

The Need for Vulnerability

Rosh Hashanah 5779 – Day 1
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Stepping up to the scale of Judgement

Today, Rosh Hashanah, is also known as *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. According to Maimonides, the great medieval sage of Spain and Egypt, this is the day when “the world is evenly poised between innocence and guilt.”¹ If one commits a sin, they tilt the balance of their fate and that of the world in that direction; if one performs a good deed, that scale is tilted in the other direction.

I want you for a moment to imagine that this scale has come to life. I want you to imagine that instead of this sermon, there was a great scale on the *bimah*, and everyone was forming a line one-by-one to weigh their merits and *de*-merits upon the scale – sharing moments we’re proud of and moments we would never want to see the light of day. The question to ask yourselves is, would you join that line?

I don’t know about you, but I would wonder – why would I ever want to join that line? Why would I put myself in that position to make my deepest, most secret self open to cross examination without a lawyer present to defend me? In other words, why would I ever choose to become that vulnerable?

¹ “Even though the blowing of the shofar on the New Year is a biblical decree, it none the less contains a deep meaning, as if to say: Awake, sleepers, from your sleep; rouse yourselves, slumberers, from your slumber. Examine your deeds, return in repentance and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and spend their years on meaningless pursuits that neither profit nor save, look to your souls and improve your ways and works. Let each leave his ways that are bad and thoughts that are not good. *Therefore throughout the year everyone should regard himself and the world as if evenly poised between innocence and guilt.* If he commits a sin he tilts the balance of his fate and that of the world to guilt, causing destruction. If he performs a good deed he shifts the balance of his fate and that of the world to innocence, bringing salvation and deliverance to others. That is the meaning of [the biblical phrase] ‘the righteous person is the foundation of the world’ (Prov. 10:25), namely that by an act of righteousness we influence the fate of and save the world” (Mishneh Torah *Teshuva* 3:4 as reported in “Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal A Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005. 231”).

The necessity of vulnerability

If you were to do so, if you were to risk exposing your most private self, if you were to make yourself vulnerable, it is *because you know that vulnerability is the key to building a life of love and connection with one another, with God, and with ourselves.*

Think about someone close to you. How do you know you're close with them? Do you tell them your secrets? Do they know your fears? Do you share moments not made for Facebook or Instagram? Chances are that if you've ever taken the leap to go from being an acquaintance to becoming a close friend, or from being a close friend to becoming a life partner, if you've ever said I love you to someone, it is because that person knows something about you that is dear and precious to you, and you pray that it becomes just as dear and precious to them. When God took the rib out of Adam in order to create Eve, God integrated Adam's rib into Eve's body.² His insides become a part of hers, which leads Adam to say, "You are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."³ ***Imagine if we were to think of someone else's vulnerability as a part of our own flesh – how careful we would be with it.***

The mutuality of vulnerability

But this is the scary part. We never know for sure that they'll be careful with our vulnerability or that we'll be careful with theirs, because by definition being vulnerable means we make ourselves "capable of being wounded"⁴ by our friends, our partners, our confidantes who can use what we've shared out of love to hurt us, ridicule us, shame us, or even ignore us. And if or when that happens, it leaves us wondering if we can trust someone enough to be vulnerable again. As Dr. Brene Brown, a researcher on shame and vulnerability, writes in her book *Daring Greatly*, "Vulnerability is based on mutuality

² Commentary of 12th-13th Century Italian Rabbi David Kimchi (*Radak*) on Genesis 2:22.

³ Genesis 2:23.

⁴ Brown, Brene. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Avery, 2012. 39.

and requires boundaries and trust.”⁵ When someone does not mutually share their vulnerability or violates yours, it makes you question their trustworthiness. But therein lies the rub and the paradox – you can’t be vulnerable with someone you can’t trust, but you won’t know if someone is trustworthy until you’re vulnerable with them.

God’s vulnerability

In thinking about that paradox, I want to take some time on this day of Rosh Hashanah to think about God’s relationship with humanity, because according to one tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of God’s creation of humanity.⁶ Simply put, when God created humanity, God became vulnerable. God took a chance in creating us. As the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says, “creation inescapably involves risk...for God it is true of only *one* act of creation, namely the making of humanity”⁷ especially because God had to limit God’s own power in order to create the possibility of free will and our ability to choose. This means that God was taking a risk in creating human beings since our behavior is so uncontrollable it could end up wounding God. According to one midrash, the angels understood that risk and warned God that we would take advantage of God’s love for us.⁸ ***But God would not listen and for one reason only: Because God wanted to love us, God wanted to connect with us, and thus was willing to take the chance to be vulnerable with us and for us. That is the only reason we are here.***

And what have we done with that vulnerability? Have we cared for it like it’s a part of our own flesh? NO! Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the Garden of Eden against God’s

⁵ Brown, 45.

⁶ “Opinions in the Babylonian Talmud consider the first day of the month of Tishrei (Rosh Hashanah) as the first day of creation (Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a). Yet the Midrash records an opinion that the world was created on the 25th day of the preceding month, Elul (Pesikta D’rav Kahana, Piska 23:1). That is, the sixth day of creation – the day on which God created human beings – fell on the first day of Tishrei. Thus, according to this opinion, Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of humankind” (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010. 20).

⁷ Sacks, 195.

⁸ “That is why here alone in the biblical account of creation do we find not a simple ‘Let there be’ but a deliberative prologue, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our own likeness...’ as if to signal hesitation, consultation, doubt. Several rabbinic texts develop this point. God consulted, they say, with the angels, who advised him not to make man. The sages understood what in philosophical discourse cannot be conceived: that – in some sense, however metaphorical – there can be a test of faith for God himself” (Sacks, 195-196).

wishes,⁹ and their son Cain committed the first murder of humanity by killing his brother Abel.¹⁰ Then only a short time later God nearly destroyed all of humanity with a flood because of our wickedness.¹¹ And even after that, humanity tried to raise themselves to God's level, forcing God to strike down the Tower of Babel.¹² Time and time again, humanity failed to uphold God's trust; and that's just within the first few generations of our existence. If we think about the history of humanity up until the present day, we don't have to look hard to see how time and time again we have failed to care for God's vulnerability in loving us. ***It is as if God is stepping up to the scale of judgement each year to bear God's vulnerability for us, and each year we judge God's vulnerability with harshness and ridicule because of the ways we treat each other with harshness and ridicule.***

Rosh Hashanah as the time God judges God

So that should mean that God should quit being vulnerable with us because God can't trust us, right? But the amazing thing is God does not quit on us. Though we seem to be untrustworthy, God's love is steadfast. Brown says, "Love is uncertain. It's incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed. Yes, it's scary and yes, we're open to being hurt, but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved?"¹³ God cannot imagine life without loving humanity, so after the flood God does something counterintuitive: God promises *never* to destroy humanity again though the risk and uncertainty of man's intentions is still very much real. With this in mind, Maimonides was wrong. When we stand in line before the scale, the world's fate does not hang in the balance because the world was guaranteed to survive after the flood. No, when we stand in line before the scale, what is on trial is not our fate or the fate of the world but rather the fate of God's faith in us.¹⁴ That is what is being judged today on the anniversary of

⁹ Genesis 3:6

¹⁰ Genesis 4:8

¹¹ Genesis 6:11-14

¹² Genesis 11:1-9

¹³ Brown, 34.

¹⁴ "The halakhic midrash *Sifre* states: 'A God of faith – He who had *faith in the universe* and created it' (*Sifre* to Deut 32:4) (Sacks, 200).

humanity's creation. ***And as we decide whether to step up to the scales, we are not only being asked to care for God's vulnerability but also, as is important in any loving relationship, if we are willing to be vulnerable with God.***

For those struggling with God

I want to take a step back here for a moment. In the past few minutes I've been talking a lot about God, and what's so fascinating about this idea of God's decision to create us with a sense of free will is that because of that decision, God creates the possibility, really the eventuality, that there will be people who will not believe in God. So, while many of us have a connection and belief in God, there are many of us who at least struggle with that kind of faith, who have gone through experiences that make them wonder how a caring God could let them go through this, who *have* approached the scales before God and have been wounded by God's judgment that was too harsh to bear. Why would we ever approach the scale again?

The same question could be asked about the entire Rosh Hashanah service. Why should we bother to care about the service if our prayers assume a relationship between us and God? Where are we supposed to find meaning in the service if we're struggling with God? That's why it's so brilliant, whether they intended to or not, that our sages instituted for this service a Torah reading to help those of us struggling with God find a connection to Rosh Hashanah through a human story. The Torah after all is not a book about God – it's a book about humankind's ups and downs, vices and virtues.¹⁵ When it comes to today's reading, we can see our own struggle with vulnerability in the story of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar's struggles with theirs. ***And what's so amazing is that when we read about their vulnerability, God's character can be redeemed and be made meaningful even for those who have their doubts.***

¹⁵ "The Bible is not humankind's book of God; it is God's book of humankind" (Sacks, 192-193).

Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar's vulnerability

Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar all feel vulnerable in ways we should recognize. Sarah struggles with her sense of self-worth because she has difficulty getting pregnant.¹⁶ Abraham struggles with the responsibility of having to choose between two different, warring sides of his family.¹⁷ And Hagar struggles with the loneliness and terror of being a stranger, without a home or a support system to help her raise her child.¹⁸ Perhaps we've felt similar kind of vulnerabilities as the result of infertility, as the result of family drama, or as the result of feeling like a stranger. Or perhaps we've felt other forms of vulnerability as a result of a decline in our health, or the loss of a loved one, etc.

Regardless of the cause of vulnerability, what we should recognize the most with Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar's experiences is that being vulnerable is painful – very painful. Sarah lashes out at Hagar,¹⁹ Abraham becomes “distressed,”²⁰ and Hagar calls out and cries.²¹ Because vulnerability is painful, it is hard for others to really understand it. We bear the brunt of our pain alone, and even if we share it with others, can we really expect them to feel it in the same way we do? The worst thing someone can say to you when you're expressing your vulnerability is “I know exactly how you feel.” Really? Do you know exactly what it's like for me to feel like I don't deserve to be a parent because I can't have a child, or to have to give up something or someone I love, or to feel like no one wants you? No, you can't. ***Empathy is an inexact science, and we can't expect to simply take away another person's pain.***

¹⁶ “As long as Abraham and Sarah dwelt outside of the Holy Land, they looked upon their childlessness as a punishment for not abiding within it. But when a ten years' sojourn in Palestine found her barren as before, Sarah perceived that the fault lay with her” (Yebamot 64a; Genesis Rabbah 45:2-3, as reported in “Ginzberg, Louis. *Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947. Volume 1: 237”).

¹⁷ “Of all the trials Abraham had to undergo, none was so hard to bear as this, for it grieved him sorely to separate himself from his son” (Ginzberg, Vol 1: 264).

¹⁸ “The evil glance cast upon her stepson by Sarah made him sick and feverish, so that Hagar had to carry him, grown-up as he was. In his fever he drank often of the water in the bottle given her by Abraham as she left his house, and the water was quickly spent. That she might not look upon the death of her child, Hagar cast Ishmael under the willow shrubs growing on the selfsame spot whereon the angels had once spoken with her and made known to her that she would bear a son. In the bitterness of her heart, she spoke to God, and said, ‘Yesterday Thou didst say to me, I will greatly multiply thy seed, that it shall not be numbered for multitude, and to-day my son dies of thirst’” (Ginzberg, 264-265).

¹⁹ Genesis 22:10

²⁰ Genesis 22:11

²¹ Genesis 22:16

The only one who can understand our pain, who can feel it exactly like we do, is either in here or in here. It is the voice within our own heads and hearts, the one that hears everything, the one we can't escape from. When we experience the pain of vulnerability, that voice is the first one to speak to us, to reply to those emotions. We can call that voice our consciousness, or our spirit, or something else. But in the biblical and Jewish imagination, that inner voice is the same voice as God's. "*V'kol d'mama dakah yishama,*" we can hear the still small voice of God within us.²²

So, when we express our vulnerability, how will our inner voice respond? Our tradition teaches us that since that voice is the same as God's, then when we become vulnerable, that voice will respond with love and kindness. When Abraham expressed his hurt, that voice responded by saying, "don't be distressed,"²³ and when Hagar cried out, that voice responded by saying "fear not."²⁴ Yes, there are other voices in our head, some harsher than others. ***But Judaism teaches us that positive self-talk is God-talk; when our inner voice speaks with love and kindness, that is God's voice because love is the only language God knows how to speak to God's most cherished creation, humanity.***

Our prayer to be vulnerable

In just a moment the Cantor is going to recite the *Hineni*, a personal prayer to God for guidance, strength, and direction as we begin the *Musaf* service. It is also the perfect prayer to recite if you want to approach the *bimah* to weigh the weight of your good deeds and your mistakes on the great scale of judgment. As the Cantor will recite, "Here I stand, impoverished in merit, trembling in the presence of the One who hears the prayers of Israel. Even though I am unfit and unworthy for the task I come to represent Your people Israel and plead on their behalf."²⁵ This is a prayer soaked in vulnerability as the Cantor

²² 1 Kings 19:12

²³ Genesis 21:12

²⁴ Genesis 21:17

²⁵ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, 140.

is willing for God to peer into his soul and weigh his faults and his merits with discernment. But it is more than the Cantor's personal prayer of vulnerability. ***It is a call for us to offer our prayers of vulnerability.*** We stand at attention as the melody and the words permeate the air with a heaviness that makes us imagine that the letters of the prayer are being physically placed on the scales on our behalf. Drawing its power from our attention, the *Hineni* removes the armor we wear to hide our vulnerability so that we can bear it before God, even if we are in the midst of a struggle with God. As our armor is stripped away by the resounding melody, we can feel the pain of our vulnerability rising up within us. For a moment, we're fearful. We don't want to let it out, but we can't hide it any longer. This hallowed prayer won't let us. It forces our pain to the surface as we allow our Maker to see what He made. And as we let go of controlling that pain, as we engage with and embrace our vulnerability, something amazing happens. We find the courage²⁶ to take a step forward toward the scales with our own personal prayer of vulnerability, a courage that is strengthened as we look around the room and notice that more members of our community are joining us in taking those steps forward with their prayers of vulnerability. And with every step forward we take together, we feel God's love embracing us. It doesn't mean the pain is gone – it is still hard to bear – but now we know that leaning into our vulnerability will not make us weak – it will make us strong. It will not shame us; it will empower us. We may be in pain, but we are no longer in fear. The compassion that God promises us on the Day of Atonement is present now on this Day of Judgment because we are willing to present ourselves to be judged, thus rewarding God's faith in us. And as the final words and melodies of the *Hineni* wash over us inspiring our prayers of vulnerability, we can sense a joy that will last with us as we leave this hallowed hall, a joy that comes when we step up to the scales fully and without hesitation, ***a joy that is soaked in a profound sense of love and connection to our very own existence because we are willing to be vulnerable.***

²⁶ "Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage" (Brown, 37).