Worthy: You Matter Just As You Are
The Inherent Worth of Each and Every Human Being

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“The greatest challenge for most of us is believing that we are worthy now, right this minute. [But] worthiness doesn’t have any prerequisites.”¹ So says Brené Brown in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Little did Brené Brown know that she’s echoing the message of *Kol Nidrei* and *Yom Kippur*.

We introduce *Kol Nidrei* by saying *anu mattirin le-hitpalleil im ha-avaryanim* - we grant permission to pray with the sinners. Because the concept of sin has been used to control and abuse, we may be tempted to ignore these words or scoff at them. But this statement is important and wise. We begin *Yom Kippur* with an affirmation that whatever our faults and doubts on this night, all are welcome in the synagogue. This declaration invites those who feel burdened by guilt or a sense of being unworthy into our community.²

It’s also an invitation to radical acceptance of the shortcomings of ourselves and others. The Hebrew word for permit, *mattir*, also means to loosen, to release, to set free. We set ourselves free when we pray with people who have made

² *Maḥzor Lev Shalem*, p. 204
mistakes - because in doing so, we recognize and accept that we are all people who have made mistakes. We give ourselves and each other permission to be here, and we confirm that we are all equally worthy. In this way, we affirm our common humanity, “recognizing,” as Brown says, ”that suffering and feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience–something we all go through rather than something that happens to ‘me’ alone.”\(^3\)

You are not alone, and you are worthy of love and respect just by virtue of being human. The Talmud emphasizes the inestimable value of each and every individual, explaining: “...but a single person was first created in the world, to teach that anyone who destroys a single soul, he is deemed by Scripture as if he had caused a whole world to perish; and anyone who saves a single soul, he is deemed by Scripture as if he had saved a whole world. And again, [but a single person was created] for the sake of peace among humankind, that one should not say to another, ‘My father was greater than your father.’”\(^4\)

Science affirms the absurdity of claiming that any one human being is inherently better than any other. Based on an examination of our DNA, any two human beings are 99.9 percent identical. We all evolved from the same physical ancestors. So what do we make of the astonishing variety of individual differences in sizes, shapes, personalities, abilities, and facial features that we see every day?

\(^3\) Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, p. 60
\(^4\) *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5, translation adapted by R’ LP from Sefaria and the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America’s iEngage: Together & Apart sourcebook
We have to be able to appreciate differences without comparing ourselves to others and ranking people as better or worse. We need to reject the caprices of mainstream society that arbitrarily value and devalue random traits and circumstances. We must lift up the truth that all humans are born equal.

Even as we feel so different from one another, let us enter Yom Kippur with this knowledge of how alike we are. Let Kol Nidrei be an invitation to accept ourselves exactly as we are. We need to accept ourselves before we can truly improve ourselves, let alone improve the world. We can’t make progress without understanding our real selves, harnessing our talents, skills, and passions, while working with our flaws and limitations. As the author Melissa Camara Wilkins writes: “You are enough as you are, mess and all, beautiful and broken, and yet, showing up for your life every day.”\(^5\) This does not mean that we can’t improve and do better. Rather, it means that we have enough within ourselves—enough strength, enough ability, enough resilience, enough soul—to deal with that which is broken and to overcome it, or transform it, or simply to live with it and find the beauty in it.\(^6\)

We can do this without falling into the trap of all-or-nothing perfectionism. We can adopt what Brené Brown calls healthy striving, in which we strive for goals

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not so that others will admire us more, but rather because we want those goals for ourselves and we trust that working towards those goals will be for the betterment of ourselves and others as well.\textsuperscript{7} If we strive healthily, working toward a goal is less about achieving it and more about the process of working toward it.

And as we work towards our goals, we make mistakes. We do bad things. That does not make us bad people. It makes us human. In Judaism, there are very few things which are beyond forgiveness.\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Teshuvah}, repentance, presents us with the opportunity to apologize, repair the damage, and, where possible, heal relationships. We need to let go of what Brene Brown calls “shame self-talk,” in which we say “I am bad.” Instead, we can say “I did something bad” without loathing ourselves for weeks or months or years.\textsuperscript{9}

What if we met bad behavior in ourselves and in others by reminding ourselves of each other's inherent worth and goodness? It’s said that in the Bemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, they are placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. “All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, listing the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in their lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and

\textsuperscript{7} Brene Brown, \textit{The Gifts of Imperfection}, p. 58  
\textsuperscript{8} Cf. \url{https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-are-there-things-that-cant-be-forgiven/}  
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 42
accuracy, is recounted. All their positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.”

_Yom Kippur_ is like the Bemba tribe’s ritual of forgiveness and reconciliation. Rabbinic tradition says that _itzumo shel ha-yom mekhappeir_ - the essence of the day itself forgives, cleanses, and renews, welcoming us back with joy.

We spend so much time working hard, worrying about our careers, our finances, our accomplishments, and those of our family members and friends. In Jewish tradition, however, success is not about acquiring degrees, praise, or wealth. In Yiddish, to be a success is simply to be a _mensch_ – a good person. We become _mensches_ by caring for others – but we cannot embrace and serve others successfully if we cannot accept and embrace our own true selves.

One of the greatest blocks to lovingkindness is our own sense of unworthiness. Love and compassion for others must begin with kindness toward ourselves. George Washington Carver, the pioneering African-American agricultural scientist, put it this way: “How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the

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10 Jack Kornfield, _The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace_, p. 42
11 Maimonides, _Hilkhot Teshuvah_ (Laws of Repentance) 1:3-4
striving and tolerant of both the weak and the strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.”

It’s difficult in American culture to believe in our own self-worth, especially for those who don’t have meaningful work or a reliable income. Rabbi Elliot Kukla, an author, artist, and disability justice activist who was the first openly transgender person to be ordained by the Reform seminary Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, writes a powerful reflection on worthiness and chronic illness in our culture:

“Like many people, I had once measured my worth by my capacity to produce things and experiences: to be productive at work, share responsibilities at home, “show up” equally in my friendships and rack up achievements. Being sick has been a long, slow detox from capitalist culture and its mandate that we never rest. Slowly, I found a deeper value in relationship beyond reciprocity: an unconditional love and care based in justice, and a belief that all humans deserve relationship, regardless of whether we can offer anything measurable back. In these discoveries, I’ve been led by other sick and disabled people, whose value had always been apparent to me. Amid the brilliant diversity of power wheelchairs, service dogs, canes and ice packs, it’s easy to see that we matter just as we are.”

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We all live on a spectrum of ability and disability, of privilege and disadvantage, of connection and loneliness. We just need to help each other feel more safe, more cared for, more connected, more fully worthy. We need to embody the radical truth that we are all equally valuable, each of inestimable worth.

We can begin to build a reality in which difference is honored as equal in all regards by honoring those parts of ourselves that feel like outsiders, like failures, those parts that feel exhausted from the battles we have to fight every day. We all have those parts of ourselves. I sometimes feel like an exhausted outsider when I struggle to be an observant Jew in a secular-yet-Christian-dominated country. And I question whether I’m a good enough anything - a good enough father, husband, son, brother, musician, or rabbi. And I’m embarrassed by the parts of me that want material things, needless acquisitions, like the part of me that wants a fancier car, or another expensive electric guitar, even though I own several that I rarely play already. All those desires, those places where we are striving, those places we feel inadequate – they are all part of what makes us perfectly imperfect.¹⁴

Jewish tradition teaches that you are inherently valuable, just as you are. Your identities have nothing to do with your inherent worth, dignity, and sanctity as a human being. Whether you are a woman or a man or gender-non-conforming,
you are worthy of respect. Able-bodied or living with disability, you are worthy of love. Whether your labor is paid or unpaid, you are inherently sacred.

A Hasidic tale affirms the unique sanctity that each of us carries within us. The story goes that a Rebbe named Zusha was lying on his deathbed, crying and distraught, as his students sat around him. His students asked him why he was crying, as they reminded their teacher of “all the wonderful deeds he had ever done over the course of his life. Rabbi Zusha replied, ‘I’m afraid that when I get to heaven, God will not ask me ‘Why weren’t you more like Abraham? Or why weren’t you more like King David?’ God will ask, ‘Why weren’t you more like Zusha?’”

_Yom Kippur_ reminds us to be more like ourselves as _Kol Nidrei_ releases us from doubts about our self-worth. The promises we made to ourselves and to God are nullified. We begin this cancellation of personal vows by saying _anu mattirim le-hitpalleil im ha-avaryanim_, giving ourselves permission to pray with those who miss the mark - which is all of us. In her book “Permission Granted: Be Who You Were Made to Be and Let Go of the Rest,” the author Melissa Camara Wilkins summarizes the lesson we need to internalize and embody this year: “…you are enough, just as you are, just as you were made to be.”

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15 Yael Shy, _What Now? Meditation For Your Twenties and Beyond_, p. 85.
When we embrace the truths of who we are, we gain access to our worthiness—the feeling that we are enough and the understanding that we are worthy of love and belonging. Then, we can in turn show others that each and every person is inestimably valuable. This year, may we build a more loving world, starting with ourselves, living out the truth that we matter just as we are.

_Gemar hatimah tovah_ - may we be sealed for a good new year.