

The Spirituality of Imperfection¹

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It's the playoffs. I'm not a sporty lesbian, but I do love baseball, perhaps because baseball is a very Jewish game.

Baseball Commissioner Francis Vincent Jr. once said:

Baseball teaches us...how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often... I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone... considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.²

Similarly, “[s]pirituality teaches us how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in life... that errors are part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.”³

In a beautiful book entitled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchan teach that: “the spirituality of imperfection begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake.”⁴ For “[s]pirituality accepts that ‘if a thing is worth doing, it’s worth doing badly.’”

There was a man who desecrated the Sabbath against his will because his carriage broke down, and though he ran as fast as he could, he didn’t reach the nearest town before sunset. For this, Rabbi Mikhal imposed a harsh penance. The man felt so

¹ I want to thank my *chevrei*, of all religious traditions, for informing and inspiring this sermon. In particular I want to thank the founders and writers of Alcoholics Anonymous; the members of my OA meeting; the authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchan; my *chevrei* at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and especially my *chevruta*, Rabbi Megan Doherty; and my colleagues, Sarajane Garten and Rabbi Rain Zohav, who offered their comments on earlier drafts.

² Kurtz, Ernest, and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Bantam Books, 1992, p.1.

³ *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.1.

⁴ *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.5.

guilty and he tried so hard to withstand his penance, but his body could not endure it.

The man became physically ill and terribly depressed. The man heard that the Baal Shem Tov was visiting nearby, so he mustered his courage and told the great Rebbe of his sin. "Carry a pound of candles to the synagogue, and have them lit for the Sabbath," the Baal Shem Tov instructed him. "That shall be your penance."

The man feared he had not explained to the great Rebbe how great his sin had been, so he told the Rebbe about the harsh penance imposed by the other rabbi. "You just do as I said," the Master replied, "and tell Rabbi Mikhal to come to join me for the Sabbath."

As destiny would have it, a wheel broke on Rabbi Mikhal's carriage, and he continued on foot. The rabbi arrived at the master's table, breathless, to discover the Baal Shem Tov already making Kiddush. The master turned to the entering rabbi and said, "Good Sabbath, my sinless friend! You have never tasted the sorrow of the sinner, and so, it was easy for you to dole out penance."⁵

Just recently, I had a real-life, 21st century, high-tech version of this broken wagon wheel story. I was ahead of schedule. Everything for Rosh Hashanah was gonna be all done 30 minutes before Shabbat ...until ...well... it involved a malfunctioning cash register, a new printer that wouldn't print, and construction workers in my way, and I was a half hour late for Shabbat.

And I was VERY AGGRAVATED!

Sometimes there are factors beyond our control. Sometimes we have no good excuse. We just mess up.

For a decade now, I've been counting the Omer, and I'd never gotten further than 20-or-so days of the 49...until this year. I was so excited that I was gonna make it. I was so proud of myself! I counted 48 days ...and then I forgot ...on the ...very ...last night.

The spirituality of imperfection.

All vows...shall be absolved, released, cancelled, annulled, and made void and of no effect... nor shall they have any power.⁶

A similar formula is used for the best *bracha* in Judaism, known as *bedikat chametz*.⁷ Not the version said before you search for the unleavened bread but the version said

⁵ There are many versions of this story, many based on Buber's *Early Masters* (p.142-143). I have adapted a version in *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 198-199.

⁶ Translation of Kol Nidrei from Congregation Bet Mishpachah's *machzor*.

after. "All *chametz* in my possession, whether I have seen it or not, whether I have removed it or not, is hereby nullified and ownerless as the dust of the Earth."⁸ Countless Hasidic teachers understand *bedikat chametz* as a mini-Yom Kippur, an internal spiritual transformation.

Chametz symbolizes our negative internal tendencies – pride, greed, anger, everything that gets in the way of our liberation. We cleanse ourselves as best we can, but we know there will always be some *chametz*, some vow, some sin still lurking. So we say, never mind God, let's agree to ignore that spot.

No, that's incorrect. We don't ignore it. We nullify it. We kill it.

The traditional Yom Kippur morning Torah reading is also read right around Passover. The reading begins: "And God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they drew near before God, and they died."⁹

The *Vitebsker Rebbe* makes a play on words, reading the word *sh'nei* - two – as change - *shinui*, - to teach that real change requires us to die to who we were. "For it is impossible," the *Vitebsker* writes, "for anything new to be revealed unless it first returns to nothingness."¹⁰

To what do you need to die, in order to become your true self? What is holding you back? What might help you to transform? To let go? To become nothing, that you might become who you are meant to be?

True change requires letting go. It is hard. It is scary. It can feel like dying.

Kol Nidrei and *B'dikat Chametz* are both about letting go.

So is AA's 3rd step, which says: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God." In an article on AA's Third Step, Richard Rohr counsels that spirituality involves the 'letting go' of 3 needs:

---the need to be in control,

---the need to be effective,

⁷ My *chevruta*, Rabbi Megan Doherty, is to be credited with this excellent opinion.

⁸ Traditionally said in Aramaic on the morning before the *seder*, after a candle and feather search the night before, this translation was taken from the website of the Rabbinical Assembly.

⁹ Leviticus 16:1.

¹⁰ *PriHaAretz* on *Acharei Mot*, with notes and translation by Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, as distributed by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Thanks to Rabbi Jacobson-Maisels and my *chevruta*, Rabbi Megan Doherty for studying this text with me.

---and the need to be right.”¹¹

We cannot control who shall live and who shall die! But we can control our symbolic dying – through our repentance, our prayer, and our charity.

*U'teshuvah, u'tefilla, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezerah.*¹²

Ma'avirin does not mean avert. The root *avar* means to pass over, to transcend, or to go beyond.¹³

Teshuvah is the process of transforming our souls. Soloveitchik called it 'a circular motion' always heading for home.¹⁴

Tefila, Heschel taught, "...is to forget the self.... In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender.”¹⁵

Through *tzedakah*, we give away ourselves – our money, our time, our materiality.

“All three share this common denominator of a loss of self.”¹⁶ What my teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner calls “a voluntary, loving lessening of ourselves.” Through repentance, prayer and charity we nullify ourselves. We die to ourselves. We “go beyond.” As we give away our ego, we draw closer to nothingness, and real change becomes possible.

Teshuva, tefilla and *tzedaka* don't **avert** the evil decree. They **change** us, so that we might **transcend** the decree.

Teshuvah, tefilla, and *tzedaka* are the few things we can control. They are the core of the 12 Steps of AA, because they connect us to our Higher Power. I learned this recently when I joined Overeaters Anonymous, a 12-step program based on *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which declares:

¹¹ The Spirituality of Imperfection, p.173.

¹² The final line of *U'n'taneh Tokef*, a center piece of the Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur liturgy.

¹³ Though many have pointed this out, I first learned it from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. See “Death Without Dying,” in *Who By Fire, Who By Water: Un'taneh Tokef*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD.

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, Joseph in “*On Teshuvah*,” as paraphrased by Rabbi Alan Lew in *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003).

¹⁵ Heschel, A.J., *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), xiii, 7.

¹⁶ Death Without Dying,” in *Who By Fire, Who By Water: Un'taneh Tokef*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Ph.D., p. 110.

“Some of us have tried to hold onto our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely....

Remember that we deal with alcohol – cunning, baffling, and powerful!

Without help it’s too much for us. But there is One who has all power – that One is God.”¹⁷

You needn’t be religious to have a Higher Power. Your Higher Power may be a group – a 12-step meeting or this holy congregation. Your Higher Power may be the cause of the Big Bang. Your Higher Power may be a big black woman in the sky, or an old white man with a beard on a throne.

It doesn’t matter what your Higher Power is, only that you have one. In Hebrew, we call a Higher Power *Avinu Malkeinu*. Not *Imeinu Shechinateinu*, that’s a different concept, but *malkeinu, malchuyot, majesty*, the One who controls it all. The only One who is Perfect! And so, “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”¹⁸

Twelve steps work and Yom Kippur works because imperfect people do it together. It’s a rare opportunity to bond over our failures rather than our successes. Together, we find strength in our weaknesses. We get love for confessing our darkest secrets. We feel supported by a community of liars and scoundrels, **just like us**.

The rest of the world expects us to keep up pretenses, but in these holy hours we can be our true selves. Less than a week ago, I was struggling with this *drash*. I had pages and pages of notes, from months and months of research, and it was a pile of **nothing**.

So, late at night, when I gave up on writing anything I’d ever say to you, I grabbed cake – A LOT of cake! I’m ashamed to tell you HOW MUCH cake. The next morning, I weighed myself and was relieved that despite my binge I had still lost a pound in the prior couple of weeks. I decided that was respectable for a stressed rabbi and the mother of an infant.

Then I remembered I was supposed to be ignoring the scale, and focusing on my recovery. So that night, I went to a meeting, and the next morning I went to a yoga class. And then, low and behold, all those piles of notes magically reorganized themselves into a *drash*.

“We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”¹⁹ In the words of the *machzor*: “What can we say before You who are Perfection?”²⁰

¹⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous, p.58.

¹⁸ Alcoholics Anonymous, p.58.

¹⁹ Alcoholics Anonymous, p.58.

The spirituality of imperfection is a paradox. We will be more powerful when we recognize that we are powerless. We will achieve more, when we strive less. When we acknowledge our brokenness, we feel more whole.

As soon as we think that we've found spirituality, we've most certainly lost it. It may not feel like it should be as easy as lighting some candles before the Sabbath, but it can be.

The Baal Shem Tov, the same spiritual master in that story we began with, he taught:

At times the Evil Urge deceives a person, telling her that she has committed a great transgression, even if it is only a[n added] stringency or not a sin at all. Its intention is to lead that person to a state of sadness, so that by reason of her depression she will be distracted from the service of the Creator.²¹

Too often, we are our own Rabbi Mikael. We give into our Evil Urge, beating ourselves up over things that never mattered, or over serious errors that are already forgiven.

It's not supposed to be **effortless**, but it's not supposed to be **impossible**. Whether in the ancient words of the *machzor*, or the modern wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous, it's as easy as *teshuva*, *tefilla*, and *tzedaka*.

It takes real effort, but it's only hard because **we** make it so difficult. We are the only ones who expect us to be perfect.

What if we truly sought, not spiritual perfection, but spiritual progress?

The Spirituality of Imperfection taught me that: "to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness."²² "Spirituality teaches us... that errors are part of the game [of life], part of its rigorous truth."²³ "{T}he spirituality of imperfection begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake."²⁴

For "[s]pirituality accepts that 'if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly.' "

²⁰ *Ein Nistar*, a traditional liturgical poem.

²¹ From *Tzavat Ribash* which is attributed to the BeShT (the Baal Shem Tov), as translated and told by Michael Strasfeld. Gender changes are mine.

²² *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.19.

²³ *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.1.

²⁴ *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.5.

Tomorrow morning, we will read the poem *Ein Nistar* together, and we will cry out:

“What can we say before You who are Perfection?”

Indeed, there is nothing we can say.