

YK morning 5780/October 9th 2019

Practicing failure, rehearsing resilience

Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

On Yom Kippur, we examine our actions and our hearts as honestly as we can. We go down to plumb the murkiest, messiest depths of ourselves. We acknowledge the moments in the year when we feel we've failed - failed ourselves, failed other people, failed God. But we don't go there alone. Throughout Yom Kippur, we call on, we are supported by, we trust in the ultimate love of God as the ultimate parent. Avinu Malkeinu, our Father, our King. Imeinu Malkateinu, our Mother, our Queen. Like any loving parent, God tries to give us tools with which to keep ourselves healthy and sane - to keep us from hurtling head-first down that spiral staircase of shame and fear and doubt. God says, slow down. Use your feet. Think before you step. Where do you want to go?

Yom Kippur is our yearly day to **practice** reaching the bottom of that staircase, and to **practice** moving beyond it, in a spiritually safe, ritualized space. I believe that God gives us this day, this day of atonement, in part so that when we are bowled over during any other time in the year - when perhaps we're not surrounded by our loving community, when we're not feeling connected to God, when we're tired and confused and a million obligations pull us in every direction - then, when we need it most, we can find that we have the tools to be resilient.

Failure is awful. It feels, smells, tastes bad. But failure can be a powerful teacher.

In 2008 I heard the author JK Rowling address fresh-faced, crimson-gowned young graduates at Harvard, with these words:

"Why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me... rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life."¹

In most arenas of our lives, when we experience failure, it's hard to find the positivity with which Rowling describes it. As a parent, I fear failure, all the time, both the reality and the perception of failure. I think that many parents do. We fear the perception of failure because of our own egos. We fear the reality of failure, because we love our children. But sometimes a failure helps teach us exactly how MUCH we love our children. Our personal stress, the million and one other claims on our time: those get stripped away. We become just parents again. Completely focused on our children, giving our whole energy and attention to the situation at hand. And suddenly ready and willing to learn from it, because we have to.

One morning last month became what I call, in my head, The Horrible Morning with Jonathan and Benjamin. I was tired, they were tired, they screamed, I yelled, and Jonathan had an epic meltdown at school dropoff, kicking and thrashing, hysterical at getting water on his sneakers. I had to peel his arms off my neck in order to let a teacher hold him firmly, as I walked away across the field, his screams following me.

I felt like I had failed as a mother, that particular morning. I cried after I dropped Jonathan off; I kicked myself for my lack of self-control. And I realized that no matter how tired or cranky I was or how many High Holy Day sermons were left to write, I had to up my game. I am their mother. In that moment of failure, that was my ONLY job. I had to figure out what was going on between us and how to make it better, because I never wanted either of us to feel like that again.

That evening, I called home to check in with Mike and the kids before bedtime. Both boys were playing happily and chattered away about their days, the tacos they were eating, what Jonathan had drawn at school. I got Jonathan on the phone and told him I was sorry that I'd yelled at him that morning - that I'd been really frustrated but I shouldn't have yelled, and that he didn't deserve it. Then I heard his little voice say, "Mama, **I'm** sorry I yelled at you too." I almost started crying again. I told him I loved him, and we promised

each other to try again in the morning.

I slept that night. And the next morning, I remembered what had happened, and I was more careful not to enter the feedback loop of anger. And it was better. (Not that I never got mad at my kids again. That's a tallit on my back, not a pair of wings.) From that place of failure, though, I'd learned something. But I couldn't learn the lesson in the thick of my anger. I needed space and time to calm down. I needed to think about it in a place of rest. And I needed to practice not getting angry the next time the opportunity presented itself.

In March of this year, I read an NPR story on Jean Briggs, a researcher who lived with the Alaskan Inuits for a year in 1970-71 in order to study their indigenous culture. She was immediately struck by how even-keeled the people she lived among seemed. Nobody got visibly angry. Nobody raised their voice. Adults with small kids never yelled at them or scolded them. She wondered how. And then Briggs started to observe the parenting technique that helped to shape such calm, centered behaviour.

From the interview:

"She was walking on a stony beach in the Arctic when she saw a young mother playing with her toddler — a little boy about 2 years old. The mom picked up a pebble and said, "Hit me! Go on. Hit me harder," Briggs remembered.

The boy threw the rock at his mother, and she exclaimed, "Ooooww. That hurts!"

...When a child in the camp acted in anger — hit someone or had a tantrum — there was no punishment. Instead, the parents waited for the child to calm down and then, in a peaceful moment, did something that Shakespeare would understand all too well: They put on a drama...

The parent would act out what happened when the child misbehaved, including the real-life consequences of that behavior.

...The parent repeat[ed] the drama from time to time until the child stop[ped]

*hitting the mom during the dramas and the misbehavior end[ed]."*²

I read this article with wonder and curiosity and not a little envy. Parenting is some of the most rewarding work I've been privileged to do in my life. It allows me to accompany two small, sparkling, endlessly curious souls and sweetly rounded bodies, as they dig their small hands deep into the mud of life and shape it into forms I could never have dreamed of. I love my kids totally and deliriously and without reservation. Parenting can also feel frustrating beyond my wildest nightmares. How, HOW do these Alaskan parents keep from, at the very least, telling their children to "stop that right now!" What magic lives up there? Or are they just more evolved parents than I?

When the shame and self-blame subsided (see a pattern here?), I went back to the article and read it again, more carefully. And I discovered that the Alaskan Inuits are actually helping their community members do what humans already do best: **to form habits**, and to do so through play and repetition under very controlled circumstances.

"The dramas offer kids a chance to practice controlling their anger", Miller said, "during times when they're not actually angry."

Wow. What a gift. How many times a day - a week - a year - do I take time out to practice how I might best behave in the grip of strong emotions? Ask most parents you know if they have a "theory of parenting" that they painstakingly researched, possibly debated with a partner, fully committed to before the arrival of their first child... and as often as not, that theory is a tattered rag on the floor by the end of the first few months of childrearing. We are simply overwhelmed by the messy physicality and messier emotions that raising a new life dumps us into. Instead of responding, we react. "Rational thinking" can seem like a fatuous dream.

Our old habits are overwhelmed, and our lives, tied to our kids', change faster, it often seems, than we can form new ones. This is true of many great identity shifts. As we shed our old skins to let the new ones fully emerge, we sometimes lose part of what we've practiced in our old incarnations.

But without habits, our reactions jerk us around.

Judaism is a religion of habits. In prayer, we value keva, fixed and regular, repetitive practice, as deeply as kavannah, heartfelt and unpredictable intention. We make our habits physical as well as spiritual: putting on a prayer shawl. Winding t'fillin around our arms and laying them on our heads - you never forget the satisfying firm grip of the leather around your forearm, when you get the tension just right. Weekly, on Shabbat, we light candles and make kiddush and motzi. The warmth and focus of the flame, and the heavy sweetness of the grapevine's fruit, and the softness of the challah in our mouths, all impress on us the Divine offer of rest and delight, oneg. Our prayers are at consistent times of day: morning, midday and evening, timing the rhythms of our souls' turning to God, to the rhythms of our bodies' needs.

And once a year, on Yom Kippur, we practice failure. We fast, letting our bodies feel the precariousness of running on empty. We trip over our own tongues as we castigate ourselves with the strongest language of disapproval that we can find. "We have sinned, we have disobeyed, we have spoken falsely, we have gossiped maliciously." We strike our own chests, "klopping al cheit," giving ourselves the public punishment that we fear we deserve. We are sincere. We know how many times we've made harmful choices, mistakes, missed opportunities, hurt people we love (including ourselves). But we also know, in the back of our minds, that we will probably survive this spiritual harrowing. We will still be here at the end of Ne'ilah. So will our shortcomings. The real question is, once we have practiced for a day in a safe space, what will we do to truly begin to change the habits that lead us down that darkened staircase?

On Yom Kippur, we address God throughout the day as "Av Harachamim," "Merciful Parent." On Yom Kippur, I believe we also must think and pray about **ourselves**, all of us, as parents - whether or not we're raising, or have raised, young children. We are the generation before the generation to come. We are people in charge of a world in which other people will grow up. What are we preparing for our children, our nieces and nephews, our friends, our neighbours, our students, our patients? How can we cultivate both principles and practices, on Yom Kippur, that will help us and them be resilient, even when the world's foundations seem suddenly shaky?

We may worry that we are failing the next generations, as we consider what's happening to Earth on our watch: rising global temperatures and sea levels, shrinking populations and biodiversity of animals and plants alike, water and earth and air that are becoming more toxic. Will the birdsongs we grew up hearing, vanish from the air before our children can learn them?

We may worry that we are failing the next generations, as we consider the welcome that greets people displaced by climate change. Country after country - including ours - says of migrants driven from the newly inhospitable climates of Guatemala, El Salvador, the Sudan, the Bahamas, "We don't want them. We can't take them." Rachmonis, mercy, is in short supply. If parts of America become uninhabitable - will we expect the refuge we denied to others?

Yom Kippur is here to teach us about our responsibilities when the time comes for us to confront failure, or its approach. Just nine days after the Akeidah, the Binding of Yitzchak, forces us to consider Avraham's failings as a father, Yom Kippur holds a mirror close to our own faces, no flinching aside. Yom Kippur says, don't just moan with your heads in your hands. Don't wait till the waves are at your shoulders. Make of your prayers and your regrets, a battering ram, and hammer on the gates of heaven until they open.

Yom Kippur teaches us that the surest way to move forward from a time of failure, is to reflect, articulate both our shortcomings and our values, and then

to act on them. The Haftarah from this morning is explicit. Solu, solu! Panu darekh! Harimu michshol miderekh ami.³ Build up a highway, clear a road, remove all roadblocks from the way My people need to walk. Don't sit in your misery, says God. Build yourself a new way. And lest we feel unclear about what kinds of action are most effective, God (through the prophet Y'shayahu or Isaiah) gets into the nitty-gritties with us. Look at page 557 in your machzor, the translation of Isaiah 58, which Morry just chanted so beautifully for us. "This is the fast I desire...to let the oppressed go free, to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to offer clothing, and not to ignore your own kin....If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand, and evil speech, and you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the famished creature - Then shall your light shine in darkness."⁴ I hear God saying, take those actions that are within your power, and don't equivocate.

A new commitment to personal action and engagement has emerged among the climate scientist community, to combat the scientists' sharp sense of failure and deep grief over what their data show. Kim Cobb, a professor of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Georgia Tech, fell into a profound depression about climate change in the fall of 2016. *"On New Year's Day [2017]...she made a "climate resolution": She would walk her kids to school twice a week and ride a bike to work twice a week. (She went on to become a daily bike commuter.) She put solar panels on her roof. She became a vegetarian."* Cobb built herself new practices. And she invited other scientists to join her, [saying:] *"You don't have to know where we'll end up. You just have to know what path we're on."*⁵

We don't have to know where we'll end up. We just have to know what path we're on. Sometimes we have to build that path up for ourselves. And when we can identify and build a collective road, when we invite others to join us on the path we have discerned, how much more does our despair diminish and our hope, increase. Remember the plural audience of Y'shayahu: not "Soli, soli" or "Sol, sol" - not to just one person. "Solu." That's Hebrew for "Y'all." Some highways cannot be built by a single pair of hands. When we join or create a group that fights for what we need, we heal.

So when we come to a failure in our lives, personal or communal: here's our God-given blueprint. We stop. We acknowledge what we've done wrong. We clear away the debris of shame and collateral damage and identify what we value most - what we most need to carry with us or rebuild from any ruin, God forbid. And then we figure out how to care for that shining thing, and we follow through.

Olympian soccer champion Abby Wambach gives it to us straight, in her 2018 Commencement address to the graduates of Barnard College. "*Listen: Failure is not something to be ashamed of, it's something to be powered by. Failure is the highest octane fuel your life can run on. You gotta learn to make failure your fuel. [I knew I'd have to, by] letting the feelings and lessons of failure transform into my power. Failure is fuel. Fuel is power.*"⁶

God is with us in this work, a steadying hand outstretched, every step of the way. And in Their enormous love, God gives us a yearly Yom Kippur boot-camp, a crash course: how to let failure transform our power. How to make failure not an end, but a beginning.

Our practice clock is slowly running down. The New Year awaits us on the other side, roaring, ready to flood us with all the ways the world is going wrong. How will we respond?

Let us take what we love and run with it, rather than freeze up in the face of failure. **That's** our work, in every brilliant and broken moment of our lives.

G'mar chatimah tovah. This year, may we be sealed into resilience and into hope.

Notes:

1. Rowling, JK, Commencement address to graduating class at Harvard University, June 5th 2008, as printed in the *Harvard Gazette*. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2008/06/text-of-j-k-rowling-speech/>

2. Doucleff, Michaeleen and Jane Greenhalgh "How Inuit Parents Teach Kids to Control Their Anger," published by *NPR* on March 13th, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/03/13/685533353/a-playful-way-to-teach-kids-to-control-their-anger>

3. Isaiah 57:13

4. Isaiah 58:6-8, as translated in Machzor Hadash

5. Corn, David "It's the end of the world as they know it," published by *Mother Jones* on July 8th 2019. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2019/07/weight-of-the-world-climate-change-scientist-grief/>

6. Wambach, Abby, remarks as delivered at Barnard College's 2018 Commencement; transcript published on Barnard's website. <https://barnard.edu/commencement/archives/2018/abby-wambach-remarks>