

The Power of Vulnerability: Erev Rosh Hashanah 2017

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You might have seen Saturday Night Live's *Weekend Update: Summer Edition*, last month, on the heels of the horrific events in Charlottesville. "Wearing a University of Virginia sweatshirt, comedian Tina Fey—who graduated from the school in 1992—talked about the hatred on display in the place she loved, and the violence that had resulted from it. She talked about the President's reticence: his baffling but also not entirely baffling reluctance to use his bully pulpit to unequivocally criticize the bigots who had marched on Charlottesville.

She did the thing that has been so crucial, and so frustratingly lacking in reflexivity, among those in positions of power: She named the hate groups, and she full-throatedly condemned them.

And then: Tina Fey ate cake. Sheet cake [to be specific]. Cake that worked as a visual metaphor for the sense of helplessness so many Americans have been feeling as hate groups feel validated and empowered, and as so many in the U.S. government give those groups ample reason for the feeling. Fey's cake, destroyed by the end of the segment, was frosted with an American flag."¹

I laughed out loud when I watched it. Recognizing vulnerability in the face of really scary stuff; the instinct to want to numb oneself against the pain, anesthetize the feelings of helplessness and even hopelessness.

Not everyone loved the skit though; many objected to the seemingly dismissive nature of "eating cake"—calling it in poor taste, "white privilege" and that "eating cake" even if satirical, when compared to the 20,000 people who stood against hate in Boston only a few days later, was not right.

It was a moment that crystalized the challenging fragility that I have been feeling nearly every day since we last gathered together in this place. I haven't always known "what to do" when I feel vulnerable. Sometimes I have opted for binge watching great television, sometimes I have opted for making a public statement that might be a little more sharp than usual.

There are many options along the continuum between binging on cake or TV and taking a public stand, but this is the place where I find myself this year. Our High Holy Day *machzor* reminds us that we stand perched on the edge of an abyss, precariously

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/08/let-us-eat-cake/537294/>

peering into the next year, hoping for stability and certainty, even while we know the world is fragile, and much is uncertain.

We live in a very vulnerable world in 2017, and it isn't always so easy to discern what are the tools in our spiritual tool box to manage vulnerability of community, of those identified and marginalized, and of ourselves.

Over these *yamim noraim*, I want to explore the multi-layered experience of vulnerability.

What is our responsibility to sustain and nurture our community in the face of overwhelming secularity and ambivalence?

What are our obligations to the increasing vulnerability of Democracy that many Americans feel because of who they are, where they are from, and who they love?

How can we best care for ourselves in the face of the inevitably difficult moments that life deals to humankind?

Each dislocation we experience, personal or communal, takes a toll on us. Suffering is suddenly real in many of our lives, in ways that seem new for our generation. How do we deal with it all? I cannot isolate in one sermon all of Judaism's wise responses to adversity -- our tradition is, in a sense, all about this. It is the subtext if not the substance of every Torah discussion, every education session, every pastoral intervention. Why is this so central? Because adversity is, contrary to our entitled modern ethos, the natural state of affairs.

And yet, as we put the Torah away each Shabbat, we sing: *Hashivenu Adonai Eleicha v'nashuva*—Return to us God, and we shall return to you, *Hadesh Yameinu Kekedem*—renew our days as they were once before.

Renew our days, re-enchanted our days. Because the question isn't whether life entertains us all the time, but whether we are deep enough, mature enough, spiritual enough, to insist more firmly and loudly than ever, that we will not succumb to paralysis.

Remember that Pharaoh's fatal flaw in the Exodus story was that he hardened his heart, refusing to see the possibility that his reality could change. "We may feel anxious and vulnerable to real or perceived threats. But we can take comfort in this: our people have persevered through centuries of challenges that held both promise and grave darkness. As we have in the past, we turn to each other, and to our life-giving tradition, for the wisdom and strength to find our way."²

² Rabbi Jen Feldman, Rosh Hashanah sermon 2017

Brene Brown, a researcher, who studies human connection, and our ability to empathize, belong and love, teaches that while for most of us, vulnerability means “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure, vulnerability can also be the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity.”³

So what tools do we have to transform vulnerability and uncertainty into empathy and accountability, whether we are speaking of our community, our country or ourselves? I count three this year:

Resilience
Hope/Optimism
Integrity

Resilience can be encapsulated in the life of Yisrael Kristal, z”l, the oldest man in the world, who died last month just short of his 114th birthday. Until his death, Kristal was an observant Jew who lived in Haifa, Israel. Last year he marked his 113th birthday by celebrating his *Bar Mitzvah*. He had missed his chance to celebrate when he was a young 13-year-old who became an orphan in Poland during World War I.

During World War II, the Nazis occupied Poland and confined Irving to the ghetto later sending him to Auschwitz where they murdered his first wife and two children. Mr. Kristal survived the *Shoah* and moved to Israel. There, he eventually remarried and built a new family and a successful life. Oren Kristal, Yisrael’s grandson, said his grandfather “accomplished a lot. Every year he lived was a like a few years for somebody else.”

I didn’t know this man, but reading his story I sensed he was a man who understood that while people can wreak much horror on the universe, they can also create great beauty. Having experienced it all, Mr. Kristal reminds us to build lives of love, hope, and achievement. **Strive to be resilient.**

As difficult as life can be, we can elevate what’s positive over what’s negative. Rabbi Jonathan Saks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain, taught that one of the most important distinctions he learned in the course of reflection on Jewish history is the difference between optimism and hope. “Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never—despite a history of sometimes awesome—given up hope.”⁴

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability#t-89660

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Saks, *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 206

A good addition to the resilience we seek. For every negative moment in our lives, where possible, **let's create a hopeful response.**⁵

So we need to be resilient, we want to exude a hopeful attitude. And, we can make a conscious difference in someone's life or impact another when we aren't aware of it **by living with integrity.**

Drew Dudley, a leadership educator from Canada, believes leadership is not a characteristic reserved for the extraordinary. He works to help people discover the leader within themselves, instead of never imagining that they have had or can yet have an impact.

He tells a story of a moment he made a difference in someone's life, that *he did not even remember* until four years after the fact. The details are not as important as the fact that it was a small action that had a woman walk up to a stranger four years later and say, "You've been an incredibly important person in my life,"

How many of us have such a moment in our lives? Or a person who made such a difference? Have you ever told them? If not, why not? Dudley says: "It can be frightening to think that we can matter that much to other people, because as long as we make integrity something bigger than us, as long as we keep integrity something beyond us, as long as we make it only about changing the world, we give ourselves an excuse not to expect it every day from ourselves and from each other.

We need to get over our fear of how extraordinarily powerful we can be in each other's lives. We need to get over it so we can move beyond it, and our little brothers and our little sisters, and one day our kids or kids right now—can watch and start to value the impact we can have on each other's lives more than money and power and titles and influence."⁶

Resilience
Hope
Integrity

⁵ Rabbi Ron Shulman, *Resilient, Positive People of Integrity*, sermon 8/26/17

⁶https://www.ted.com/talks/drew_dudley_everyday_leadership?utm_campaign=tedsread--b&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

These tools can help mitigate the most powerful paradox of these holy days, that we swing precariously on the pendulum between fragility and stability; between the quest for a sense of security and trust and the awareness at the edge of consciousness that wakens us in the middle of the night that at any moment everything that we take for granted might change, might end, might disappear.

We stand on the precipice of the New Year, not enthralled by the view, but dizzy from the height of our potential fall. It can take your breath away.⁷

The voice of the Psalmist we hear every day of the month of Elul in Psalm 27 echoes the profound prayer of these days: *Achat shalti me'et Adonai otah avakesh*, One thing I ask of the Power that makes for safety—May I dwell in the house of the Divine forever.

As we stand together these days in our vulnerability, we can numb ourselves, or hide from reality, we can choose to mend our ways, to open our hearts in prayer, stand up in the face of hate, and give to others. We can stand in the present moment and yet lean into eternity with resilience, with hope, and with integrity.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah—May the coming year be filled with hope and sweetness for us all.

⁷ http://templeisaiah.com/pdf/1483480461_sermon_pdf_Vulnerability_-_Rosh_Hashanah_5774.pdf