

## **Beth Am B'Yachad: Embracing Imperfections**

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Let me open with an American icon, you even may have heard of him from Broadway, Alexander Hamilton, who wrote in The Federalist Papers, "I never expect to see a perfect work from an imperfect [person]."<sup>1</sup> This quote that has been on my mind for the past few years.

We are fallible. We do wrong and miss the mark. This is what Yom Kippur is all about. Let's face it – we are not perfect. Yet, increasingly, there is decreasing room for errors in our society. There is an expectation of greater productivity, more impressive and faster innovation, higher levels of achievement, all with fewer mistakes. The pressure for perfection is so intense. Therefore, I wonder what it means to be imperfect today. What does it mean for others to be imperfect? What about ourselves? Most importantly, for the sake of teshuvah, repentance, especially on Yom Kippur, when can we forgive others for their imperfections? When can we forgive ourselves?

Let us first understand the concept of perfection, or the lack thereof, in Jewish terms. In our Shabbat prayer books, when we return Torah to the Ark, we quote Psalm 19, "The Torah is perfect."<sup>2</sup> We read on Yom Kippur from the Book of Leviticus where God commands a series of atonement sacrifices. Throughout the Books of Exodus and Leviticus, God asks for specific sacrifices to be "tamim – without blemish," meaning "perfect." Does God really expect perfection from ourselves and our actions? Biblical commentator Dr. Nahum Sarna teaches that God does not want perfect behavior and sacrifices for God's own sake, rather to encourage us to push ourselves to a higher level of expectation, which then enhances the harmony between us and the Divine.<sup>3</sup>

King David wrote in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "There is no [person] so perfectly righteous that [they] do only good and never sin."<sup>4</sup> Perfection is a myth. In fact, God loves us more when we do make mistakes, embracing our imperfections. A midrash on the Book of Leviticus states, "As human beings, we are often ashamed to use imperfect vessels. Not so with the Holy One. We are all broken, and we are all God's [imperfect] vessels."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist Paper: No. 85,  
[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_Century/fed85.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_Century/fed85.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 19:8

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Nahum Sarna, Commentary on Exodus 12:5, "The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus," 2003

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, <http://www.kol-tzedek.org/imperfection.html>

God taught this lesson to the angels, in a story told in the Talmud,<sup>6</sup> explaining why Torah is not in the heavens, a verse we read today.<sup>7</sup> Moses ascends to the heavens to receive Torah. The angels complain, “Torah is a hidden treasure that has been withheld since the world’s creation, and you give it to a creature of mere flesh and blood!” The angels cannot understand why God would gift humanity, so imperfect and flawed, with God’s wisdom, instead of themselves, arguing Torah should remain in the heavens. Interestingly, God does not answer the angels, but asks Moses to respond. Moses proceeds to recite a number of Torah’s passages, citing human fallibilities and frailties. Angels do not need the commandments; humans do. The angels realize that precisely because of humanity’s imperfection; we are meant to receive God’s Law on earth. Because we are imperfect, God raised us to a chosen place above the angels in the heavens.<sup>8</sup>

Seen through a modern lens, professor and best-selling author Brene Brown writes, “Imperfections are not inadequacies; they are reminders that we’re all in this together.”<sup>9</sup> Imperfection is a badge of honor. Dr. Brown affirms, “perfection is an unattainable goal.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, that has not stopped many of us from expecting it – both in ourselves and others.

Sadly, I find our expectations of perfection have become a major feature of our culture, which manifests in a variety of ways. Today, let’s focus on three sides of our struggle to embrace imperfection – expecting perfection from public figures, our tendency to only focus on what others do wrong, and finally, the need to forgive imperfections, both in others as well as ourselves.

First, let us confront our expectation of perfection. From celebrities, to media personalities, to influencers, and especially politicians, when we look up to someone, we seek to magnify their positive qualities, while we often minimize, disregard, and sometimes deny, their negative qualities and imperfections. We get defensive when a negative story comes out or they are critiqued in public. When we hold someone to a higher standard, it is very difficult to knock them off a pedestal. This is a modern equivalent of the biblically prohibited act of idolization. We must be honest and realistic, and value the humanity, not the myth, which we have created in those we revere. We are holding others to unrealistic, impossible standards, seeing them not as imperfect creatures, but as perfect idols. In this manner, we have broken the Covenant of Torah that God gifted us, above the angels. In the vein of the modern maxim “never meet your heroes,” there is nowhere to go but the downward cycle of disappointment.

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<sup>6</sup> Shabbat 88b

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 30:12

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl, <https://www.beth-tzedec.org/page/sermons/a/display/s/1/item/imperfection-and-at-one-ment-kol-nidre-5778-september-2017-10-tishrei-5778>

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Brene Brown, “The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are,” 2010

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

We see this all too frequently in recent politics, both on the left and the right, where we are quick to dismiss a negative story or characteristic about a political ally or idol because it does not fit our narrative. Talk show host Stephen Colbert said it well, “No one forms their identity in association with [a celebrity] necessarily. But a particular politician or political figure is part of [our] identity. If they are guilty, then somehow I am guilty for supporting them.”<sup>11</sup> In reality, the way we look at an idolized political or other public figure is a Rorschach test, becoming a window into ourselves. That political idol becomes ourselves.

So, we create litmus tests expecting perfection, where none exists. The philosopher Voltaire is attributed with the aphorism, “Don’t let the perfect get in the way of the good.” Or worse yet, instead of building ourselves and those we support up, we break others down. The only way you will find someone who is running for office who holds 100% of your views is if you run yourself. Maybe you should. Either way, when we lift someone into perfection, or the complete opposite, we are turning people into messiahs and demons, and our Jewish faith believes in neither.

It is one thing to expect perfection, but another when we focus almost exclusively on the imperfections. Our second flaw is when we only see what is wrong. Our desire, at the moment, seems to be more energized by calling out a wrong than embracing a positive. This is also relevant in everyday lives, not limited to politics. We are too critical of our neighbors, coworkers, etc. Activist and author Loretta Ross describes this so wonderfully in her description of our current “call-out culture.” She writes, “Call-outs happen when people publicly shame each other online, at the office, in classrooms or anywhere humans have beef with one another ... Call-outs are often louder and more vicious on the internet, amplified by the ‘clicktivist’ culture that provides anonymity for awful behavior. Similarly problematic is the ‘cancel culture,’ where people attempt to expunge anyone with whom they do not perfectly agree, rather than remain focused on” the larger systemic problems we face, seeking positive ways to lift up those who are hurt, not on aiming to take others down.

It seems that we do not wish to truly speak to each other, but yet we are quick to criticize. We hear but we do not listen; we speak but we do not discuss. We are too busy waiting for the other, often viewed as the opponent, to make a single mistake, so we can quickly jump on them, expose them, and due to a single error, disregard their entire message. Rabbi Peter Berg warns us, “Since being right feeds our egos and brings satisfaction, it is logical that being wrong is embarrassing and deflating. In America today, it seems impossible to admit that we are incorrect, to realize that we made a mistake halfway through an argument or to discover that we may have erred regarding politics, faith or our life’s work.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Colbert, “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,” September 10, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Peter Berg, <https://atlantajewishtimes.timesofisrael.com/yes-and-yet-responding-to-the-lack-of-civil-discourse/>

There needs to be an honest reckoning about how much imperfection we can and should embrace for the sake of partnership, cooperation, civility, and growth. It is okay to disagree, as long as we do it respectfully, not just for the sake of pointing out another's imperfections, all while not recognizing it in ourselves. A balance must be struck. We may be too quick to disregard an entire social movement, group, or issue, because of a singular component. If there is one sentence in a massive platform that is not to our liking, any support for that entire movement is null and void. Sure, we are certainly allowed to have red lines that cannot be crossed; I would never ask anyone to abandon their values. At the same time, we cannot let the quest for perfect synchronicity get in the way of the good that can be done b'yachad / together. Perhaps, we need to suspend our limits occasionally, in order to build social justice and personal relationships that can help change minds over time.

Activist and author Bryan Stevenson writes, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."<sup>13</sup> When someone does something wrong, we let it become the only thing that matters. We take a single event from someone's past and we use that to exclusively define them in the present. Worse yet, when we let this single act become the all-defining feature, we reach a point where we lose any context. This is not just in the public or political realm, but often with family and friends. We hold grudges and judge others by a single mistake for so long, that their imperfection becomes an impediment to ever healing that relationship.

Romeo and Juliet opens with these verses, "Two households, both alike in dignity, / In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean."<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare never defines the "ancient grudge" of the Capulet's and Montague's, yet they remain eternally at war. In more modern times, historians do not fully know the origins of the feud between the Hatfield's and McCoy's, which led to generations of bloodshed.<sup>15</sup> I imagine that many of us have similar stories. I know my family does. I have never met a second-cousin because she did one thing to another family member who died over a decade ago. In so doing, we have refused to acknowledge and forgive imperfection. We have stalled in time, never sought to heal.

In our first two areas of this sermon, we examined two flaws – expecting perfection and only focusing on the negative. But Yom Kippur is not about what is wrong, rather doing the hard work to make it right, in others and ourselves. Therefore, I say we go all in and embrace being imperfect. Let us make mistakes. Let us not hold grudges forever, if true teshuvah, repentance, is made. This sacred day helps us understand imperfections, in ourselves, others, and those we hold too high. We must allow others, as well as ourselves, the ability and space to change and grow. Bryan Stevenson presses, "We all need mercy, we

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<sup>13</sup> Carl Gregg, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2016/04/just-mercy-each-of-us-is-more-than-the-worst-thing-weve-ever-done/>

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, Prologue, Romeo and Juliet, 1595

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hatfields-and-McCoys>

all need justice, and—perhaps—we all need some measure of unmerited grace.”<sup>16</sup> We know that we want to become better with each mistake. We must let others have that same grace and forgiveness. I know that I am not the person I was a few years ago, certainly many years ago – should not I allow that same growth for others, giving them the benefit of the doubt and the chance to show their present selves?

In Jewish tradition, in order to receive this grace, we must commit to real, honest teshuvah. This is no fake celebrity apology, in the vein of, “if someone was hurt by my comment, I am sorry.” In Judaism, we must fully live up to our errors, accepting and embracing our imperfections, and commit to doing better. But for those who were hurt, once that teshuvah has been accomplished, including whatever penalties and consequences are appropriate, it is incumbent upon us to forgive, release the grudge, and move forward. We mustn’t hold on to that pain forever. If we do, we are refusing to acknowledge the imperfection of the other.

We are here on Yom Kippur to explore these themes of imperfection and forgiveness. According to Maimonides, the great Medieval sage, the ability to undergo honest teshuvah brings us closer to God, as a means of embracing our imperfections.<sup>17</sup> A recent study proved this, showing that making mistakes actually helps us learn and grow.<sup>18</sup> This Yom Kippur, when the gates of heaven remain open to us, we must unite b’yachad / together, to allow for more growth, forgiveness, and acceptance of imperfections around us – in ourselves, loved ones and families, and those we revere in celebrity and halls of power. In our community, we need less judgment, and more embracing and understanding of all our flaws. On our day of teshuvah, let us be ready to give people a second chance. We are imperfect beings, so instead of rejecting someone for an error they made, minor or major, recently or long ago, let us find the ability to forgive.

On the communal level, Loretta Ross urges us, “We can change this culture [with calling-in]. Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. Calling-in engages in debates with words and actions of healing and restoration.”

On the personal level, Dr. Brene Brown encourages us, “Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are. Choosing authenticity means cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable... [I need us all to say:] Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Gregg, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2016/04/just-mercy-each-of-us-is-more-than-the-worst-thing-weve-ever-done/>

<sup>17</sup> Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, 7:4

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/06/180611133437.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Brene Brown, “The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are,” 2010

We are imperfect beings, and that is perhaps one of the most fundamental and beautiful parts of our humanity. Yes, we do wrong things. People, politicians, business and entertainment leaders, friends and family, do wrong things, say wrong things, at times, horrible things. But that does not make them bad people. That does not define who they are. It does not mean all of the work they do or all of the precious time that we may have with them is tainted. It most certainly does not mean that they are to be discarded. We are all a mix of the good and bad, right and wrong, our full complex selves. We must listen, learn, teach, and grow, both them and us. This is the experience and necessity of teshuvah. Help them repent for hateful language and deeds, by accepting them, for their imperfections, with a warm embrace and love.

“As human beings, we are often ashamed to use imperfect vessels. Not so with the Holy One. We are all broken, and we are all God’s [imperfect] vessels.”<sup>20</sup> We are imperfect, and that is what makes us truly sacred beings. Let us continue on with our Day of Atonement and New Year, and embrace our imperfections b’yachad / together.

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<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, <http://www.kol-tzedek.org/imperfection.html>