

There's a scene I love in Monte Python's 1983 movie *The Meaning of Life* (actually, there *lots* of moments I love in that movie, so I should be careful about getting started). In a morning chapel service being held in a British boarding school, Michael Palin playing the chaplain leads the school in a prayer: "Oh Lord, oooh you are so big. So absolutely huge. Gosh, we're all really impressed down here I can tell you. Forgive us, O Lord, for this dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery. But you are so strong and, well, just so super. Fantastic. Amen." The suggestion, not so subtle, is that prayer is nothing but calculated flattery, designed to stroke the Divine ego so that God will be appeased and hopefully grant our petitions and spare us punishment. I think of this over-the-top 'prayer' sometimes at the High Holidays when we read passages like, "We are strong-willed and stubborn, but you are merciful and gracious. We are stiff-necked, but you are slow to anger. We are full of error, but you are full of mercy. We – our days are like a passing shadow, but you are one whose years shall never end." (957) Or how about this – again, our Machzor, not Monte Python: "Who am I? What is my life? I am like a piece of straw before a fire, like dried and withered trees before a raging flame, like silver waiting to be purged of baser metals, the emptiest of empty things, in whom no substance dwells (759)... But you, holy one, your reign is eternal, the God who lives and endures! No limit exists to the years of your life, no end is assigned to the length of your days, no measure contains the array of your glory, your name is beyond all translation." (877)

When I was a rabbinical student first leading High Holiday services, these sorts of passages from the liturgy used to grate on me: Why were we supplicating ourselves in this way? Obviously, we are not God, obviously God is so far beyond us or any of our imaginings – and the idea of belaboring the point at length seemed like the most transparent kind of kissing-up – which didn't match up either with the way I thought about God or the way we're supposed to relate to God – as an entity to be flattered and supplicated. It wasn't until a number of years later that it finally clicked for me: Although these words are phrased as an address to God, the sentiments they express aren't intended for God at all, but for us. We contrast God's vastness and power to our smallness and impermanence, not because God needs to hear about God's own greatness, but because we need to hear about our smallness and imperfection. We need to hear it and, on Yom Kippur especially, we need to take it to heart.

We don't like thinking of ourselves as small. We naturally want to feel important, and powerful. And reminders that we are not these things can leave us feeling defensive, uncertain, and frightened. But I don't think our liturgy is trying to make us feel scared... or defensive, uncertain, and frightened. I think it's trying to make us feel something we often confuse with being scared, but which is in fact very different. I think it is trying to make us feel *vulnerable*.

Vulnerable. It's an uncomfortable word, one we don't really use that often and one we generally don't like thinking about. "Vulnerable" suggests something that is exposed, defenseless, at risk of being attacked. We don't like that place, we really don't. It's scary and lonely – dangerous – so we try to get out of it as quickly as possible if we ever stumble upon it by getting ourselves back on familiar terrain, by pushing away the anxieties and insecurities that make us scared so we don't have to think about them, by putting on our armor to convince ourselves and others that we are *in-vulnerable* to harm. By contrast, vulnerability is the quality of being willing to hang in in the exposed and unpredictable place of being vulnerable, of staying present in the face of possibly being hurt rather than shutting down or walling ourselves off from the world to try to avoid it. Of being willing to risk the

possibility of rejection and failure while remaining open and exposed. Vulnerability reminds us that we are not as powerful and impervious as we would generally like to think; that we are creatures who can be thwarted, be frightened, be wounded and harmed. It reminds us that, instead of being the original Adam and Eve who are given sovereignty over the Garden and all its creatures and whose every need is taken care of, we are the Adam and Eve who are cast out, who are made to toil by the sweat of their brows, who are aware of their transgression and feel exposed in ways no fig leaf can cover.

We all know what it's like to feel vulnerable, and how uncomfortable that makes us. The latest and greatest solution to this by the way, I'm convinced, is smartphones. Not because of the escapism of being able to check Facebook whenever and wherever we want, although that's true too. No, the amazing thing about smartphones is that they mean that all of us are carrying around with us, all the time, always, a tool that makes us look busy, purposeful, important. I do this all the time. Waiting for an elevator with someone I don't know and don't have anything to say to? Pull out my phone. In a room full of people I don't know and feeling awkward about going up to someone and making conversation? Pull out my phone, act like I have an important message. I don't even read what's on the screen, don't have any idea what's there. I don't need to – it's just a prop. A prop that gives me something to do when I don't want to be caught looking like I don't know what to do. A high-tech fig leaf.

There are so many ways – so many fig leaves – we use to try to cover over our vulnerability. There's avoidance and denial. There's planning and trying to assert control. There's numbing ourselves to our fragility through food, escapism, or medications. One of the most insidious ways we deal with navigating our scary and unpredictable world as vulnerable and limited beings – and we see this all the time in our modern world – is through the quest for certainty. Living in the unknown is scary. So we try to seek absolute certitude – in our facts, in our opinions, in our convictions. As the world has become more unsettled, we've seen the rise of all sorts of orthodoxies and fundamentalisms – people *absolutely certain* that their beliefs are true and unassailable. This leads to religious zealotry and ethnic hatred, causes people to ignore reality and construct entire systems of beliefs that leave no room for doubt.

And it may sound funny to some of you that a rabbi is sounding an alarm about fundamentalism and religious certainty. So it's really important to point out that Judaism is a religion that is absolutely rooted in making room for multiple and even contradictory opinions and positions. The Talmud will record multiple opinions on any one issue side-by-side, sometimes resolving the matter, sometimes *not*, but always preserving minority positions. One of the most central texts in our tradition – almost a mission statement for the rabbinic project – is a disagreement between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai (two early, highly respected, schools of thought) which goes on for years, until a Divine voice declares "*elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim* – these and these are the words of the living God." (B. Eruvin 13b) It's nothing less than remarkable: an insistence that in a disagreement one side doesn't need to be right and other side wrong – not a binary either/or approach, but a complex both/and one. But even more than that: the process of arguing, and debating, and disagreeing isn't something threatening or scary. Rather, it is crucial, indispensable, for coming to the closest approximation of truth we can attain: these and these together, contradictory, are more accurately the words of the living God than either side on its own. In fact, the early rabbis were so concerned about the perils of certainty – and the dangerous ways human beings can act when they feel absolutely, completely certain – that they declared that when a

panel of twenty-three judges is convened to hear a capital offense, if they all (separately, independently) vote in favor of execution, the condemned man is released! (B. Sanhedrin 17a) Why? How is that possible? Because when everybody, without exception, is completely convinced something is true then there's a strong chance we are engaging in some form of group-think and missing something critical. If even one of the judges votes in favor of acquittal, that dissenting vote demonstrates the case has been fully and fairly heard but if every single one votes to convict that complete unity suggests there hasn't been enough space for doubt to enter the judges' mind to render a fair verdict. Stunning!

The rabbis knew then as we know now that when people are absolutely certain, we are capable of horrific and unimaginable things. Certainty gives us license, which makes us feel powerful, dominant... God-like. With our doubts and hesitations covered over we feel empowered to act with authority: no wonder certainty is such a potent tool for trying to avoid facing our inadequacies and limitations. So we devote all our resources to denying and forestalling our vulnerability and the inexorable awareness of our limitations. But what is it, exactly, that we're so scared of? Being human *means* being flawed, being finite, being uncertain, being susceptible, being *vulnerable*. We all are.

But it's scary, and we don't want to acknowledge it, we don't want to go there. I mentioned on Erev Rosh ha-Shanah that every sermon I give goes to Aimée, who reads my drafts and offers feedback and suggestions before I finalize and deliver it. You would think after fifteen years of being a rabbi – and twenty-one years of marriage! – that this process would be easy and painless. You would be wrong. There's something extraordinarily vulnerable – even with someone you love and who you know has your back – about turning over your heartfelt attempts at crafting an insightful and hopefully inspiring message for evaluation and critique. I want feedback and constructive criticism, of course; but what I *really* want is approval and recognition for how dazzlingly thoughtful and articulate my words are. Which is why every time Aimée comes back to offer her comments after reading a draft – which I *know* she's not going to think is as insightful and brilliant as I thought when I was writing it – there's this part of me that starts getting on edge and defensive, that wants to reject any criticism and suggestions *even though* they're designed to make my sermons better and *even though* they're coming from a place of love.

It's just so easy to flip the switch and go to that place of defensiveness and ego, rather than remaining open and vulnerable to receiving advice and critique. It takes practice and trust – and a certain measure of faith – to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We don't like doing it, which is why we often stick with what's comfortable and familiar instead of making a leap into the unknown. But if we can find the courage and resilience to be vulnerable instead of allowing fear and uncertainty to cripple us, paralyze us; if we can move forward in a way that embraces discomfort as Mike Rosenberg exemplified so powerfully last night, then we can open ourselves to new chances, connections, insights, and opportunities in every aspect of life.

And this leads to the amazingly powerful and counterintuitive truth that lies at the heart of vulnerability. Acknowledging our flaws and limitations, our insecurities and lack of control isn't a weakness, it's a strength - one that lies at the heart of what it means to be willing to tolerate uncertainty and risk, to nurture the resilience that comes with exposing yourself to criticism, to the possibility of rejection or failure. Texas researcher Professor Brené Brown has gained a lot of attention for her work on vulnerability and the seemingly paradoxical insight that the people who are happiest, most secure,

most connected, and most fulfilled are those people who acknowledge and even embrace their vulnerability. We think that being vulnerable is the same thing as being fragile, or weak, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Owning one's vulnerability, acknowledging that we are not perfect, or self-sufficient, unassailable – or even safe – is key, Brown argues, to being willing to take risks, make connections, be creative. If we're too scared to try anything we will never take risks and will only live in the very small sphere of things we think we can control. But if we have the courage and openness that come with vulnerability – with being willing to take a risk on a new project, a new idea, a new relationship – we can reap unimaginable rewards.

Think about it: in order to form meaningful connections with other people we have to open ourselves up to the possibility of being rejected, being hurt, experiencing loss. If we can't face this, can't make ourselves vulnerable to this possibility, then we're simply like that sad, lonely soul in the Simon and Garfunkel song: "I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries."

Loving and being loved – fully, whole-heartedly – is rooted in the willingness to be vulnerable. So is empathy: the ability to be touched by someone else's experience of sadness, or sickness, or pain. It's only possible if we're willing to open ourselves up to those same possibilities for ourselves and be present to them rather than trying to push them away. It is out of acknowledging that we can – and surely will – fail that we build our capacity for risk, generosity, resilience, connection, and all the qualities that make life full, rich, and worthwhile.

Given how important vulnerability is to fostering a life of discernment, character, and purpose it should come as no surprise that our liturgy – and in fact the very purpose of this day – seeks to cultivate it within us and how we should stand this day before the universe: "You know the secrets of the universe, the most hidden recesses of all that lives. You search the chambers of our inner being, you examine the conscience and the heart. There is nothing hidden from you, nothing is concealed before your eyes." Vulnerability, being willing to expose ourselves – to scrutiny, to critique, to remorse – is a crucial part of Yom Kippur and this season. It's not a message we generally hear, in a society so focused on promoting success, self-worth, self-esteem. A society where we're terrified to fail, as though our failures reveal something about our *character*, some aspect of our authentic self that we want to keep hidden from the world.

This day stands as a corrective to these very human tendencies to try to cover over our failings, to ignore or justify our shortcomings, to present ourselves to the world as wholly competent and self-assured. Instead of convincing ourselves that we're great exactly as we are, Yom Kippur demands that we ask how we can be better: more generous, more loving, more just. Instead of trying to numb ourselves to our limitations and lack of control we should be using those qualities to cultivate compassion for ourselves and empathy for others. Instead of giving in to our anxiety about being seen as we truly are, warts and all, this day encourages us to see ourselves as we truly are, recognizing that trying to present a constantly assured and self-confident face to the world is actually a sign of weakness and insecurity and fear, and we have to work so hard to maintain that façade – for ourselves and others – and are paralyzed by the anxiety that somebody will see through us.

In fact, Brené Brown defines vulnerability as the quality of being willing to be fully *seen*, to expose the truth of who we are to the world and ourselves. It is in this spirit that Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes:

Today we stand before the Mirror of All
to see ourselves as we are.

We come with no gifts, no bribes, no illusions, no excuses.

We stand without defense and wait to be filled.

And that is what this day is about. Being seen: no excuses, no façades, no pretenses. All that language about how we're so small and God sees us as we are: it's to help us strip away our armor, acknowledge ourselves as we truly are, seek forgiveness for those places where we've inevitably failed to live up to the way we should be in this world, and strive to take these lessons with us into this New Year so we'll do better next time. It's hard, but it's so important, because keeping up those defenses all the time – it's exhausting. And it might be scary but it doesn't need to be – if we can allow ourselves to be a little vulnerable. If instead of seeing ourselves standing naked and stripped of defenses as something that will hurt us, make us feel small and wretched, we approach this process of knowledge and self-awareness as an opportunity, a gift: because being clearly seen from a place of *love*, as we are on this Yom Kippur, gives us the precious chance to acknowledge our shortcomings and atone for them: to be held and made whole, to experience gratitude and joy even in the face of the unknown, to love with our full heart even though we know nothing in this world is guaranteed. But we need to be willing to step outside of our instinctive defenses and let ourselves be vulnerable for this powerful transformation to happen.

This is the challenge and opportunity Yom Kippur holds out to us all. It's the mission that was set at the heart of being Jewish from the very beginning as the first Jews, Abraham and Sarah, were told "Lech Lecha," were called to take themselves beyond the boundaries of what was known, comfortable, familiar – and so are we. They were asked to set out without knowing their destination, but trusting that they were being accompanied and held along the way – and so are we. And they were promised that, in their journeying, they would become a source of blessing for the world – and so are we. This is our legacy and this is our mission: to put aside our defenses as we go forth into the world, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and exposed, to acknowledge our imperfections and strive always to do better, and in so doing open ourselves to the possibility of transformation and blessing.