



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Yom Kippur – A Day of Vulnerability

Have any of you heard about Performance Storytelling? Performance Storytelling is an up and coming form of art and entertainment where an individual shares a true tale of his or her life on stage. Since the stories are real and personal and every voice authentic, the performances dance between documentary and theater, creating a unique, intimate, and often enlightening experience for the audience.

This past spring I took a class in performance storytelling at the DC Speakeasy. I've loved listening to this type of storytelling for years, (think Moth Radio Hour) and I wanted to try it out. I thought that this new venue might expand my own speaking style, perhaps giving me a new approach to my sermons or Shabbat stories.

For six weeks I went downtown on Wednesday evenings for a 3-hour class. There were 10 of us in the group, all at different ages and stages of life, and with different goals for this adventure. At the end we performed on stage at a 'story slam' in a DC Bar. It was great fun, and while I hope I grew my speaking skills, there was a greater unanticipated take away that has had a lasting impact on me.

During our classes, I always found myself drawn to the stories that were about an incredibly funny or outrageous incident. Interestingly though, at the performance, these did not receive the most applause. The stories that the audience responded to most, were the ones where the narrator shared a journey of change, exposed a weakness or revealed a fear - the story about getting caught cheating, about learning that your mom is gay, about coming face to face with getting old – these stories were the most powerful, the ones where you could see the audience members leaning in, trying to get closer to the speaker. This was my unexpected take away – all of these most admired stories were, at their core, accounts of vulnerability.

While I may not be able to recall all of the elements of these tales, the experience of sharing in someone's moment of vulnerability stayed with me long after

that fun evening in the bar. I've come to appreciate vulnerability and how powerful and even desirable this trait is.

By coincidence, around the time I was taking my storytelling class, I watched a TED talk by social worker Dr. Brene Brown¹ on this very theme. It was so compelling I then read her book and I now consider myself a convert from one who sees vulnerability as a weakness to one who sees vulnerability as a strength. Tonight, on this most vulnerable night of the year, when we come before God bearing our souls, the deepest truth of who we are, I want to journey through vulnerability with you.

(Sharing a personal confession) Right now – I admit that THIS is vulnerability for me. My rabbi growing up taught me that you must always preach every sermon to yourself – which means that every sermon is 'me' exposing an issue I am struggling with in front of all of you. Not only that, the moment the holidays end, I hit the play button on a worry that repeats all year long – What will I say next year? Will I be able to come up with something as good as last year, or will you all say – yay, good sermon, but not as good as that other one. All yearlong I am imagining being judged – one sermon against the next. And I guess the implication is that if you don't like my sermon as much as last year, maybe you will like me less too.

Like me, most of us associate vulnerability with uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. The thought of it is frightening because it reveals our imperfections. Often we think that if others see our flaws they will turn away from us, shame us, even reject us all together. *What kind of parent would do such a thing? What kind of rabbi would make that mistake? How could you have let that happen in your office?* We rarely seek to make ourselves vulnerable.

So why were the stories that revealed vulnerabilities the most popular? Because in truth, the most accessible place for people to connect to one another is in a shared experience and rarely is that shared experience about triumph – a high score on a test or winning a prize. Connection, our greatest human need, happens in the place where the wall is low and the ground is soft; the place where our true selves can be seen with all of our imperfections right next to our passions, our values and our dreams. Even

better, this place of vulnerability – Brown explains - “is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity.”² It is the fertile ground from which we, and our relationships with others, grow.

Vulnerability will look and sound different to everyone. Most of us have been part of the tough and uncertain moments of sickness or death, the loss of a job or a divorce. But feeling vulnerable also happens when we...

- Support a child who wants to try out for a team he likely won't make
- Sign up a parent for hospice care
- Get pregnant after two miscarriages
- Announce the news that you are in remission

For me, speaking on race (my sermon on Rosh Hashanah) left me feeling very exposed. I recently publicly supported the Iran deal when virtually every major Jewish organization has rejected it. It's hard and risky to share an unpopular opinion. I will admit that I feel insecure when I speak Hebrew in Israel. I speak in Hebrew and the person answers me back in English – ugh. I feel vulnerable each time I officiate at a life cycle event. Many of you know that I am a very public crier. I so worry that my own emotions will emerge and keep me from being the attentive and effective rabbi I want to be.

And today we might ask – what's more vulnerable than asking for forgiveness? Admitting you've made a mistake, first to yourself and then to others? Really it's not an easy task. But on this day, we inch towards opening ourselves up and experiencing our own vulnerability through the unique rituals of Yom Kippur. This may sound morbid, but actually all of these rituals are designed to bring us as close to death as possible, without actually dying. Today we rehearse our last day. We don't eat, we don't drink, we share no intimacy with anyone else. It is as if we are not alive.

Today we recite the viddui, the prayer that is said on one's deathbed. I'm wondering...is this what it will feel like? Is this what it will sound like - for me?

This tallit that I, and many of you, wear for every hour of Yom Kippur, we do this because we will be buried in these sacred garments. Sometimes I find this comforting – I know wearing this tallis that has been here with me and shared so much of my work and life. But often it feels just scary to me.

The ancient thinking behind all of these rituals is that as we experience a quasi-death we realize that there is no reason to hide anything. And in the best of circumstances we learn how to shed our defenses, how to lower our guard and to put away our pretenses. It works for me. And I understand that being vulnerable in life is much more important than being vulnerable in death.

At the ‘story slam’ last spring, one story was a form of a confession. When Matt was around 12, he and his friends were using a slingshot and some marbles trying to hit passing cars. He never thought a marble could do any serious damage but when it shattered the back windshield of a car causing it to slide off the road. He and his friends panicked and they each ran home. The police actually came through the neighborhood door to door and when they reached Matt’s house, his Dad called him down and in front of them all Matt denied the entire thing. For 10 years he held this inside unwilling to open up about the car and more importantly the lie. He feared that if he came clean, if he exposed this dark place, it would forever change his relationship with his dad.

Admitting our flaws is risky. For 10 years, Matt just couldn’t go there. But in front of a crowd of mostly strangers, he inched forward and opened himself up, uncovered the past and maybe readied the ground to tell this story again to his dad. Who knows, maybe his father would share a sin from his own youth and they both would be freed from the bonds of regret.

At the bar, as Matt stood on stage, you could feel the connection among the listeners. Oh yes, we’ve all been there, but few of us have garnered the strength to admit our mistakes. Few of us willingly show our failings even if deep down we know that in doing so others may feel closer to us. They come closer because the wall is low and the ground is soft, because in our moment of vulnerability there is accessibility that leads to connection and acceptance. Some people equate vulnerability with the feeling

of insecurity. While such a moment surely is an uncertain one, I believe it can be a moment of redemption, a time when we feel a little Divine love sneaking into our hearts.

I have a colleague, who at one time in his life became virtually paralyzed with anxiety. He had to step away from his pulpit for a while because of it. Last year we were talking about our sermons and he told me he was going to be speaking about overcoming personal challenges. Of course I asked him if he would be including his own story. “No,” he said, “I just can’t let that out. I’m not prepared to deal with the fallout of my emotional weakness.” I guess I could understand why this was so hard for him. But wouldn’t it have been so powerful for him and his community if he could have journeyed into this vulnerable place and shared this profound challenge, what it felt like then and how he lives with it today? I image that the congregation would have only grown closer to him, admired his strength and of course, connected on some level with his trial.

It was as though this rabbi had built a wall around this experience - a very high wall. I imagine that he has been walking around every day maintaining this façade and in doing so inadvertently encouraging others to the same. Of course that wall is not really protecting him; in truth it is shutting him off from others and even from himself.

Dr. Brown explains in her book Daring Greatly³ how personally destructive it is for us to build these walls, in her words to numb ourselves from our own vulnerability. Whether through silence, or other means or pushing away our weakness – alcohol, overeating, escaping to work, we suppress our uncertainties and the feelings that accompany them. The problem with that is that we cannot selectively numb or close off emotions. If you shut down our vulnerability you also shut down our capacity for joy, for gratitude, for happiness.

Vulnerability is scary. As with God – it requires faith. As with every day of our lives – it requires courage. Being vulnerable is about being real and living your truth. For me, this is a message that I want to show others: the truth that we can’t always be certain, that we are less than perfect and all life is about taking risks. But the payoff is

usually not only worth it – but has the highest yield of meaning, purpose, and love. The hard truth is that whether we want it or not, we will encounter moments of vulnerability. It's going to happen. Today, on Yom Kippur, our tradition invites us to experience this, but will we retreat and hide, or will we stay in the moment and hang in there long enough to feel the redemption – a little Divine love sneaking into our hearts?

One last insight comes from the folk singer Leonard Cohen who has a great line in one of his songs that captures the essence of this. He sings: 'There is a crack in everything; that's how that light gets in.'⁴ We think of a crack in a wall as a flaw in the same way as many of us see vulnerability, but no, it is the opening that leads to change and meaning. The sun shines in and something new starts to grow. To see our true selves, to feel the warmth, to let something fresh take root, we have to pry ourselves open or even more, to break apart our walls. It is the crack, the splinter of space that brings brightness, shedding light on our darkest places and offering us new possibilities.

I'd like to think that Leonard Cohen was influenced by his Judaism. This wonderful line about 'the crack that lets the light in' is actually reflected in one of the most beautiful prayers of this day. At our *Neilah* service at the end of Yom Kippur, we will begin with *Pitchu li* – a prayer from the Psalms whose direct translation is 'Open for me the gates of righteousness.' But maybe we can read it another way? Maybe we can offer this prayer in a way that would make us the object, as in *Pitchu li - Open Me...* Might this be our deepest prayer? Might this be what Yom Kippur is really about?

Remove, God, the walls that block my soul, my true self, with all its flaws and all of its love and passion, from shining through. Help me to open myself in ways that will allow me to truly be me. Give me the courage to trust those I love by making myself vulnerable to them.

*Pitchu li...*Open me, God and let the light come in, that something new will grow.

Shana Tova.

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¹ http://www.ted.com/brene_brown_on-vulnerability

² Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 34

³ *ibid*

⁴ Leonard Cohen's song *Anthem*, in the album, *The Future*.