

Collective Vulnerability¹
Rabbi Rachel Joseph
Congregation Beth Israel
Yom Kippur Morning 5781

In the middle of August, I put on my white robe and high holiday tallit, as we began filming our services. It was my first time standing on the temple bimah since my wedding on March 15th. It was my first time standing -- 20 feet apart -- from my clergy colleagues since March. As I stood there looking at the havdalah candle and listening to Ben Sandler sound the shofar signaling the end of Yom Kippur (we actually recorded the end of Yom Kippur first) something cracked inside of me. The sound of the shofar always makes me look back from one year to another; it triggers memories and desires. And this year, this year, the tears streamed down my face. I tried to hold them back but everything in my being said: go ahead, it is okay to come right out in the open and cry.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner taught: If we just sat here, all of us, and cried together today, that might be the most eloquent response to the year we've just lived through.²

I am normally not one to cry in public and yet over these last six months I have shed more tears than in my entire life. And then Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died on erev Rosh Hashana. More tears.

We are so overwhelmed. So many of us are doing double, triple or quadruple duty (family, work, online school) and more. The situation changes daily and we are left feeling that there is little we are actually in control of.

Most of us do not see vulnerability as a positive attribute but today I want us to consider vulnerability as a prerequisite for deep teshuvah - repentance, for returning to the potential that we have to be our best selves. We need teshuvah because our world is suffering. Individuals are suffering. Life seems hard.

As a religious leader, I can tell you, I don't have all the answers. I so wish I did. "We are building the plane while trying to fly it. I wish I could say it will all be ok, and I wish I could deploy support and resources that would ease all the stress and burden that each of you is facing. I can't. What I can do is be honest, vulnerable and hopeful."³

I wonder if today, we might imagine God offering a gentle presence. Perhaps God is telling us: it is okay to cry, to admit that we are, in the words of recording artist Dan Nichols: "perfect the way we are... and a little broken too."⁴

¹ Thank you to Sara Spettel, Josh Kashinsky, Rabbis Sam Joseph, Michael Cahana, and Aimee Gerace for their guidance and suggestions.

² Rabbi Rachel Timoner, *"I am a Jew,"* Rosh Hashanah Day One Sermon 5780

³ Dean Sandra Davidson, UCalgary Nursing Community, *"Navigating an awkward, collective vulnerability,"* April 1, 2020

⁴ Dan Nichols, *Asher Yatzar*

In Judaism, in Torah, being vulnerable is not a sign of weakness. Rabbi Timoner continues⁵: Crying is not weak, crying is not giving up. Jacob cries, Joseph cries — a lot. Crying is associated with men of power. Warriors cry and kings cry — Saul, David, Hezekiah. Crying is often the beginning of new wisdom. Solomon cries, the Psalmist cries, the Prophets cry — Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah. Crying is often a turning point toward liberation and redemption. After all, there's a reason we have bowls of tears on our seder tables. It was only when the Israelites cried out in Egypt that our birthing into freedom began. It was only when Mordechai wept in the gates of the palace that Esther moved into action. And it is upon hearing Hagar's cry that God saves her and Ishmael and brings them back from the wilderness.

Judaism teaches that tears are what open the gates of heaven. When we cry God remembers us and pays attention to our world. God brings us from confusion to direction. God heals our broken hearts.

This is one of the reasons why we gather on Yom Kippur: to confront ourselves. This is a unique moment of individual and collective vulnerability we find ourselves in and therefore it provides a unique opportunity for collective growth and courage.

So, I return to one of my heroes, Dr. Brene Brown, whose TED talk on the Power of Vulnerability has been viewed over 45 millions times (watch it, it's worth it).⁶ And I believe it is a powerful how-to guide for doing teshuvah and helping us during this time.

Now, I don't know about you, but vulnerability doesn't tend to be the emotional space that I want to live in; but here we are.⁷ Our Tradition shows us that vulnerability is a key ingredient to being an authentic, wholehearted person; the more vulnerable we can be with ourselves, the closer we can become to living a life where teshuvah, returning to our best selves, is a way of being in the world.

Collectively, we have been thrown into a place of vulnerability. No one is shielded from the pandemic. We don't get to choose. This isn't about us as individuals, seeing the benefits vulnerability brings and deciding that we want to get more comfortable with being vulnerable.

This is us, as a society, as a global community, being forced into a situation where we HAVE to show up and be seen, when we can't control the outcome. We have to work out how to make a living, look after our families, and protect each other, when we don't know what's going to happen.

“This pandemic experience is a massive experiment in collective vulnerability.”⁸ We are ALL living in the wake of the terror and fear. Fear of economic instability, fear for our safety, fear for our future. For the Jewish community, we can add the layer of anxiety of increased

⁵ Ibid Timoner

⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en

⁷ These next several paragraphs are inspired by Dr. Brown's reflections on 10 years since her original TED Talk on vulnerability.

⁸ <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2020/03/21/collective-vulnerability/>

worldwide anti-Semitism. Every day, something new: Fear of wildfires. Fear, at times, for our very breath.

Fear is often accompanied by a sense of shame.⁹ This leads people to ask themselves: am I good enough? At my work? At being a partner? A parent? A child? An adult? Do we sometimes feel like imposters in our own lives? Fear also comes from a culture of scarcity. We think that we do not have enough: enough time, enough things, enough security, enough money, in our lives. Or that WE are not enough. And fear, shame and scarcity lead people inward; we lose the ability to feel empathy. And that is where things get bad.

By allowing us to be vulnerable, Jewish Tradition demands us to have empathy.

Because we were slaves in Egypt, we care about those who are enslaved. Because we were outcasts, we care about poverty, because we understand that all material things on this earth ultimately belong to God and are resources for ALL of humanity we care about the environment. We were strangers in strange lands throughout our history, so we care about the stranger, the immigrant, our ancestors were welcomed here and our historic vulnerability allows us to feel the fear of those similarly seeking asylum on our shores. We need to feel empathy for the suffering of others in order to live our values.

Never before have so many people, regardless of socioeconomic status, had their health, safety, food, and housing security threatened for such a sustained period of time. A lot of people are feeling very uncomfortable. And I have come to better appreciate that the discomfort we are experiencing in these pandemic times is all too routine for many individuals at all times.

The COVID-19 crisis is surfacing long existing inequities. It has shined a light on the disproportionate impact and the heightening of vulnerabilities in the Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and People of Color communities.

What I hope, as Rabbi Cahana taught on Rosh Hashanah¹⁰, is that the vulnerability our nation is collectively feeling will create some urgency to recognize and reduce disparities. That our own vulnerability will create empathy which will lead to action and support for policies that address these disparities. Our vulnerability can help protect the vulnerability of others.

And . this . is . so . hard. Because vulnerability and fear can also be used to divide us. The entire presidential campaign is built on exposing/exploiting our vulnerability. If one candidate wins, we are told, we will become a country run by communists and Antifa. If the other candidate wins we will become a reign of facism and martial law. And Portland is at the center of this debate: “an anarchist jurisdiction.” I’m sure I’m not the only one who has received calls/texts/emails from around the world, for months asking if I’m okay? If I’m safe?

Portland has been on the cover of the New York Times more in the last several months than the last several years.

⁹ Inspired by concepts from Dr. Brene Brown’s book, *“Daring Greatly,”* 2012

¹⁰ Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana *“A More Perfect Union: Hopefully Lessons from the Pandemic,”* September 18, 2020

When I first heard the phrase: defund the police, I could feel the power of my vulnerability. What does that mean? As a rabbi, as an upper class white Jewish woman, I have a good relationship with the police. During the massacre at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, police officers rushed into the building. In normal years, during the High Holidays, the police department keeps us safe and it was only last year we debated how much extra security to have on a DAILY basis at our synagogue.

I am listening to people of color, Jews and non-Jews, say that is not what the police means to them. That in so many ways our country has failed the promise of equality and justice.

It is vulnerable to say you do not have answers. And, I don't and we have a lot of work to do. And it is hard. But we can do hard things!¹¹ Admitting we are vulnerable, admitting we don't know, is the first step in getting things done.

The promise of these High Holidays is that teshuvah has tapped into the power of vulnerability. Yes, it's risky. It exposes us to the possibility of being shamed. Rejected. But, as many of us know, it can also free us. It can reconnect us and break through our feelings of isolation and tell us, "It's okay, I've been there. You're not the only one."

Yom Kippur is the time to shed our armor and dig deep into ourselves to discover why we may have missed the mark in some of our actions. In order to do teshuvah, to fix ourselves and the world, we have to be willing to confront that which makes us vulnerable, that which makes us human and flawed and messy.

How will you choose to live in that world? How will the current situation and sense of collective vulnerability help us embrace who we are? Last year we lived in a world that taught us to fear vulnerability. This year, we can choose a different narrative, a new path.

I pray for us for a year where we can allow ourselves to feel vulnerable, so that we can feel empathy for ourselves and for others, so that we can create lasting teshuvah, and be our authentic wholehearted selves.

There will be tears involved. That's ok. Our ancestors cried those tears as well. Let's sit together in this collective vulnerability, wipe away the tears of another, embrace a sense of collective courage, and come together as a collective community of connection. Through our vulnerability we will create a better tomorrow.

¹¹ Glennon Doyle, *"Untamed,"* March 10, 2020.