

YOM KIPPUR 5779

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One of the memories of going to High Holiday services as a kid was getting all dressed up. Uncomfortable tights, stiff patent leather shoes, a white dress, which I loved but which required a super-human effort to keep free from dirt, grass stains or juice.

Dressing up was clearly an important part of the ritual. It was about 1969 and I was a child 8 years old. I could see that the teenagers in the youth group were in a rebellious mood, and dressing up was high on their hit list. This was during the years of the infamous generation gap, and the older generation in the Temple (meaning parents in their late 30's and early 40's) made the mistake of letting one of the

teens speak from the bima. She took the microphone and said something like, “going to Temple is like being run through a washing machine. It’s all about dressing up.” With that, she caused quite a stir among the adults, and planted a seed in my 8 year-old brain.

Well, now I’m in the older generation, and I do like dressing up. It lends a sense of festivity, celebration and respect to the occasion. But I still think about the image of the washing machine, and what that teenager might have meant. I wonder if her critique was actually not referring to dressing up at all, but to dressing over—covering over the real things happening in people’s lives, or in the life of the country as at the time we were fighting the Vietnam War. We were invested in bringing to temple an image in which

everything was just “perfect,” like the families we saw on TV.

That desire to “cover over” is understandable. We humans are a judgmental species, and the social context in the suburbs where I grew up exemplified how harsh those judgments could be. Girls who loved sports were called “tom boys.” Women who worked were accused of not being good mothers and their husbands of not being “good providers.” Intermarriage and divorce were talked about in hushed tones. Homosexuality wasn’t talked about at all. Jewish kids were pressured to be doctors or violinists, which is great if that is what they loved, but only a handful did.

So “covering over” seems like good sense, if one feels oneself surrounded by judgment. And focusing on outward appearance of perfection is even a tradition in the ancient

Judaism of the priests and the Temple. Aaron, the beginning of the priestly line, was chosen because he was a smooth talker. The priests were instructed over and over to offer up only animals “without blemish.” You could only bring to the altar something physically perfect on the outside. And that idea of something without a blemish “*ein bo mum*” extended to the priests themselves. Only the descendants of Aaron who “had no blemish” could make certain offerings on the altar in the Holy Temple. God forbid if there were a pimple or a wrinkle. *Ein bo mum*, no blemishes allowed for the priests or for their offerings. The worshippers may be imperfect, but through the priests and the offerings they were afforded a vision of perfection, an ancient Facebook page of illusion.

But then something ironic as well as tragic happened. While Temple Judaism focused on an external perfection and holiness, the Temple itself that was the center of that “no blemish” religion was destroyed by the Romans, and lay broken, burned, and in pieces. The centralized holy space of perfection was now the holy space of brokenness. There was no dressing up or covering up that fact.

Fortunately, right alongside that priestly worship of perfection and the external appearance of wholeness, was and always had been, a Judaism whose center was brokenness--a Judaism that embraced the *mum*, the blemish and took it as the foundation for holiness. That Judaism was the religion of Moses, not Aaron. Moses was not a smooth talker like his brother. He had a speech defect. Moses was the one who was quite an imperfect father and an imperfect

spouse as well. He had a bit of a temper. In fact, Moses was the one who threw down the divinely made tablets he received on Sinai, smashing them to pieces. There was no hiding that. And what was there to do with the pieces, the shards that were a reminder of the brokenness of Israel's faith with the Golden Calf? Moses could have swept them under the proverbial rug. He could have buried them. But tradition said he took the shards and put them in the Holy Ark, right alongside newly made second set of tablets. They were carried with the Israelites in the ark for their 40 years of wondering and exist, it is said, even today. The brokenness of human life and faith would never be hidden in the religion of Moses, but would at the center of holiness.

Jewish mysticism teaches that the ark is like the human heart. We carry brokenness with us as well—and far from

being something we should cover up, it is our brokenness that the mystics say is a home for the Shekinah, the divine presence. For the Shekinah is said to dwell only in broken vessels, and not in hearts that are arrogant. Prayer never begins from a place of self-satisfaction. Prayer begins, as the story of the biblical Hannah tells us, with a broken heart. Psalm 51 challenged the priestly offerings that were “without blemish.” Rather, true “offerings of God,” the Psalm says, are “offerings of a broken spirit.” Centuries later the Kotzker rebbe taught, “there is nothing as whole as the broken heart.”

This is the Judaism that embraces and lifts the broken-- the Judaism of Moses, of the Psalms, of Hannah. This is the Judaism whose most important holiday, Passover, puts at the center of the table a piece of broken matzah. It is this

Judaism that was passed down through the generations to us--the Judaism that teaches that in the place where a *Ba'al Teshuva* stands (one who commits wrongdoing and has the courage to repent) not even the perfect Tzadik can stand.

Perhaps that is why I was so drawn to a banner I saw outside a church that I drove by one day. The banner read: "The perfect place for imperfect people." That is my vision for this community. True communities of faith are not temples of perfection. We are a "come as you are" congregation, (which is not the same, by the way, as a "stay as you are.") We strive to grow and change and recognize the power of *teshuvah*. But teshuvah is not possible if we must present an appearance of perfection, or if we choose to embrace only those who present that appearance of perfection. We are not a perfect place, and we are filled with

imperfect people. But we strive to be a place where we can be imperfect and yet loved, where we can bring our failures, our struggles and our brokenness, and receive support when we need to change course. Teshuvah is loosely translated as repentance but the Hebrew really means “return.” I recently saw in Moment Magazine a tagline for teshuvah “all returns accepted.” In this store, in this shul, “all returns accepted here.”

The urge to dress over brokenness and present ourselves like priests without blemishes is human. But wise cultures help us transcend that instinct. Just as Judaism lifts up brokenness as a container of holiness, so does a tradition within Japanese culture raise brokenness to a form of art. In Japan, for the last 400 years there is a traditional art form that uses pottery shards called Kinsugi. When a piece

ceramic pottery is broken, sometimes we throw it out, other times we try to repair it in a way that the cracks are barely visible. In the art of kintsugi, however, the broken pieces are bonded but the line of repair is decorated with gold. Rather than hide the repair, they highlight it and make it beautiful. Just as the one who commits a wrong deed and does teshuvah is at a higher spiritual level than one who has never sinned, the broken pottery becomes even more beautiful than the original piece before it broke-- more beautiful because of its brokenness. Like the broken tablets of Moses, the broken pottery lifts us to higher levels.

It takes work to build a community that embraces the brokenness, that doesn't ask us to dress it up or cover it over. I don't think we are any less judgmental today than in the 60's of my youth. The drive to be perfect today is

relentless and is perhaps one factor in epidemic rates of anxiety and depression among our children. Some universities have created the term “failure deprived” to describe students who have been driven to appear perfect on paper but lack the basic coping skills for the failures that are a part of everyone’s life. There seems no room for risk or for challenges, because they are allowed no room for failure. Yet we all know of success stories, possibly in our own lives, which have been built on failures. Shep Gordon, the well-known music manager used to say: “if you’re always right, you’re doing the wrong thing.”

That acceptance and appreciation of failure seem rare today. The New York Times reported¹ that at Smith College, there is an initiative called “failing well” whose goal is to destigmatize failure. Students are asked to volunteer stories of

their failures, which are then projected on a big screen for all to see. In a sense, that is what the Al Heyt, the Yom Kippur confession is. We have all made these mistakes and experienced these failures so don't even pretend. As part of the initiative at Smith, Rachel Simmons, its leader, hands out to all students when they enroll in her program, a certificate of failure that reads: "You are hereby authorized to screw up, bomb or fail at one or more relationships, hookups, friendships, texts, exams, extra-curriculars or any other choices associated with college ... and still be a totally worthy, utterly excellent human."

Maybe we should include such a certificate in our high holiday mailing every year to remind ourselves as well.

What I love about the certificate is that it resists the attempt to promise that out of failure you will attain success. In our

blemish free, failure-averse culture, the literature on “failing forward” and “failing well” may sometime seem part of the problem. We aren’t even allowed to fail at failing. Bumps are sometimes what move you forward. But sometimes they are just bumps. They are not always just a step to success. We need to accept that as well.

A faith community at its best is a place where its members embrace each other with all of our broken pieces. We are embraced when we succeed and when we fail; when we believe and when we doubt; when things go according to plan and when things don’t.

Sometimes, faith communities, however, like each of us, are not at their best and also fail. We need to give our communities the chance to fail as well, and so we too as a community can do better. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

spoke to this issue of when churches fail to embrace all of us, and urged them to do better. He was very critical of churches that took pride in external markers of success. He said it was the “Drum Major Instinct” at work. “We all have the drum major instinct,” he wrote. “We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.”² And sometimes, he taught, a church gets into a bind, and says, “We have so many doctors and so many school teachers, and so many lawyers, and so many businessmen in our church.’ And that’s fine, because doctors need to go to church, and lawyers, and businessmen, teachers—they ought to be in church. But the church is the one place where a doctor ought to forget that he’s a doctor. The church is the one place where a Ph.D. ought to forget that he’s a Ph.D. . . . When the church is true to its

nature, it says, 'Whosoever will, let him [or her] come.' . .

It's the one place where everybody should be the same standing before a common [creator]. And a recognition grows out of this—that all people are brothers [and sisters] because they are children of a common father [mother]."³

"Whosoever will, let him or her come." That sentiment is actually a part of the Kol Nidrei service. Just before Kol Nidrei is recited, the prayer leader says: *anu matirin lehitpalel im ha'avaryanim*. We accept into our midst whosoever seeks to pray. Whether righteous or unrighteous, all shall pray as one community." We have failed as individuals. We have failed as a community. And that realization is not a call to despair or resignation but a call to *teshuvah*. In order to have the beautiful result of Kinsugi, we need to take the shards of pottery and make some repairs.

Yom Kippur calls us to make those repairs at every level of our lives. The ancient priestly service addressed failures at the individual, communal and national level. We sometimes fail as a nation, and how we deal with that failure is critical. While the actions of the President's men during Watergate were a failure of democracy, our institutions' response to it became one of its greatest affirmations. When we are afraid to admit failure, we get into trouble. Thinking back to the Vietnam War, how long did we extend war, at the expense of thousands of lives, because the goal became simply wanting to avoid failure? Remember John Kerry's poignant testimony to congress? "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" And how many good fights for justice are not won because they are not begun for fear of failing? I remember with admiration what President

Bill Clinton said about the failure of U.S. led negotiations for Israeli/Palestinian peace in the 90's. "At least we failed while trying."

Cecilia Munoz, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Obama, and long-term advocate for immigration reform, tells a moving story about she and other immigrant advocacy organizations working with Ted Kennedy for an immigration reform bill in 2006-2007.⁴ In 2006 the Senate passed a bi-partisan comprehensive immigration reform bill, co-sponsored by Kennedy, John McCain, and others. But the House had passed a bill completely at odds with the senate one, more in line with the anti-immigration rhetoric we see today. Disagreeing with Kennedy, the activists did not want to go to conference for fear of too much compromise, holding out

for another chance in 2007. But in 2007 it didn't even pass the senate. All their hard work ended in failure, and many people, including the dreamers would be seriously affected. Munoz and her colleagues were in tears, devastated.

Kennedy, saw their despair. Rather than say, "I told you so," he took them out, bought them lobster rolls and drinks, and joyfully raised a toast to the fight. He told them we have to dust ourselves off and keep at it. Most important, he said, we must remember to take joy in the fight—that this is joyful work. Caring about justice, equality and peace means dusting ourselves off after failure after failure after failure.

In our culture of winning and success, in our culture of youthful beauty that creates models as the new priests of the blemishlessness, in our culture of covering up any mistakes or brokenness, we stand up on this day of Yom Kippur for a

different reality. We embrace the truth of our failures and our brokenness in a quest for a deeper wholeness. Our hearts carry the broken tablets of life's experiences and carry the vision of wholeness for which we seek. We strive to be a Jewish community that is the "perfect place for imperfect people," where we may choose to dress up, but where we don't have to "cover over." We strive to be a Jewish community where we can grow in teshuvah—be forgiven for our mistakes and be encouraged to transcend them. We strive to be a Jewish community that commits to social and economic justice in the darkest of times, even when we have to get ourselves up and dust ourselves off again and again. In our failures, we draw inspiration from Martin Luther King who taught that the definition of greatness is not success but service. And in service is where "everybody can

be great. Because everybody can serve . . . You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.” A heart full of grace. And as the Kotzker Rebbe taught, there is nothing as whole as a broken heart.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/fashion/fear-of-failure.html>

² Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 260.

³ *Testament of Hope*, p. 263, 265-267.

⁴ *The Wilderness* podcast, chapter 7. <https://crooked.com/podcast-series/thewilderness/>