

During Covid: Self-Reflection of a Different Nature

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New Yorker Carey Mott tells this classic New York story: “I was at the 68th Street-Hunter College Station, standing in a neat row of commuters dressed in suits and punching dumbly at the keys of the MetroCard machines that all seemed to be down. A construction worker came bounding down the stairs. He was smiling and went straight to the booth. I stepped over to stand behind him. He was covered head to toe in concrete dust. A line began to form behind me.

“Fill it up,” he said to the woman in the booth, handing her a MetroCard and a crisp \$50.00 bill lightly coated with the same dust.

“Sorry,” he said – still smiling, “I’m a little dirty. But, I guess that means I’m doing all right, you know? If I’m clean, that means I’m broke. But if I’m dirty, I’m doing all right.”

I love the story. Partly because it’s hard not to be drawn to the good natured and jovial construction worker. Also, for me, the story resonates because – and maybe it’s just the rabbi in me – in it I hear a lesson about life. Making our way in this world – simply living day by day – by definition, means that we are going to make mistakes – that we are going to ‘get dirty.’ Our goal in life is not to remain perfectly clean. But rather, as the dirt accumulates, we are supposed to acknowledge it and try to wipe it clean.

This, as we know, is the purpose of the High Holy Days. The music, the poetry, the fasting, the prayers all invite us to engage in *teshuvah* – to ‘clear our slate,’ if you will. Truth be told, however, Yom Kippur can be difficult. This day we focus upon our failings and misdeeds. We do so through the ominous imagery of divine judgement. And we literally beat upon our chest as we recall our transgressions: *Ashamnu....Bagadnu....* – as we did earlier this morning.

During most years, the metaphors feel powerful – indeed appropriate – as they are intended wake us into making necessary change. However, I have to confess that this year feels different. Following what has felt like endless months of struggling with Covid, I must admit that I – like so many, if not all of us – am feeling drained emotionally and spiritually. This year, Yom Kippur’s call for us to consider a long litany of errors feels more punitive than productive. Our souls – like a part of the body that has been deeply bruised by a hard fall and is now sensitive to the touch – simply do not feel up to the regular process of stark self-reflection.

As we gather on this Day of Atonement, I can’t help but believe that our introspection is of a different nature.

Another New York story.....A few weeks ago, Emily and I had the opportunity to be in the audience for a taping of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. Emily is a longtime-bigtime fan

of Colbert and recently she admitted that seeing him “live” was on her bucket list. So.....for her birthday....we went. It was awesome. After waiting in several lines, we were warmly ushered into the famous Ed Sullivan Theater – where we took our seats in the fourth row. The pre-show comedian was terrific. Jon Batiste and his musical group were amazing. And then, Colbert came out for some relaxed Q and A. Daniel Radcliff was the guest – an extra treat as our family has read all of the Harry Potter books and seen the movies multiple times! One of my favorite moments, though, took place during Colbert’s monologue. About half way through a joke, he stumbled over his words. Realizing what had happened, Colbert paused and told his crew that he wanted to start the joke over again. He then turned to everyone seated in the audience and, after assuring us that his mistake would get cleaned up in post-production, he said to us: “Just don’t tell anyone that I’m not perfect.”

We laughed, of course.....not only because it was Colbert, but also – I think – because it was uplifting to have him point out his fallibility in such an easy-going and light hearted way. Since that night, the moment of Colbert’s miscue has stayed with me. I have been thinking a lot about imperfection: how it is an inherent part of who we are; how natural it is to wish that we somehow had our own life-revising post-production crew that could edit away our mistakes. Even the name of Colbert’s house band – Stay Human - has sounded like a reminder to not expect more of ourselves than is reasonable.

This idea was well understood by our rabbis. And, in fact, Jewish tradition brings forward numerous subtle, yet significant reminders of how our lack-of-perfection and lack-of-completeness are essential. For example, there is an interesting rabbinic custom that when a new home is built, the owner is supposed to leave a small part of the house unfinished: a section of wall unpainted, a beam exposed..... something to keep the construction incomplete.

Similarly, when a larger amount of challah dough is being prepared for baking, there is a rabbinic practice – prior to putting the challah into the oven – of, first, removing and discarding a small piece of the dough from the whole. Here, too, preventing it from being complete.

As one last example, it may come as a surprise to learn that even a Torah scroll – a text whose holiness hints at perfection – actually has within it a handful of grammatical errors. Scholars tell us that these are simply scribal errors – erroneous writing that took place long before the availability of computer proof-reading. Notably, however, our sages were well aware of these mistakes. Yet rather than fix them – as they certainly could have done! – they chose to keep the Torah as it was. Now, the mistakes are addressed when the Torah is read aloud in the synagogue – with the grammar corrected by the reader. But the Torah’s written errors remain.

One might ask, though: If recognizing our innate imperfection is so essential, why is it that the symbolism that I just mentioned is so understated? Challah baked without a bit of its dough is not obviously lacking anything. Nor is a home necessarily noticeably flawed if the part of the house left undone is hidden from view. As well, a Torah’s scribal errors are only evident to those who are studying the text so that they might read it correctly. Why not make this

symbolism more obvious? More pronounced? The answer, I think, is that our tradition is trying to offer us a different, but complementary teaching: that while our mistakes are part of being human, we are more than our mistakes. Our errors do not define us. And, as such, we are supposed to see them as a means to help us to grow.

Early this past summer, the multi-million-dollar media company HBO Max erroneously sent an email to a significant percentage of its subscribers. The subject line read: "Integration Test Email #1" and the content only read: "This template is used by integration tests only." Most of the customers who received the message, just deleted it. Others, though, not surprisingly took to social media to make fun of the company's error. To their credit, HBO Max took it all in stride. They sent a follow-up message to all of their customers that said - quote: "We mistakenly sent out an empty test email to a portion of our HBO Max mailing list this evening. We apologize for the inconvenience, and as the jokes pile in, "Yes," it was the intern. No really. And we're helping them through it." To seal the message of support, HBO Max management concluded the post with a heart emoji.

Now, the story simply could have ended here. But it didn't. The empathetic email from HBO generated a wave of Twitter support for this unknown intern. Hundreds of people sent messages with the hashtag Dear Intern – causing it to trend for days. The notes included not only messages of encouragement, but movingly, personal examples of times when the senders themselves had blown it.

Dear Intern --- one post began – as a very young copywriter I once had to write a brochure about a prescription drug that "reduces mortality in patients." But it turns out I actually wrote that it reduces MORALITY in patients. Nobody caught it until 50,000 were printed.

Dear Intern --- said another ---- I once globally took down Spotify. It almost happened twice. My team was awesome about it and I'm still here. You managed to find something broken in the way integration tests are done. It's a good thing and will help improve things. Good luck!

My personal favorite:

Dear Intern, When I was 25 I had made a PDF ((document for myself)) assigning each employee ((in the office)) to the Muppet they reminded me of the most. I meant to send it to my work friend, but I accidentally sent it to the entire company. My supervisor (Beaker) wanted to fire me, but the owners (Bert and Ernie) intervened.

In a similar example of strength through solidarity, for the past eleven years, Finland has celebrated what it call a National Day of Failure. It was started by a group of university students who realized that – over the coming years – Finland would need thousands of new businesses and jobs. However, because high standards are so strongly emphasized in Finnish culture, the students worried that people would be reluctant to take a risk – to start something new – for fear of failure. And so, the National Day of Failure was born – a day on which people are

encouraged to share their stories of falling short and the accompanying lessons that they learned. The day immediately struck a chord. And, today, it is so popular in Finland that it has garnered support from many of the country's biggest names in politics, business, and sports.

In some respects, Yom Kippur is the Jewish people's National Day of Failure. We gather together on this day in no-small-part to remind us that in our very human fallibility, we are not alone. It is, by the way, as Rabbi Julie mentioned last night, one of the reasons that the *Ashamnu* prayer that I mentioned earlier is not written in the singular. It is written in the plural. *Ashamnu* – We are guilty. We have transgressed.

And, while this prayer is traditionally accompanied by our fist tapping our chest, there is a beautiful teaching that tells us that this gesture is not about punching or punishing ourselves. But rather, it is a reminder of God's compassionate closeness as we engage in our self-reflection.

The Song of Songs is a Biblical book that speaks of the relationship between God and the people of Israel as one of love. Its pages are filled with poetry that is often quoted at Jewish weddings. In one particular text, we hear the voice of the people sensing God's nearness.

Ani y'sheinah....v'libi ayr.....kol....dodi dofek. Pitchi Li.

"I was asleep....but my heart was wakeful.....Hark, my beloved knocks. ((My beloved asks:)) Let me in."

In the context of the *Ashamnu* prayer, rather than our being awakened to *teshuvah* by beating our chests, instead, the poetic imagery here is that of God gently tapping upon our hearts – wanting to be allowed in – wanting to extend us the forgiveness that we need and deserve.

In the spirit of this essential Yom Kippur teaching, a message that I believe to be resonant during this time of Covid-weariness – as we seek repentance – comes from the 19th century French Carmelite Nun, Therese of Lisieux. She wrote:

"Our faults cannot hurt God. Nor will our faults interfere with our own holiness – ((for)),” she continued: “genuine holiness is a matter of enduring our own imperfections patiently.”

On this Yom Kippur morning, just as we are called upon to be understanding of others.....so may we be understanding of ourselves.

As we are called upon to be gracious with others.....so may we be gracious with ourselves.

As we are called upon to be forgiving of others.....so may we be forgiving of ourselves.

Cain y'hi ratzon. Be this God's will....and ours. Amen.