

## Vulnerability and Trust

By Cantor Ida Rae Cahana

Rosh Hashanah Eve Sermon

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Sixteen years ago, I stood on this bima as the wife of your recently arrived senior rabbi and delivered his sermon during the late service for Rosh Hashanah eve. A medical emergency forced him to be here just long enough to bring greetings, give a sermon, and then he was rushed back to the hospital like some kind of a rabbinic Cinderella, where thankfully, his health was restored. In that second service; however, you entrusted me to share his vulnerability, and some of my own, by opening your hearts to us both as I read his words with an anxious heart. It was a dramatic beginning for our relationship with you, our new congregational family, and the way you all stepped in to embrace us was extraordinary. Like the first holding of hands in a relationship. We will never forget it.

A month ago, I shared some news of a much different, non-life threatening medical situation of my own. An elusive neurological condition of unknown origin, which is progressive and has no cure yet, is slowly and steadily impacting my technical ability to sing. In the e-mail that was sent to our congregation, I talked about the role of the Cantor, that we are so much more than singers alone. Teachers, pastors, community leaders, creators of ritual, interpreters of liturgy, the ones who name, marry, instruct B'nei Mitzvah, organize the music and musicians for our services, hold the hands of those transitioning from this life, along with their families. And yet, the deepest part of me is and always has been the one who sings. One of my first memories is of swinging my little brother to sleep while singing Summertime to him in our backyard in Pleasant Hills, PA. That memory of my childhood- the magical calming effect of my singing along with my total rapture in releasing my feelings through song is one of the sweetest I have. As an awkward and shy kid, singing pulled me up and out from a sheltered, narrow-minded suburb into other cities and other worlds of possibility. I studied voice for years with incredible teachers in Boston and New York, honing this instrument which consists of just two little membranes, the vocal folds. I learned how to breathe with depth and control in order to spin out vocal lines, modulating volume and intensity at will. Cantorial school was a culmination of all

those years of training and praying; I finally really felt seen and heard as an artist, as a communicator whose singing voice could bring people together in shared sorrow as well as in joy. I met my basherte, Michael, while sitting and singing together in Jerusalem side by side, feeling him melt into the warmth of my voice surrounding him. It was my voice, I always thought, that made me who I am and gave my life more beauty and opportunities than I ever could have imagined. And beyond that-I just loved to sing and release my heart's fullness, sitting and playing the piano while singing through arias or Ladino or French art songs or musical theatre tunes or Yiddish. So much gorgeous music to be explored and shared and finally, in my 30's and 40's, I had developed the vocal instrument to make it all live! When you sing, you become a resonating chamber, a passageway, for the vibrations of the sound and more-you open a pathway for the fullness of your own self expression. That is why, many often feel like crying when they sing; it is not just the throat that opens, not only the ribs which expand with each breath. It is the deepest part of you that relaxes and shines. Singing and listening to masterful singing can crack open the heart. Twenty-four years ago, when my best friend got married, I recorded this song for her as a wedding gift when, seven months pregnant with triplets, I was unable to be with her.

**[PLAY CLIP 1 of "ON MY WAY TO YOU"]** That was me, then.

Fast forward to this year, the end of June. I received a diagnosis that confirmed my angst over the gradual slipping away of control, my ability to sing in the expressive way I love. What has slowly faded because of the brain sending the wrong message to my singing voice is what always characterized my voice and made it stand out: the long legato lines, the ability to spin a high pianissimo, the clarity and silkiness. Being robbed of these hallmarks of my instrument caused a death of my spirit. I know that I said this condition is not life-threatening. And it's not, thank God. But for me-singing WAS my life. Who would I be now that I couldn't be that conduit in the way I once knew how to be? How do you mourn a passing of a seminal part of yourself? And what grace would help me to keep going, find strength, healing, a different path forward?

When I shared my news with our senior staff, their first response was to embrace me, letting me know that they were by my side always. Rabbi Rachel Joseph suggested I deliver a sermon about it. It is unusual for cantors in most synagogues

to give sermons on the High Holidays and certainly is not the custom here. Thank you, to her and to our whole clergy team, for their encouragement and trust. The support and love I received after opening more to them than I ever had with other colleagues, is what led me to stand here tonight with my reflections on some of the very same questions that were swirling around us on Rosh Hashanah Eve 2006. After these past two and a half years of pandemic, we are all struggling, in different ways, with what it means to allow ourselves to be vulnerable in a world where the unforeseeable happens regularly. How can we move past debilitating fear and grief and open ourselves to others? How can we risk trusting them with glimpses of our imperfect selves, especially now after we all have been sequestered and apart? When does self acceptance, love, and forgiveness come as we lose pieces of who we thought we were through no fault of our own? And through all of this, is healing and hope possible?

At the head of this Jewish New Year we are tumbling into, straight out of a traumatic time of wild uncertainty, mistrust, sickness, even death- Let us take a collective breath and consider where and who we are before emerging on the other side of these ten days of repentance. I invite you to use this liminal time while the gates of forgiveness and compassion are open to make a “cheshbon hanefesh,” an accounting of the state of your soul. The first step is the hardest one – to acknowledge our brokenness. It is scary and uncomfortable to admit vulnerability, to ourselves, as well as to others.

There is a lot that stops us. Will my admission of any of the things that make me feel broken appear as weakness? I can imagine each of us bringing to mind what is most pressing: physical, emotional, psychological impairment; unsteadiness or dissolution of a relationship; loss of a job; loss of self-confidence... Will learning of my “weakness” cause me to feel shame or that I am being judged? Being vulnerable is an essential first step in our own journey towards repair. Ted Talk wonder and PhD researcher Brene Brown writes in her book, “Daring Greatly” that it’s a chicken and egg conundrum: we need to **feel** trust in order to be vulnerable and we need to **be** vulnerable in order to trust.

As for shame, we all feel it. We hold back from sharing our ideas or feelings because we tend to assume the worst; that we will be judged as lacking. Our sages teach us that causing another person “bushah,” or shame is a grievous sin.

Shame derives its power from being unspeakable and carries with it the fear of disconnection. We all are hardwired for human connection. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. Why risk these intense feelings by exposing my vulnerability? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, taught us that Judaism posits shame as a sin imposed by ones’ surrounding culture. To be disparaged, characterized, or belittled comes from the outside “norms” which dictate certain ways of looking, speaking, being. Judaism condemns this shaming and instead, as Jews, we embrace guilt! Because guilt doesn’t come from corrupted stigmas and stereotypes which our society may bind us with. Guilt is something we feel inside when we know we have missed the mark. It is our essential internal moral compass that helps us make corrections when we stray. Guilt leads us to pray for forgiveness and make amends. Causing another person to feel shame is the thing to be condemned while guilt-well-it’s actually not **so** terrible.

Fear of shame made it difficult for me to share with others, with YOU, that for many years now, I have been struggling with something that was affecting my singing voice, the golem of a singer’s artistic self. Who and what would I be without it?

Each of us has a name, we are taught (Midrash Tanchuma Vayakheil 1:1); one that is given to us by our parents, one that others call us, and one that we earn for ourselves. Those names are aspects of our many soul colors. During eulogies, families often learn about qualities of their loved ones which had never been revealed to them. You may define yourself as primarily one thing, when, in truth; you are much more. When that inevitable shift in your life’s path comes, and it will come in one way or another for all of us, it feels unsettling. Once I am no longer that “thing” – a student, a spouse, a parent, no longer young, no longer working - who am I? Who am I when suddenly, I am not defined by the very thing that gave my life meaning, delight, depth, recognition?

It is, admittedly, very hard to share with others when you think of yourself as a private person. I struggled a lot with why I was sharing my own pain with my congregation. Was it merely ego? Or was it to help model and encourage others to open up? Well – yes; there is definitely ego involved. I wanted people hearing me to know that my singing was going to be different, sometimes cut off, less

elegantly phrased, suddenly-in a word, a bit uncontrollable. I have found that putting it out there has helped others open and talk about their own vulnerabilities or unexpected life changes that forces them to redefine who they are. Since the e-mail went out to our congregation, I have received many loving messages of support as well as sharing of your own personal challenges. Thank you for each of these letters and phone messages and e-mails; they feel like gifts and a balm.

Persona is a Greek term for “stage mask.” You need not be a singer to wear a metaphorical mask or armor for protecting yourself from the discomfort of vulnerability. Thank you for trusting me and lifting your mask.

One thing that we all share, especially in the shadow of the Covid spectre, is a deepened fear of the future and the unpredictability of life. To paraphrase the psalm we sang at the beginning of the service, How good and how pleasant it would be for all people to sit together in non-judgemental, worry-free places!

It’s true that we children of post-modernity have learned to live in a transactional world and we have even “...commodified the meaning of time... Our obsession with extracting the greatest future value out of our time blinds us to the reality that, in fact, the moment of truth is always now. Living more fully in the present may simply be a matter of finally realizing that we never had any option but to be here now.”<sup>1</sup> (as Ram Dass taught us latter day hippies) Perhaps this is a Covid lesson we have learned; in the weariness of accepting so many abrupt changes and limitations. It has become more natural for us to appreciate the moments we inhabit, while still peering ahead with apprehension.

My beloved sister-in-law Karen, shared a story with me about her friend who is a persistent worrier (I relate), always imagining the most awful outcome of any potentially risky venture taken by her family. Her husband and child were taking a trip that involved a drive on a windy mountaintop road with a steep cliff on the other side. Perfect. What could possibly go wrong? Suddenly, an object came hurtling down from above, narrowly missing their windshield. Although it was not large, if it had made impact, the breakage or distraction would have been calamitous. Someone had thrown a bottle of salad dressing from atop the mountain. After her husband and son safely reached their destination and

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Burkeman “4 Thousand Weeks: Time management for Mortals

recounted the story, Karen's friend shook her head and said, "I had thought of a lot of horrible scenarios, but I never imagined salad dressing..."

For me, one of the possible "salad dressing moments" has struck. I could not have anticipated or prevented it; now it is my choice how to live with a changed reality.

I can imagine everyone here has had a salad dressing moment. Unexpected job changes, moving, disruption of education, retirement. Loss of a loved one. Fading or intensifying of a relationship. A new diagnosis. Disappointment in ourselves, our partners, our children, our friends, our city, our country. The pieces of our broken spirits have multiplied since last year. **And** for many of us, the pieces **needed** to be taken apart and looked at anew.

One of the most remarkable stories told about the Ten Commandments has nothing to do with what they instruct us to do! The first set of the 10 commandments was broken after Moses came down, witnessed the abomination of the Golden calf revelry and smashed this first perfect rendering. Then he went back up and received a second set. Talmudic tradition states that the broken tablets were carried in the Holy Ark along with the intact second set.<sup>2</sup> The broken tablets were not buried which is what we generally do with holy items no longer in use. Kabbalistic teaching holds that the Ark is a symbol of the human heart.<sup>3</sup> When we experience loss of a loved one, hopes cut short, disenchantment, betrayal, we are left shattered and powerless. Jewish ritual embraces brokenness because it is part of life. A glass is broken under the Chupah to represent broken moments in personal or communal life. Pesach begins with the breaking of a matzah representing a slave freed from her previous life. On these Yamim Nora'im, one of the Shofar blasts is named shevarim from the root shever – broken. Each moment is part of the wholeness of ritual-you can't have a proper marriage without breaking the glass. You can't celebrate liberation from Egypt (seder) without breaking the matzah. The Shofar sound is incomplete without the broken notes. We are diminished beings without the fullness of our experiences of brokenness. Ernest Hemingway wrote in "A Farewell to Arms," "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places."

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud BB 14b

<sup>3</sup> Reshit Chochmah

But how can we find that strength to move on?

Rabbi Joseph introduces the mi Shebeirach, the prayer for healing, with these words which made a chill go up my spine the first time I heard them, “we pray for healing of the body when it’s **meant** to be and healing of the spirit which can **always** be.” There is a difference between “Cure” and “Healing.” Medical professionals and researchers find miraculous drugs and exercises and surgeries to stop or eradicate disease. As Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen explains, “Healing is very different from curing...[it] is a process we’re involved in all the time... Sometimes people heal physically, and they don’t heal emotionally or mentally or spiritually. And sometimes people heal emotionally, and they don’t heal physically.”

Remen continues, “Everybody has pain, everybody is wounded...it’s our woundedness that allows us to trust each other. I can trust another person only if I can sense that they too have...pain, have fear. Out of trust we can begin to pay attention to our own wounds and to each other’s wounds – and to heal and be healed.”<sup>4</sup> Or as the Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk teaches us, “There is nothing as whole, or as perfect, as a broken heart.”

Who you are is not somebody with an illness, somebody with an addiction; somebody without a perfectly curated FaceBook presenting life. Who you are is **somebody**. Somebody complex. Somebody who matters. I tell this to each of my B’nei Mitzvah students, but mostly I need to tell myself, “It’s not about being perfect, it’s being most deeply and truthfully who you are.”

Rashi taught that the two sets of the 10 commandment tablets sit touching each other. When our heart is broken the presence of the whole set helps us confront our frailty and remember that things can get better; we may not be cured; things may never again be whole, but they CAN get better. Both sets of tablets are arranged side by side in the holiest place in our tradition. When we open to another with our pain and when we listen as another opens their heart to us, that place where we sit together is sacred. It is a sacred responsibility to be sensitive to others’ suffering, to share our vulnerabilities. I hope and pray that we will each find renewed strength to trust ourselves and others. That we can lay to rest the fear of shame if we expose the beautiful mess of our imperfect selves to people

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Moyer’s “Healing and the Mind”

we know are there for us. May the broken pieces rest comfortably, named and accepted and stripped of their power to keep us locked in fear, shame, and regret. **[Play Clip 2 of “On my way to you”]** That voice is who I was and am. It’s one of the broken tablets I carry in the ark of my heart. I am grateful for these broken pieces because they brought me to everything that has joy and meaning: my career, my husband, my family, and ultimately to you. And-hearing that voice from the past breaks me open again as any one of our most vulnerable moments would. When we hear the sobbing, halting voice of the shofar, may all of our hearts be cracked open once again. God, grant us the courage to share our vulnerability with those we trust as we lift each other towards healing. Then, we each will truly be able to sing without fear from our whole broken hearts! Shanah Tovah!

Closing Benediction (Chanted improvisation):

Eyl Rachum v’chanun, merciful and gracious Creator of such a complex and staggeringly beautiful universe, we thank you! We are grateful to each other as well for revealing our remarkable, multi-faceted, imperfect selves! In this New Year, 5783, may we reside, with all of our broken as well as whole pieces, in a place of trust in one another. May this Rosh Hashanah bring us hope, bring us healing, bring us close-Amen!