

From a heart of stone to a heart of flesh

When Sally Lapides, who is with us in the congregation this morning (thank you Sally), sent me an email with a poignant letter that stirred my heart and moved me to tears, I knew I needed to share it with all of you. Sally has a tradition of reading this letter aloud with her family each Yom Kippur. She has recorded it for future generations and shared it with me this past week. What letter, you are wondering?

In 1945, Fred Friendly served with the American Army unit that liberated the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. After his experience he wrote a letter home to his mother in Providence, RI.

Fred Friendly, the icon of journalism and former president of CBS got his start in radio right here in Rhode Island. Some of you may remember the *See It Now* series he worked on with Edward R Murrow, one of many journalistic feats. If you go through our Temple Beth-El cemetery you will see the name Wachenheimer. That was Fred's family name before he took his mother's maiden name, "Friendly," professionally.

In his letter home he details the great destruction of Europe, bemoaning the cities reduced to rubble. He wrote, "I think if I could sit down in our living room or the den at 11 President, I might be able to convey a portion of the dismal, horrible and yet titanic mural which is Europe today." ¹

He continues, "This was Mauthausen. I want you to remember the word... I want you to know, I want you to never forget or let our disbelieving friends forget.... This was no movie. No printed page. Your son saw this with his own eyes and in doing this aged 10 years."

Friendly goes on to detail, "Mauthausen was built with a half-million rocks which prisoners carried up on their backs from a quarry 800 feet below. They carried it up steps so steep that I walked it once and was winded, without a load. When I go to the Boston Symphony, when I hear waves of applause, no matter what the music is, I shall be traveling back to where I heard applause unequalled in history, and where I was allowed to see the ordeal which our fellow brothers and sisters of the human race have endured.

¹ You can read the full letter [here](#)

And how does the applause fit in? Mother, I walked through countless cell blocks filled with sick, dying people - 300 in a room twice the size of our living room. As as we walked in - there was a ripple of applause and then an inspiring burst of applause and cheers, and men who could not stand up sat and whispered - though they tried to shout it - Vive L'Americansky... Vive L'Americansky... the applause, the cheers, those faces of men with legs the size and shape of rope, with ulcerated bodies, weeping with a kind of joy you and I will never, I hope, know. Vive L'Americansky... I got a cousin in Milwaukee... We thought you guys would come... Vive L'Americansky... Applause... gaunt, hopeless faces at last filled with hope. One younger man asked something in Polish which I could not understand but I did detect the word "Yit"... I asked an interpreter what he said - The interpreter blushed and finally said, "He wants to know if you are a Jew." When I smiled and stuck out my mitt and said "yes"... he was [overcome], unable to speak or show the feeling that was in his heart.

This is my Mauthausen letter. I hope you will see fit to let Bill Braude read it. I would like to think that all the Wachenheimers and all the Friendlys and all our good Providence friends would read it too.

Then I want you to put it away and every Yom Kippur I want you to take it out and make your grandchildren read it.

Forwe, all of us, might well have carried granite at Mauthausen. All my love, F.F.”

I found myself wondering, why did he request that the letter be read each year on Yom Kippur? Why this day?

Rabbi Naomi Levy writes that the theme of Yom Kippur comes down to the words of the prophet Ezekiel: I will replace your hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. “What melts the heart of stone? she asks “Sometimes it’s a sense of memory that cuts through all your defenses and brings you back to something precious.”

Friendly has perspective and gratitude for the bounty and promise of America. He touches on what is precious to us as both Jews and as Americans. The values of courage, conscience and compassion. The qualities of justice and liberty envisioned by our founders. The responsibility to safeguard these rights and ensure that bounty and promise is available to all. That is indeed precious.

Friendly's words cut through the angry rhetoric of our times. They transcend hatred and vitriol and divisive politics. They touch upon the very best of what our nation offered to our parents and grandparents.....and what we hope and dream it will offer to our children. Our story about the granite of mauthausen is a fitting reflection on this day when we replace our hearts of stone with hearts of understanding. On this day when we ask God to do the same for us.

For it is when we access that moment of our greatest vulnerability as a people that we can soften our hearts. To recall suffering is to open the pathways of empathy and compassion. We are reminded not only have we been vulnerable in the past, we are vulnerable now and vulnerability lies in our future. It is the human condition. To name that and use it, in all its complexity and hardship, to be better for our struggle--that is our task.

The difference between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is marked. Rosh hashanah is the celebration of strength, it is joyful, there are apples and honey. Yom Kippur on the other hand, is the commemoration of weakness

and dependence. And yet, taught Rabbi Harold Schulweis, “they belong together. One without the other is a half truth.”²

Embracing our weakness is not for the faint of heart. Our tradition teaches that some people don’t wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur. Schulweis railed against this indignity, “ Can you imagine John Wayne without leather boots? Walking around in socks? He couldn’t do anything at all. He couldn’t swagger, stomp or wear iron spurs. He would have no strength or power at all.”

In fact, that is the point. Today we commemorate our weakness. We acknowledge our vulnerabilities. A colleague once suggested that we rebrand Yom Kippur as the Festival of Exposure³. Everything about this day reminds us of our human frailty. We are one x-ray, one phone call from the doctor, one hurricane. . . one moment away from the the worst.

The liturgy also couldn’t be more clear. We just recited these: Ki Hem Basar v’dam---Adom yissodo me afar v’sofo l’afar We who are mortal--our origin is dust, and so is our end. We wear out our lives to get our bread.”

² I was inspired by Rabbi Schulweis’ beautiful [sermon](#) in its entirety. .

³ Rabbi Dara Frimmer

These words fall in our prayerbook between the G'vurot prayer--about strength and courage and the Kedushah prayer that is about holiness.⁴ We can see that so very clearly in our new books (page 216). How true it is that our vulnerability is sandwiched squarely between heroism and holiness. Recognizing our weakness is both what gives us courage and imbues our lives with sacred meaning. Our struggles, although we never would have chosen them, are the very component that instigate our growth.

As we reflect upon the year past and contemplate the year to come we know that the words we say shine a floodlight on our vulnerability. "I love you," "How are you" "How can I help" all have the potential to connect us to others in satisfying ways as Rabbi Gutterman has pointed out many times. And at the same time these words lay us bare for rejection and open our hearts to potential pain. That is even without adding "I am sorry" or "forgive me" into the mix. Last week Rabbi Voss-Altman reminded us about the importance of knowing our neighbors. Reaching out across the fence is so difficult precisely because we risk being rejected. Yet it is these ways in which we open our hearts that give us the greatest purpose and meaning. And do the same for those whom we invite into our lives.

⁴ Inspired by Rabbi Yael Splansky's incredible [sermon](#) about her struggle with cancer.

Our ancient rabbis also knew this truth. They marveled at a verse from Deuteronomy (10:17-18) in which God is called great, mighty and awe-inspiring and immediately followed by these words: “God upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” Wherever we find God’s mightiness, the rabbis teach, we find God’s mercy. Even God seeks meaning from compassionate encounters. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments upon the juxtaposition of these verses as well, teaching “The Power of powers cares for the powerless. The infinitely great shows concern for the small. The Being at the heart of being listens to those at the margins: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, the outcast, the neglected.”

Our tradition teaches, without exception, that true power means caring for the weak. Real strength is exerting power on behalf of the powerless. When we have advantage it is incumbent upon us to use it to help those with no advantages. For when we deny our own vulnerability we numb our ability to stand up for those who need our strength the most. Sometimes those are people in our families or in our communities who are hurting--inside or out. And at other times the vulnerable are people who do not look like us

or speak our language. We stand up for them, each the same because if we can, our tradition mandates that we do.

This is even more important today, than ever.

Vulnerability and fear are closely linked. And with fear often comes blame. When we don't fully embrace our own weakness it can result in lashing out at others. Real strength is understanding this truth. Our Torah reading reverberates with this theme. It reminds us that this choice is in our hands: We must soften our hearts and connect to one another.

It takes courage to admit that someone else's life experience, viewpoint or even opinion is true and real. Our tradition supports us in this challenge. What better way to understand hunger than to fast. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of that fact in our Haftarah reading. Our fast is made more meaningful when we feed the hungry, free the oppressed and give shelter to the homeless.

In the same way, hearing Fred Friendly's tale of suffering helps us to fathom the hardship of others. A student once asked a Rabbi: "Why does Torah tell us to place these words ON our hearts? (Deut. 11:18) Why does

it not tell us to place these holy words IN our hearts?" The Rabbi thought for a moment and she answered... "It is because initially, our hearts are too closed to place the holy words in them. So we place them on top. And there they stay until, one day, our hearts break and the words fall in." Sometimes we need to feel a little heartache to understand the pain of others.

And sometimes that can make a world of difference. Just before bedtime, each night for the past seven years at Hasbro Children's Hospital, something amazing happens. It is the "magic minute" as staff and patients call it. The kids, when they feel up to it, gather at the 5th floor windows for the daily ritual of "good night lights." Friends, neighbors, citizens from around the state gather with flashlights. Firefighters and Police officers join in with their blue and red lights. Together at promptly 8:30 pm, they all shine these lights in a kind of visual hug to the sick children in the hospital. Tockwotten residents have been known to gather with flashlights as have East Providence Police from the other side of the river. Even local businesses and other organizations: the Hot Club, Brown University's Library, the Superman building and the Providence Steamboat company have added to the show. The experience of seeing a whole community supporting them is an experience patients never forget. Each night our

state's most vulnerable citizens are accompanied to sweet dreams feeling the support of those who are strong enough to share their light.

That is what Fred Friendly wanted us to remember each year on Yom Kippur. That we live in a place where neighbors share their light. Where we lend a hand to those who need it. Where the powerful care for the powerless.

I end today with another iconic Rhode Island Letter. Moses Seixas wrote a famous welcome to President George Washington upon his visit to Newport and Touro Synagogue. He requested a government “which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance — but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience.” President Washington responded promising just that.

Fast forward nearly one hundred years. Moses Seixas’ great, great niece wrote a powerful work of her own. Emma Lazarus was a summer Newport resident and also worshipped at Touro synagogue. She worked tirelessly for the plight of many our own vulnerable ancestors who streamed into America, fleeing the persecution of the Czar. The very privilege secured by

her uncle Moses: to worship freely and without fear and to live with full civil rights, was one that compelled her to step forward to assist others. Her words are more than the plaque on the statue of liberty. They are a vision of what we do with our power and our freedom.

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Let’s allow all these words and our prayers today cut through our defenses and bring us back to something precious.