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### **An Imitation of Death Through the Power of Vulnerability**

EACH YEAR, MY RABBINICAL SCHOOL HOSTS A 3 DAY RETREAT  
TO KICK OFF THE SCHOOL YEAR.

ONE YEAR, A BELOVED PROFESSOR WAS NOTICEABLY ABSENT.

NO ONE KNEW WHERE HE WAS.

WHEN WE RETURNED TO SCHOOL,

EVERY SINGLE STUDENT AND FACULTY RECEIVED A LETTER

IN THEIR MAILBOX.

IT WAS FROM OUR PROFESSOR

EXPLAINING THAT HE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO BE AT SCHOOL THIS

SEMESTER BECAUSE HE HAD CHECKED INTO A REHAB FACILITY

FOR STRUGGLES WITH ADDICTION.

HIS LETTER DELIBERATELY REBUKED THE CULTURE OF SHAME

INHIBITING THOSE WHO SUFFER FROM ADMITTING THEIR HARDSHIP,

THUS CAUSING THEM TO SUFFER DOUBLY.

HIS HONESTY AND HUMILITY STIRRED US.

OUR PROFESSOR, A HIGHLY RESPECTED SCHOLAR →

AND RABBINIC AUTHORITY SHARED HONESTLY AND RAWLY WITH US.

BUT SOMETHING EVEN MORE POWERFUL

SUBSEQUENTLY OCCURRED AT SCHOOL.

MY PROFESSOR'S LETTER TRANSFORMED THE STUDENTS AND FACULTY  
BY MODELING ACKNOWLEDGING ONE'S VULNERABILITIES.

HIS LETTER OFFERED A SPACE FOR OTHERS TO SHARE OPENLY.

IT TOOK THE SHAME OUT OF TABOO TOPICS.

HE DEMONSTRATED THAT JUDAISM ACCEPTS AND ENCOURAGES  
SHARING OUR VULNERABILITIES.

AS MY PROFESSOR WROTE IN HIS LETTER,

“WE TEND TO READ OUR TEXTS ABOUT SUFFERING AND PAIN

AS IF THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE,

BUT THEN DISCOVER THE PEOPLE ARE US.”

AS A SCHOOL, WE GREW CLOSER AND STRONGER THROUGH HIS

EXAMPLE. WE REALIZED THAT WE CRAVED HONEST SHARING

EVEN WHILE FEARING BEING GENUINLY RAW.

YOM KIPPUR HARNESSSES THIS EXACT FEELING.

IT DEMANDS US TO BE VULNERABLE.

IN TURN, WE REAP THE LIBERATING POTENTIAL

OF REVEALING OUR AUTHENTIC SELVES TO THE ETERNAL.

THE TRANSCENDENT IS PRESENT IN THE ENTIRETY OF OUR EXPERIENCE:

OUR CAPABLE COMPETENT SIDES AS WELL AS OUR WEAK ONES.

AUTHENTICITY BEFORE THE TRANSCENDENT

IS THE CRUX OF YOM KIPPUR.

*TESHUVAH* LITERALLY MEANS “TO RETURN TO GOD.”

THE ENTIRE REASON WE HAVE *TESHUVAH*

IS BECAUSE GOD DOES NOT EXPECT PERFECTION.

THE PROPHET ZECHARIAH

REITERATES GOD’S MESSAGE OF LOVE AND COMPASSION:

“RETURN TO ME, SAYS THE ETERNAL, AND I WILL RETURN TO YOU.”<sup>1</sup>

WE WILL READ ABOUT THIS HONEST AND DIRECT RELATIONSHIP

WITH GOD FROM THE TORAH TOMORROW MORNING:

GOD SAYS, “FOR THIS COMMANDMENT WHICH I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY,

**IT IS NOT TOO HARD FOR YOU**, NEITHER IS IT FAR OFF.

IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN THAT YOU SHOULD SAY:

'WHO SHALL GO UP FOR US TO HEAVEN, AND BRING IT TO US,

AND MAKE US TO HEAR IT, THAT WE MAY DO IT?'

NEITHER IS IT BEYOND THE SEA THAT YOU SHOULD SAY:

'WHO SHALL GO OVER THE SEA FOR US, AND BRING IT TO US,

AND MAKE US HEAR IT, THAT WE MAY DO IT?'

**IT IS WITHIN YOUR CLOSE REACH**

TO CONNECT TO THE ETERNAL IN YOUR MOUTH AND HEART”<sup>2</sup>

GOD DOES NOT DESIRE PERFECTION,

JUST OUR AUTHENTICITY AND STRIVING.

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<sup>1</sup> Zachariah 1:3.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 30:10-14.

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THE DESIRE TO CONNECT THROUGH SHARING OUR VULNERABILITIES  
IS A UNIVERSAL LONGING.

IN FACT, THE OTHER DAY I LISTENED TO A TED TALK ON THIS THEME.

IS ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH TED TALKS?

THEY ARE RECORDED INSPIRATIONAL LECTURES

PEOPLE CAN WATCH OR DOWNLOAD,

INSPIRING US TO BETTER OURSELVES AND THE WORLD.

AND DO YOU KNOW THE MOST DOWNLOADED TALK?

IT'S A LECTURE BY BRENÉ BROWN,

A RESEARCHER WHO STUDIES VULNERABILITY.<sup>3</sup>

THE MOST LISTENED TO TALK

TEACHES THAT EMBRACING OUR VULNERABILITIES AND IMPERFECTIONS

ENABLES US TO LIVE MORE MEANINGFUL LIVES.

BROWN'S RESEARCH IS ENGROSSING,

AND I ENCOURAGE YOU TO LISTEN TO HER YOURSELVES,

BUT MOST CAPTIVATING FOR ME

IS THAT OF THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER

THE WORLD WHO WATCH THESE,

WHAT CONCERNS PEOPLE MOST, IS VULNERABILITY:

OUR FEAR AND SHAME OF TRULY BEING SEEN.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html).

AS BROWN LIKES TO DESCRIBE HERSELF,  
SHE'S MORE OF THE "LIFE'S MESSY, CLEAN IT UP, ORGANIZE IT,  
AND PUT IT INTO A BENTO BOX" TYPE OF PERSON.  
SHE STARTED HER RESEARCH WITH THE HOPE  
THAT IF SHE COULD DECONSTRUCT SHAME AND VULNERABILITY,  
SHE'D BE ABLE TO OUTSMART THEM.  
SHE WOULD NEVER HAVE TO FACE THEM.

BROWN FOUND THE MOST CONTENT, MOST HAPPY PEOPLE  
WERE A GROUP SHE TERMED "THE WHOLEHEARTED."  
CHARACTERIZED BY COURAGE,  
THESE PEOPLE SHARED THEMSELVES AUTHENTICALLY WITH OTHERS.  
BRAVELY, THEY SHARED THEIR IMPERFECTIONS.  
THEY WERE WILLING TO LET GO OF WHOM THEY SHOULD BE  
AND JUST BE WHOM THEY TRULY WERE—  
EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE OF BROWN'S COMPARTMENTALIZED  
BENTO BOX EXISTENCE  
WHERE WE ARE SCARED TO EXPLORE FEAR AND DARK SIDES.  
THE WHOLEHEARTED EMBRACED VULNERABILITY.  
THEY BELIEVED THAT ACKNOWLEDGING  
WHAT MADE THEM VULNERABLE, MADE THEM WHOLE.  
THESE PEOPLE WERE WILLING TO SAY "I LOVE YOU" FIRST,  
WILLING TO RISK WITHOUT GUARANTEES.

THEY INVESTED IN RELATIONSHIPS  
 THAT MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT WORK OUT.  
 EACH EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE RISK TAKEN TOWARD OTHERS  
 INCREASED THEIR INTERPERSONAL CONNECTIONS  
 THROUGH THEIR AUTHENTICITY.  
 WITH THE STRENGTH TO SHARE THEIR SHORTCOMINGS, THEIR NEEDS,  
 THEIR FEARS, THEY WERE ABLE TO RELATE TO OTHERS PROFOUNDLY.  
 IF CONNECTION TO OTHERS IS WHAT GIVES PURPOSE AND MEANING →  
 TO OUR LIVES, THEN VULNERABILITY CAN ALSO BE THE BIRTHPLACE  
 OF JOY, BELONGING, AND LOVE.  
 THE WHOLEHEARTED POSSESSED A STRONG SENSE OF WORTHINESS  
 FOUNDED UPON THE DEEP AFFINITY THEY EXPERIENCED  
 FROM SHARING WITH OTHERS.

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YOM KIPPUR OFFERS PRAYER AS A LADDER TO WHOLEHEARTED LIVING.  
 OUR LITURGY ENCOURAGES US TO RISK VULNERABILITY.  
 THE *ASHAMNU* PRAYER, FOR INSTANCE, VOICES OUR WEAKNESSES.  
 WE ENUMERATE THE WAYS WE ARE SCARED, HURTING, INSECURE,  
 JEALOUS.  
*ASHAMNU, BAGADNU, GAZALNU...* “WE HAVE DONE WRONG;  
 WE HAVE BEEN UNFAITHFUL; WE HAVE TAKEN WHAT IS NOT OURS.”  
 WE REVEAL THIS SIDE OF OURSELVES TO THE ETERNAL.  
 MOREOVER, WE RECITE COMMUNALLY,

PROFESSING NOT ONLY THE IMPORTANCE OF REVEALING OURSELVES,  
BUT ALSO THE FORTITUDE FROM COLLECTIVE EXPOSURE, CONFESSION,  
AND CONNECTION.

ORIGINALLY, CONFESSION ON YOM KIPPUR WAS NOT STANDARDIZED.  
EACH INDIVIDUAL OFFERED THEIR OWN EXPRESSION  
REVEALING INNER HURTS.

EVENTUALLY, A FORMAL CONFESSION CODIFIED A VARIETY OF SINS  
DRAMATIZED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER.

THIS ALPHABETICAL ACROSTIC IS A PUZZLE TO MANY SCHOLARS.  
DOESN'T IT FRUSTRATE THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF CONFESSION  
WHEN WE TURN IT INTO A MECHANICAL ACT  
DEVOID OF PERSONAL INWARDNESS?

BEFORE THE DAYS OF PRINTED PRAYER BOOKS,  
THE ALPHABETICAL FORM WAS AN AID TO MEMORY.  
MOREOVER, WHEN THE WHOLE CONGREGATION  
SHARES THE SAME FORM OF CONFESSION,  
INDIVIDUALS ARE SPARED THE POTENTIAL EMBARRASSMENT  
IF THEIR PARTICULAR LISTING OF HIS SINS ARE OVERHEARD. IN FACT,  
THE TALMUD TEACHES, DURING TEMPLE TIMES,

THE SIN-OFFERING WAS SLAUGHTERED IN THE SAME PLACE  
AS THE BURNT OFFERING  
IN ORDER NOT TO EXPOSE AN INDIVIDUAL TO PUBLIC SHAME.  
HOWEVER, WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO THINK OF OUR PARTICULAR ERRS  
WHILE RECITING A STANDARD CONFESSION TOGETHER.

ANOTHER PRAYER, *AL CHET*,  
IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVEAL OURSELVES TO THE ETERNAL.  
*AL CHET SHE'CHATANU L'FANECHA*,  
“FOR THE WRONG WE DID BEFORE YOU  
BY TALKING OF OTHERS' FAILINGS BEHIND THEIR BACK,  
FOR NOT WORKING AT RELATIONSHIPS,  
AND FOR CLOSING OUR EARS TO THE NEEDY....”  
CONFESSION OF OUR SHORTCOMINGS  
IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE YOM KIPPUR LITURGY.  
SEVERAL TIMES DURING SERVICES  
WE RECITE THIS FORM OF *VIDUI*, CONFESSION.

*TESHUVAH*, TURNING INWARD,  
IS A NECESSARY PREREQUISITE FOR CONNECTION TO THE ETERNAL.  
*TESHIVA*, COMES FROM ASSERTING OUR VULNERABILITIES.  
THE POWER OF HONEST EVALUATION AND DISCLOSURE  
HELPS US IMPROVE OUR LIVES.



MANY PEOPLE THINK THEY HAVE TO “KEEP IT TOGETHER” BEFORE GOD,  
THAT IF THEY WERE TO COMPLETELY OPEN UP  
AND CONFESS FEARS AND LONGINGS AND HURTS,  
THEY MIGHT BREAK DOWN ENTIRELY!

BUT THE TRANSCENDENT INVITES US TO USE *ASHAMNU* AND *AL CHET*  
AS MODELS FOR LIBERATING OPENNESS.

GOD DOES NOT DESIRE PERFECTION, JUST AUTHENTICITY AND STRIVING.

SO WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF? WHOM ARE WE ASHAMED BEFORE?

OUT OF THIS SELF-REVELATION COMES THE PROMISE  
OF DEEPER WHOLENESS, BELONGING, AND LOVE.

WHOLENESS, *SHALOM*,

COMES PRECISELY FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

OF THE FULLNESS OF THE WORLD

WITH ITS STABILITIES, INSTABILITIES, AND UNKNOWNNS.

WE FIND SOLACE THAT OTHERS EXPERIENCE THIS, TOO.

PLEASE DON'T MISUNDERSTAND ME,

I AM NOT ADVOCATING FOR SHARING INTIMATE SECRETS

WITH EVERY PERSON WE MEET:

YOM KIPPUR IS BETWEEN US AND THE ETERNAL.

INSTEAD, BY EMBRACING THE RISKS INHERENT IN LIVING A WHOLE LIFE,

WE OFTEN FIND DEEPER HAPPINESS.

EVEN IF WE FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE  
EXPOSING OURSELVES TO POTENTIAL HURTS,  
WE ARE REASSURED KNOWING, AT LEAST DURING THESE DAYS OF AWE,  
THAT THIS IS WHAT THE ETERNAL DESIRES FROM US,  
AND EVERY TIME WE PRAY, REALLY.  
WE RECITE AGAIN AND AGAIN  
THE ETERNAL'S QUALITIES OF CHESED AND RACHAMIM,  
LOVINGKINDNESS AND MERCY, DURING THE DAYS OF AWE.  
THE SOURCE OF LIFE SEEKS OUR WHOLEHEARTEDNESS  
FOR GENUINE CONNECTION.

OUR HIGH HOLIDAY RUBRIC IS TO CONFESS OUR ERRS,  
BUT SHARING OUR VULNERABILITIES  
IS NOT ONLY FOR WRONGS COMMITTED.  
WHOLEHEARTED LIVING IS ACKNOWLEDGING  
THAT **WHAT MAKES US VULNERABLE, MAKES US WHOLE.**  
ONLY THROUGH THE WILLINGNESS TO OPEN OUR HEARTS  
DO WE HOLD THE PROFOUND POTENTIAL FOR INTERNAL UNITY  
AND CONNECTION WITH OTHERS.

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YOM KIPPUR BRINGS US TO EXPERIENCE OUR VULNERABILITY  
BY MAKING OUR RITUALS AND PRAYERS A REHEARSAL FOR OUR DEATHS.

TEN DAYS AGO, ROSH HASHANA WAS ABOUT BIRTH  
AND NOW ON YOM KIPPUR, WE CONFRONT DEATH.  
ON ROSH HASHANA THE WORLD IS REBORN.  
ON YOM KIPPUR WE USE THE SPECTER OF DEATH  
TO GUIDE OUR *TESHUVA* AND CHANGE.  
WE REHEARSE OUR DEATHS BY WEARING A BURIAL SHROUD  
AND ABSTAINING FROM LIFE AFFIRMING ACTIVITIES  
LIKE EATING AND SEX.  
WHY? BECAUSE AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH,  
WE FINALLY SEE OUR LIVES FOR WHAT THEY REALLY ARE.

WE FACE OUR VULNERABILITIES:  
FAILURES, UNCONTROLLABLE IMPULSES, ANGER, LUST, GUILT, JEALOUSY,  
AND GREED.<sup>4</sup>  
MOREOVER, WE CONFRONT FEAR OF DISCONNECTION,  
A FEAR THAT WE POSSESS QUALITIES  
THAT ARE OFF-PUTTING TO OTHERS.<sup>5</sup>

WHEN I SPEAK TO CONGREGANTS  
WHO ARE GOING THROUGH A HARD TIME, I OFFER TO CONNECT THEM  
WITH OTHERS WHO MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP.  
AND I OFTEN HEAR BACK, "I DON'T WANT TO BE A BURDEN,"

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* (Little, Brown and Company: New York) 2003. Pg. 249.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html).

OR “I DON’T WANT TO IMPOSE.”

THEY DON’T WANT TO RISK THIS PERCEIVED SHAME BEFORE OTHERS.

BUT SO OFTEN THE CONNECTION IS MUTUAL AND THE PERSON “HELPING”

IS AS TOUCHED BY THE EXCHANGE AS THE ONE RECEIVING HELP.

WE ARE ALL ABLE TO RELATE TO TIMES OF WEAKNESS.

WE EACH WANT TO BE THERE FOR OTHERS DURING HARD TIMES.

OUR VULNERABILITIES ARE NOT THE ONLY THING DEFINING US,

BUT MANY OF US CARRY AN UNDERCURRENT OF FEAR.

WE THINK THAT ADMITTING ANY KIND OF WEAKNESS

WILL UNDERMINE OR DESTROY US.

BUT YOM KIPPUR’S TASTE OF DEATH INVITES THE INTROSPECTION TO

FACE THESE FEELINGS.

ACKNOWLEDGING THEM ONLY STRENGTHENS US.

BROWN’S RESEARCH ON DECONSTRUCTING VULNERABILITY

POINTS EXACTLY TO OUR PRESSING NEED TO EMBRACE IT

FOR DEEPER CONNECTION TO OUR SOULS AND TO OTHERS.

OUR HIGH HOLIDAY PRAYERS, *ASHAMNU* AND *VIDUI*,

AROUSE THE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WE MIGHT HAVE

AS WE APPROACH THIS ULTIMATE HUMAN EXPERIENCE →

IN ORDER TO HELP US CHANGE AND HONESTLY EXAMINE OURSELVES.

DEATH IS THE MOMENT OF REVELATION.

WE TEAR AWAY AVOIDANCE AND DENIAL.

THESE PRAYERS CARRY US TO A PLACE  
WHERE SELF-EXAMINATION IS POSSIBLE  
WITHOUT OUR USUAL DENIALS AND DEFENSES.

BEARING OUR SOULS OFFERS US THE POSSIBILITY  
OF CONNECTING MORE DEEPLY.

WE STRIP AWAY JUDGMENT AND FEAR  
TO MAKE WAY FOR SINCERE TRUTH.

YOM KIPPUR: A REHEARSAL FOR THE OPENNESS AND VULNERABILITY  
THAT COMES WITH DEATH.

MY TEACHER IN RABBINICAL SCHOOL  
REALIZED THAT ACKNOWLEDGING HIS WEAKNESSES  
OFFERED THE POTENTIAL FOR TRUE DIALOGUE AND CONNECTION.

YOM KIPPUR CALLS US TO BE SEEN—  
TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO EXPOSE OUR *NESHAMOT*, SOULS, A LITTLE  
MORE.

FOR OUT OF THIS DEATH, COMES THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE REBORN.  
THIS DEATH ALLOWS US TO MAKE SPACE FOR MORE AUTHENTICITY  
AND GRANTS INTERNAL STRENGTH  
BY EMBRACING OUR FEARS AND WEAKNESSES.

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ON THIS KOL NIDRE, ETERNAL, GIRD US WITH BRAVERY,  
TO FIND STABILITY WITHIN THE INSTABILITY,  
TO DISCOVER PEACE AND EVEN COMFORT  
IN THE RISKS WE TAKE FOR FULLER LIVES.  
AND IN THAT PLACE OF THE UNKNOWN,  
MAY WE HAVE THE COURAGE TO OPEN OUR *NESHAMOT*, OUR SOULS,  
TO THE POSSIBILITY OF *SHLEIMUT*, WHOLENESS,  
THAT COMES FROM VULNERABILITY.

WE ALL CARRY ELEMENTS OF THE DIVINE.  
WHEN WE TRY TO HIDE OUR VULNERABILITIES,  
WE LIMIT OURSELVES AND DRIVE GOD AWAY WITH OUR FACADE. WE  
SEVER OURSELVES FROM THE ETERNAL  
WHO HAS ASSURED US 100 TIMES  
THAT GOD HEARS THE CRIES OF THE VULNERABLE  
AND REMAINS WITH THEM.<sup>6</sup>  
ON THIS KOL NIDRE, AS WE REHEARSE DEATH,  
LET US BE REBORN  
FULLY ABLE TO EMBRACE A LIFE OF DEEP CONNECTION.  
MAY OUR INSCRIPTION IN THE BOOK OF LIFE BE ONE OF BRAVERY  
TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR FULL SELVES,  
TO BRING THIS WHOLENESS TO OTHERS,  
AND TO BE STRONG ENOUGH TO EMBRACE LIFE'S VULNERABILITIES.  
MAY OUR INSCRIPTION BE ONE OF TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY.

*SHANA TOVAH.*

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<sup>6</sup> Lew, 254.