

Rosh Hashanah Evening Derash

5780

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When I was born I had a large birthmark on my leg, which my parents decided when I was 4 to have removed. Karma, not to be outdone, had its final say, and the surgery left me with an even bigger scar. But I actually didn't mind either the birthmark or the scar. Sometimes people who would know me for a while but never noticed the scar would look down and say, "hey — you have a scar." And I would think, "yeah, that's just who I am."

Scars have larger than life qualities in our imagination. Sometimes they are imagined as the externalization of threat or evil — like Al Capone's nickname "Scarface," or the villain "Scar" in the *Lion King*, or villains in James Bond or Star Wars movies.

But I am more interested in the way *heroic* characters are scarred. In James Bond novels, for example, James Bond himself is consistently described as having a three-inch facial scar. Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey* has a scar on his leg from a childhood hunting incident when he tangled with a boar. It is because of the scar that his childhood nurse recognizes him at the end of the epic.

Harry Potter, of course, has a scar on his forehead from Voldemort's attempt to kill him as a baby. Professor Dumbledore declines to repair it. He says: "Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee which is a perfect map of the London Underground."

All of us have scars. Some are more visible than others. And sometimes our attempts to do metaphorical cosmetic surgery on our lives, lead us hide them. But it is our scars by which the shape of our lives is known to us and to others close to us. It is our scars that symbolize healing and survival. And it is our scars that open connections with others, helping us to realize that the person in front of us also has a life of losses, hurts and disappointments along with joy and blessings.

I started thinking about scars when I saw a remarkably honest and deeply spiritual television interview by Anderson Cooper of Stephen Colbert.¹ Both men had endured terrible tragedies when they were young. When Colbert was a boy of 10 years old, his father and two of his older brothers were killed in a plane crash. When Anderson Cooper was 10, his father died of a heart attack, and 11 years later his brother died by jumping out of a 14th floor window. Colbert has been very open as a public figure about the scars his family tragedy have left, including a near mental breakdown in his 20's, and the way that faith has been healing and sustaining for him.

Anderson Cooper for a long time was particularly private about his life. "I just don't talk about my personal life," he told New York magazine in 2005. "...The whole thing about being a reporter is that you're supposed to be an observer and to be able to adapt with any group you're in, and I don't want to do anything that threatens that."

Actually, Anderson Cooper not only presented as a person without scars, he is one of the most put together personas on television, with nothing out of place. In fact, that persona of outward perfection was actually used by Stephen Colbert as one of the influences of his character on the Colbert Report.²

But in this interview, taking place two months after Anderson Cooper's mother's death this past summer, he seemed done with that persona. He described how healing it was for people to know of his loss and have people, both friends and strangers, reach out to him. "I've been thinking a lot," he said, "about ... how we don't really talk about grief and loss. . . One of the things I found in the last two months since my mom died is people coming up to me on the street . . . and sharing their grief and sharing their loss with me. And I found that the most helpful thing. I found it to be the most powerful and moving thing. And I kind of oddly don't want that to stop. In regular times, people don't do that."

He continued to share how people are sometimes apologetic about referring to the death of his father or brother as if that would

be painful to him. “As if, what they don't realize is, I'm thinking about it all the time. As you say, it is, you know, it is one of my arms. It is an extension of who I am It's been 31 years since my brother died. More since my dad and there's not a day that goes by I don't think about it,” he said.

There is a Jewish custom at the gravesite, after a loved one's death, to forgive both our loved one and other mourners standing around the grave for past hurts. Perhaps this is because at that time of raw grief, our vulnerabilities are so clear, we cannot hide behind a persona, and we have compassion for each other in our pain.

And yet we tend not to extend that compassion, even though many of us continued to carry these experiences of loss or sadness, for years and years after. What if we did treat each other with that same gentleness that we do around a grave? We don't often talk about older hurts or the faith needed to incorporate them into a life of gratitude. But these next 10 days are days are understood to be a time to open our hearts to God, to each other, and to ourselves. As our Machzor says, we stand before the God for whom there are no secrets. And we stand before each other knowing we are all flawed and sometimes hurting. We all have scars.

And so it makes sense, in this context, that Anderson Cooper then shared with Colbert the following wish. He said, “I actually -

this is going to sound weird but for a long time, and probably still to this day, I wish that I had a scar. I wish I had like a scar.

“Harry Potter?” Colbert asked.

“Yes, more like a Bond villain,” Cooper answered. “Running down my eye on my face that is unavoidable for people to see because it would sort of, it would just be a silent signal to everybody I meet that I’m not the person I was meant to be or I’m not the person that I started out being.”

“But you’re entirely the person you were meant to be,” Colbert said.

Cooper seemed to be saying in that exchange: “I don’t want the option of the perfect persona. I want to be known both as I am and as I was meant to be.” But for Cooper, those two things didn’t seem the same thing—what I am and what I was meant to be-- and as a result, the scar he imagines is that of a Bond villain. But remember, the Bond hero is also scarred. And Colbert is reminding him by referring to Harry Potter, that it is our scars that make us heroes. The scar is a reminder of what is so painful. Yet it is also a reminder that we heal, that we grow from pain, that our heart opens.

As Albert Huffstickler writes in his poem “The Cure,”
let the pain be pain,

not in the hope that it will vanish

But in the faith that it will fit in,

find its place in the shape of things

and be then not any less pain but true to form.

Because anything natural has an inherent shape and will flow towards it.

And a life is as natural as a leaf.

That’s what we’re looking for: not the end of a thing but the shape of it.

The Torah has a beautiful way, I think, of expressing something similar. In the book of Exodus, God tells the people to make an ark and to “overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out . . .” The Rabbis ask the question, why use gold on the inside when no one is going to see it anyway? After all, gold is very expensive. Why not just line the ark with gold on the outside? The answer, they say, is in order to teach us that our inside must be as our outside—*tocho kevaro.*”

Perhaps, this interpretation teaches us, that we spend too much time and money lining our outside without paying due attention to

the inside. Perhaps we need to seek to transform our inside into gold as well as our outside, so that we see the gold within, the pure soul God gives us—and see a life of beauty in the life that includes all the scars, all the disappointments and pain as well as the successes and blessings.

I pray that these ten days of Teshuvah give us a courageous and open heart to see and be seen with our scars—scars that remind us of the power of healing, and can teach us the power of faith.

Shana Tova

¹ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1908/15/acd.02.html>

² <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15116383>