

Weathering Life's Storms\*  
Kol Nidrei 5777  
October 11, 2016

Good Yontif.

I'm so grateful to see you here tonight and my thoughts and prayers are with all of you who experienced damage to your homes in the wake of Hurricane Matthew. I saw so many photos of felled trees; houses seeping with water or, in some cases, split open; streets flooded; cars fully submerged, and abandoned mid-road; and, of course, I heard of the loss of power for hundreds of thousands including here at OST and in my own home. Truly, it's a miracle that none of us was hurt physically.

But that wasn't the case for all victims of the storm. Seventeen were killed in the United States; and at least 1,000 in Haiti, which is burying its dead in mass graves and dealing with a Cholera outbreak as a result.

The thing is Hurricane Matthew was the storm that wasn't supposed to be in Hampton Roads. All of the meteorologists predicted that it would turn out to sea, just past Cape Hatteras. We were supposed to get some wind and a few inches of rain and be fine. But we weren't. Or at least some of us weren't . . . and our hearts go out to all of you who still have damage to repair . . . whether great or small.

Events like these remind us of just how fragile life is, of how vulnerable we are, of how many things are out of our control, of the myriad occurrences that we just can't plan for or steel ourselves against.

Hurricanes, tornadoes, and, as a native Californian, earthquakes are just some of the tempests that shake us to our core. There are also internal storms we must weather: the diagnosis of a serious illness that comes out of left field, and turns our life on its head in an instant; the end of a marriage or significant relationship that we didn't see coming that cuts so deep it causes us to question everything we thought we knew including ourselves; the child with an illness or addiction that he or she can't kick that renders us constantly sick with worry, feeling helpless, and, heartbroken; and the death of someone we love, without whose companionship, guidance, and love we don't know how we will live. Any of these events can be devastating.

And these cyclones don't pass nearly as quickly as Matthew . . . in fact, they never leave us. They are the wounds of life, now scars, that remind us of our humanity; of life at its best and worst; of love so strong it shelters us even in death; of pain so deep, it seers, reminding us every minute that we are alive; and insisting that to love means to feel; and to feel means to hurt sometimes. And we are here tonight on *Kol Nidrei* to do just that: to feel, to confront our ultimate vulnerability, the things over which we have the least control – our mortality and that of those we love – not so that we despair, but so that we might live more fully in the New Year.

A Story: It's the mid 20th century. A child of immigrants "makes good," moves to the suburbs and joins "The Temple." Its newly built, a beautiful synagogue, designed by none other than Frank Lloyd Wright. It's a far cry from his

parents' synagogue in the old neighborhood or the *shul* in Pinsk, Poland where they came from.

The *Days of Awe* approach and the son thinks, "Wouldn't be nice if we could all be together for the Holidays?" But his parents seem less than enthusiastic; they like their *shul*, their rabbi, all their friends will be there. Undaunted, he decides he'll take them for a visit. Once they see how beautiful The Temple is, they'll surely change their minds and want to come.

So, next Sunday, he picks them up from the old neighborhood and takes them to "The Temple". He shows them the beautiful sanctuary, modern ark filled with ornately covered Torah scrolls, the stained glass windows. They are clearly impressed, but he senses that something is wrong and so he asks, "Well, what do you think?" This was their response, "It is lovely son, it really is; but can we cry here?"

"Can we cry here?" That is the ultimate question of *Yom Kippur* and of *Teshuvah*, the process of repentance, atonement, and forgiveness in which we are to engage this day. Can we lay ourselves bare enough to examine our deeds -- honestly, openly, and fully vulnerable? Can we feel the depth of our pain and face it? Can we admit our need for healing, the weaknesses in our character that need strengthening? Can we reach out across the table, our soul defenseless, to meet another susceptible soul in pain? Can we expose ourselves enough to take responsibility for our part in the brokenness of that relationship regardless of what accountability the human being before us is willing to take? Can we give someone else the benefit of the doubt?

Can we cry here? If not here tonight then where and when? The entire *Yom Kippur* ritual is constructed to allow us a time and space to do just that:

What is the haunting, plaintive *Kol Nidre* melody if not a communal cry, the sound of our souls in pain: for all that this past year could have been, should have been, but wasn't; for the actions we took in haste; for the challenges we failed to face; for the times we did the best we could, and it wasn't good enough? Hearts breaking open -- that is how *Kol Nidre* feels and why we feel compelled to hear it year after year, to remind us of our frailty, of our humanity.

Why do we fast this day? If not to tear down of the walls we construct to protect ourselves? If not to expose our vulnerability? No longer stuffed and bloated with food and drink, our senses are heightened and we can achieve greater clarity. We are given an unobstructed vision of our most fundamental selves; and a greater, more honest and whole relationship with God. When we come before the Eternal One in humility and brokenness, God hears us and responds to our pleas for God loves the brokenhearted -- their honesty, humbleness, and vulnerability -- most of all.

And if that is not enough, our prayers this day expose every crack and crevice within us: where we are weak; where we went wrong; where we wish we could take back what we said or did; who we wished we could be, but weren't.

We beat our breasts and cry: "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofee*; we are arrogant, brutal, careless, destructive, egocentric, false; greedy, heartless, insolent, and joyless. Our sins are an alphabet of woes." What a moment of great personal exposure this declaration is . . . if we are fully present in it. During this

day, we confess over and over again, ten times in fact, “*Al Chet sh’khatanu l’fanekh*; we sin against You . . .” for failures of truth, for failures of justice, for failures of love.

Yet, we recite this long list together because while no one has committed all of these transgressions, most of us have done something on the list and, in this way, no one has to stand alone and exposed. Like all human beings, we are limited, flawed, and prone to err. Yet it is our vulnerability, our imperfection that is precisely what makes us lovable. If we think about it: perfection is admired, but not loved. And don’t we all, fundamentally, want to be loved?

Well known social worker, author, and lecturer, Brene Brown, whose life’s work is on this subject writes in her book, *Daring Greatly* (p.34): “Admitting our vulnerability, learning to live with “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure” is letting God in. It is also key to a meaningful life. Why? Because that’s how we connect to others and connecting to others what makes life worth living.

This is Brown’s story: She was happily doing research on human behavior specifically, “connection,” because as she puts it, “connection” is why we are here, it is what gives life purpose and a sense of wellbeing.” The *Torah* says it this way: “*Lo tov heyot adam levado* – it is not good for a person to be alone.

Brene Brown found that those who can connect have a sense of self worth and that sense of ‘being enough’ allows them to lean into the messiness of life, to become vulnerable. While vulnerability can seem to be about shame, fear, and our struggle for worthiness, it is also “the birthplace of joy creativity longing and love.” Pretty much all the emotions come from a place of vulnerability; feeling happy risks the possibility of disappointment; loving opens us to rejection and the pain of loss.

Brene Brown is a research scientist. Up until this point, she operated under the motto, “what you can’t measure, does not exist.” Her goal was to tidy up the messy nature of human relations. She thought the way to live was “to control and predict.” Vulnerability?!? She hated even the word let alone what it demanded.

So what happened next? She had, as she puts it, “a little breakdown.” As a scientist and a self-confessed perfectionist, “vulnerable” was the last thing she wanted to be. It took about a year for her to regain her equilibrium. She says it was like a street fight between her and vulnerability. She lost, but won her life back. From that “broken, broken open” place, as she calls it, she did *teshuvah*, she repented by re-orienting her work to study “vulnerability.”

Let’s take a look at what she discovered. She asked her subjects to complete the sentence, “Vulnerability is....” Think for a moment: what would you say? [pause] These are just a few of the responses she received: vulnerability is sharing an unpopular opinion; vulnerability is standing up for myself; vulnerability is asking for help; vulnerability is saying no; vulnerability is starting my own business; vulnerability is helping my thirty-seven year old wife with stage four breast cancer make decisions about her will; vulnerability is initiating sex with my spouse; vulnerability is calling a friend whose child died; vulnerability is falling in love; vulnerability is admitting I am afraid; vulnerability is being accountable; vulnerability is asking for forgiveness; vulnerability is having faith . . .

Vulnerability is not what you thought, is it? I bet you were thinking

vulnerability is just being weak or narcissistic, or without boundaries; letting it all hang out, wearing your emotions on your shirt sleeves. Not true. Vulnerability is about courage, authenticity and faith. Being vulnerable is being real, showing up, living your truth. It's about seeing yourself and others *btzelem elohim*, as being in God's image.

It's like the African greeting: "I see you." I love that greeting! Like everyone else, we want to be seen as human beings first, not as "the doctor," "the lawyer," "the rabbi," or "the Temple President." Don't we know people, who when told, "Nice to see you", reply, "It is good to be seen." They think they are being funny, but how profound they are really being! For if we think about it; how often do people really "see" us? And how often do we really "see" the people in our life?

A recent article in *ejewishphilanthropy.com*, entitled, "Reinventing Synagogues: From Within," says: "Synagogues that flourish in this new era trumpet this fundamental Jewish value: 'No one belongs here more than you! Whether you or your Jewish family includes special needs, multi-ethnicity, LGBTQ, interfaith partners, older adults, empty nesters, young people, recovery from addiction, healing from brokenness or more, we embrace you always.'"

*Ohef Sholom* certainly strives to be a place like that, a place of connection for all who enter our community. It's not easy. For one thing, it's a really vulnerable moment when a new person walks into a synagogue for the first time. I've watched countless people enter our doors over the years, some successfully, some not and I have counseled many to give it time.

That is why every year before the High Holidays, I put together a *Teshuvah* Speaker Series, so you can hear people's stories, make connections with them, be inspired by them, and learn from them. If you are one of the thirty-six people who has answered my call over these past twelve years, I want to thank you for your willingness, your openness, your honesty, and, yes, your vulnerability. Most of you were hesitant and didn't think you had a story to tell, but, if being a rabbi has taught me anything, it is that everyone has a story. And all of you confessed afterward, that it was an amazing experience to put your spiritual journey, your Jewish journey down on paper and, even more so, to share it with your community of faith, of fellow travelers in life.

This year, from Alicia Willson Metzger we learned that we can all reach God through our common language of music. Lori Galbraith taught us that when she was young, she had to be Jewish, she was given no choice; after having her daughter, she needed to be Jewish so she could pass on our tradition to the next generation; and, only after living a life filled with great joy and tremendous pain, does she want to be Jewish. And Ross Firoved, who was left an orphan by the age of twelve, said, "Judaism doesn't tell you to make lemonade out of lemons. It gives you the tools to deal with the lemons life inevitably gives you."

So, too, our liturgy tonight tells us how to mitigate judgment's severe degree – through *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah*. *Teshuvah*, an honest and thorough examining of the soul, making amends to those we have harmed, striving to do and be better to ourselves and others in the coming year. *Tefillah*, opening our selves in humility to a God that sees us in all our brokenness and wants nothing more than to forgive us and to give us strength to live with our scars.

*Tzedakah*, showing kindness and compassion to others because, everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”

One last story about the *Baal Shem Tov* also known as the *Besht*: As the Holy Days were approaching, he held auditions for who would have the honor of blowing the shofar. It was a big deal to blow the shofar for the congregation of the *Besht* and many people “tried out,” and some were very good!

Finally, the last man approached the *bema*; he was shaking before he even reached the first step and he collapsed into a puddle of tears before he could get through even half the shofar calls. He felt like such a failure and was about to slink away when the *Besht* said: “you shall blow the shofar for us this *Rosh Hashanah*.”

The man was stunned. “Why me?” he asked.

Because yours is an open heart and it is only through a “broken, broken open” heart that our prayers reach God.

It is like the parable of the King who lives in a palace. The palace has many chambers all of which are locked. The King resides in the innermost chamber.”

The “King” of course is God, and the question, tonight especially, is how can we get access to that innermost chamber? How can we break through? According to the *Besht*, an open vulnerable heart acts like an ax and brings us right into the Holy of Holies, whether it be in relationship to God or in relationship to those created in God’s image, you and me.

Tomorrow we will read these lines from the Torah: “See I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse; choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live.” Choosing life means embracing our vulnerability. Choosing life means being willing to take risks in our relationships, in our work, in almost every aspect of our lives. Choosing life means things like showing up for Shabbat services because you know you need it, even though you’ve never been before and are likely not to know anyone there. Choosing life means taking the risk to invest in or re-commit to a relationship that may not work out. Choosing life means being with a friend while he or she waits for a call from the doctor. Choosing life means reaching out, in forgiveness, to a family member or friend with whom you’ve had a falling out . . . even if you believe they were in the wrong, even if it is hard, or it unmasks old pain.

Ask yourself, tonight of all nights, what would it take for you to really show up with an open, vulnerable heart; for you to take any chance you might need to take in life which might expose you to hurt, but which also may provide you great connection, meaning, fulfillment, and joy?

To live is to be vulnerable, to live life fully, to choose life, is to embrace our vulnerability. “Can we cry here?” I certainly hope so, but that is a choice each of us will have to make. I pray we each choose wisely and well, that our choices help us navigate life’s storms, and that each of us is blessed with a New Year of health, a year of openness to life’s endless possibilities, and, above all, to a year of life filled with love. Amen.

\* I am indebted to my colleague, Rabbi George Gittelman, for his research and sermon on Vulnerability.