that they will ask me 'why were you not more like Reb Zusia?' And I will have no answer, for I am Reb Zusia."

This story reminds me of my sister's theatre teacher, a man who could only ever be compared to himself.

RDB:

Many of you here knew Jim Gunn, a beloved theater teacher first at Gideon Hausner and then Kehillah. He wasn't the image of a beloved teacher. He was short, he stomped around, he yelled at his students and spat ice at them. Before ever show he would yell, "We aren't ready; we are going to have to cancel the play."

And yet; when he died the old Kol Emeth was filled with devoted mourners, crying at his loss. Why? Because he brought his whole true self into what he did and in so doing modelled what it looks like to bring your truest self into the world. In acting he told his students to bring their whole ridiculous self into their acting. His example showed how to bring you whole self into everything. And so when he died, they knew they had lost someone special in their lives. Was he the Messiah? He couldn't have been.

Where my uncle judged, Jim taught his students a subject they really needed to learn. My uncle saw only the failure and he silenced my Zaide. Jim, by contrast, invited them into their whole selves- instead of the limited self that grades and college pressure forced. They were more than their SAT scores and their GPAs. He showed them how seeing their whole self could open up possibilities, unlock their ability to create worlds again and again. That failure can be an invitation into learning which allows new and unanticipated successes later.

Speaking of successes, we are in the midst as you know of our new building. We've begun to see buildings take shape and we have completed our capital campaign. We are the only religious community in the Bay Area building a new facility. It is an amazing success.

Maytal:

But it took what felt like 974 tries! I remember when I was in the third grade you promised we would have a hole in the ground by the time I was in fifth grade. I remember at my sister's bat

mitzvah you said there would be a hole in the ground at my bat mitzvah. And only last year was there finally a hole in the ground.

RDB!

And don't even get me started about the 974 reviews of the ARB. But Maytal is right. We had this dream, and then we had come far enough that it was impossible to turn back and still didn't have anywhere near enough money to break ground. I was afraid; afraid that I had broken the schul, damaged Kol Emeth and our future. It is amazing to see where we have come.

And yet: there is still risk. If we just build a building, if it's just about concrete and cement, we will have failed and continue to risk breaking the shul. Imagine, though, that as we are building, we build something in our community as well that supports resilience and risk taking, that invites gratitude and appreciation.

As we are framing buildings, let's frame a community of appreciation and gratitude. I challenge all of us to find 3 nice things to say to 3 different people every day. And four on shabbat, please! Because that simple practice could change the way we see the people around us as we intentionally look for the good in them.

I challenge us to listen more to other. Shma Yisrael is our most basic commandment. Let go of our judgements of others. We are creating sacred spaces; let us create spaces that allow people to share their successes and their failures, knowing those will be held lovingly. Because that simple act of listening creates space for a more authentic, powerful self.

And lastly: to notice how looking for the good in others, listening genuinely without judgement, helps us see ourselves anew. Maytal, I got into a fight recently with you. I was so frustrated by your stubbornness and unwillingness to see it my way.

I spent the weekend feel bad, like a failure as a parent. I value the relationship we have and it seemed like something - that I had broken something. And then your Mom helped me realize: my own stubbornness, my own unwillingness to let you have YOUR way, was leading me to escalate and to be hurtful to you. I got upset because you reminded me of what I don't like in myself.

So I decided to take a risk. When I instead reminded myself of how much I love you how much I treasure sharing interests and projects together, our relationship changed. I allowed myself to see the good in you, which let me remember the good in myself as well.

When we judge people by the college they attended, or the salary they are making, or the number of friends they have on facebook, we are noticing only one part of who that person is.

And when we do that, when our eyes are so narrowly focused, its all we can see in ourselves as well. We lose track of joy and faith. We are shutting God out.

Maytal:

Something beautiful can emerge in our new Synagogue on Manuela and also in each of us. It can become a beautiful space where we see our own inherent goodness, where we realize our own failures and successes are to be held and treasured and loved. A place where we let God in a way that opens our eyes the beauty of everyone around us and our hearts to joy. A place where we treat each other as if the person sitting right next to you right now could be the Messiah.

RDB:

To help facilitate the importance of risk taking and failure we are starting a resilience project at a KE. In partnership with Tamika Hayes, we are going to create a series of moments to share stories of failure by amazing people to remind ourselves that failures do not define us. Failures can open up new doors into the future.

We are going to share stories of how seeing the good in others opened up new possibilities. By getting out of either / or thinking we invite God into the picture and limitless possibilities open up.

I've been working hard to learn a new set of lessons. To find this new path that can guide me towards whole fulfilling living. To let God in. I need to learn, we need to learn, that seeing the good in others allows us to see it in ourselves as well. I need to learn, we need to learn, to take risks that create worlds, to find the courage even to fail. And to build the communities that will hold that failure, listening to us in love. A community that listens genuinely without judgment.

When we have that courage, when we make the effort to see that good, we create the space for the failing and growing that makes life worth living. We allow gates of joy to open in our souls, gates that lead us back towards God who Spoke and Created the World.

When God was creating, God said: these worlds do not please me, 974 times but this one, our world, does. And then God said: tov meod, it is very good. It took 974 tries- thats a lot of resilience, persistence, willingness to believe. And maybe then what happened is God realized it was time to look for pomegranates, to see the good even amid all the world's imperfections. God is calling our world, the one you and I live in every, as very good. God is making an effort here and that allows the world to exist.

Maytal:

Each of us live in our own world. Worlds we create after many tries, and many failures. A high paying salary is a destination, but it's what we do with the money that measures real success. Are we happy with our outcome, are we happy in our lives?

A low ranking college, a low paying job, a failed hobby and a bad grade, these could all be marks of success by our own metrics. The job makes us happy, the college was the right fit, the hobby wasn't our passion, we learned something new, it was hard and it was worth it.

There's value in the risk, and value in our convictions, we didn't fail, we succeeded. So take a geometry class even if you're quote, bad at math, read a little bit of Hamlet, learn piano and only do half-well, and take pride in your, our, success.

RDB:

Be willing to risk a new relationship, even though there is the risk of being hurt.

Maytal:

There's something in all of us, we all carry the spark of enlightenment.

RDB:

It isn't about how we measure up, it's about how we contribute.

Maytal:

Allow comparisons and criticisms to fade away, remember that failure is necessary for success, and while you love your neighbor, remember to love yourself.

RDB:

After all, you could be the messiah.