

NO PLACE TO CRY HERE

High Holy Days 5776

There is a story told, of a child of immigrants who “makes good” and moves to the suburbs. It is the middle of the 20th century, and like his peers, he “The Temple.” It’s newly built, a beautiful synagogue, designed by a famous architect. It’s a far cry from his parents’ synagogue in the old neighborhood, and farther cry from the shul in Pinsk, Poland from which they came. The High Holy Days approach and he thinks, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all be together for the Holy Days?” But his parents seem less than enthusiastic; they like their shul, their rabbi, and 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, the next Sunday, he picks them up from the old neighborhood and takes them to “The Temple”. He shows them the beautiful sanctuary, modern Aron Hakodesh, the stained glass. There are many “oohs and aahs,” but he senses that something is wrong and so he asks, “Nu, what do you think?” This was their response, “It’s lovely son, but there’s no place to cry here.”

Arriving on these shores, with little money and less English—our grandparents understood vulnerability.

Arriving on these shores, with little money and less English—our grandparents needed a place to cry.

Arriving on these shores, with little money and less English—our grandparents brought their hopes and their dreams of a better life.

Each of us, sitting here in this grand and beautiful space, is the product of an immigrant story. In a narrative playing out with heartbreaking consequences in Europe right now, our great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and some of us left everything we’ve ever known and set out to give our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, and ourselves a chance at something more.

How are we doing?

There's an old joke about a man on the subway reading what is known to be an anti-Semitic newsletter.

A friend of his noticed this strange phenomenon. Very upset, he approached the newspaper reader: "Moshe, have you lost your mind? Why are you reading that rag?" Moshe replied: "I used to read the Jewish newspaper, but what did I find? Jews being persecuted, Israel being attacked, Jews disappearing through assimilation and intermarriage, Jews living in poverty. So I switched to this one. Now what do I find? Jews own all the banks, Jews control the media, Jews are all rich and powerful, Jews rule the world. The news is much better!"

And, in fact, that Bubbie's dream came true. Although Jews make up only about 2 percent of the United States' adult population, we account for a third of the current Supreme Court; over two-thirds of Tony Award-winning lyricists and composers; and about a third of American Nobel laureates¹. Collectively, communally, we have, by all measures, succeeded in America. Way beyond Bubbie's wildest dreams.

But how are WE doing? This success, this drive, this ambition—is it always good for the Jews? Is it good for us? Sitting here in this grand and beautiful space, we have paid, we are paying—in small and in big ways—the price of this success.

MADISON LOVED QUOTES. Sometimes she took a picture of the words, spotted in a magazine, and posted the image on social media. Other times she wrote down the quote -- in beautiful script, to be framed -- so she could revisit the sentiment anytime she wanted.

¹ Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, "What Drives Success?." *New York Times*, January 25, 2014, Sunday Review, Opinion Section, Online edition. (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/opinion/sunday/what-drives-success.html?_r=0)

She loved to draw, write in her journal and read. She enjoyed long runs, singing in the car, sushi, and bananas with peanut butter.

She also loved her big New Jersey family. She was especially close with her dad, whom she called "Big Jimbo." He was her biggest fan. He came to her soccer games and track meets, always wrapping her in a hug afterward. He believed she could do anything.

Family and friends used to joke that whenever they opened the Bergen Record, they saw a picture of Madison, another athletic feat captured in print: so many goals scored, so many track meets won.

Life seemed good; life was good.

Madison was beautiful, talented, successful -- very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes...²

Madison died by suicide at the age of 19.

Writing about her story, ESPN author Kate Fagan comments:

Madison was beautiful, talented, successful -- very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes. But she was also a perfectionist who struggled when she performed poorly. She was a deep thinker, someone who was aware of the image she presented to the world, and someone who often struggled with what that image conveyed about her, with how people superficially read who she was, what her life was like.³

Sound familiar?

² Kate Fagan, "Split Image," *ESPNW*, May 7, 2015, Online edition.
(http://espn.go.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/12833146/instagram-account-university-pennsylvania-runner-showed-only-part-story)

³ *Ibid.*

When a child is born, in Jewish tradition, we welcome them into our world, into the covenant with the blessing and wishes that they live a life of Torah, of *chuppah*, of *ma'asim tovim*—a life of learning and Jewish values, a life of meaningful and loving relationship, a life of good deeds and right actions. Our earliest hopes and expectations are of a good life and a life of good, lived within the frames of Jewish values and bolstered by love.

William Alexander is the director of counseling and psychological services at the University of Pennsylvania. He commented that he has watched a shift in how some young adults cope with challenges. “A small setback used to mean disappointment, or having that feeling of needing to try harder next time,” he said. Now? “For some students, a mistake has incredible meaning.”⁴

So, when did the blessing of Torah become an expectation of straight As, of the right schools? When did our hopes for *chuppah* mean staying in a bad relationship, or hiding who you truly love? At what point did our hope for happiness translate into an expectation of perfection? At what point did we learn—or teach—that disappointment is the same as failure? At what point did we learn—or teach—that failure is always a bad thing?

These are the days of owning our mistakes; of standing before ourselves, God, and our community and owning up to all the ways we have missed the mark. We stand, this day, these days, before the God of judgement. We stand with our deeds, our thoughts, our hopes and our failures laid out--- bearing the signature, we read, of every human being. And, the *nechemta*, the comfort that *teshuvah*, *u'tzedakah*, *ma'avirin et roa ha-gezeirah*— our relationships, our deeds, our prayers have the power to transform our lives.

These days are meant to remind us that success is not the same as perfection, that happiness isn't measured in accomplishments, and that no matter how far we are from where we want to be—we have the tools to bridge the distance. The reminder:

⁴ Julie Scelfo, “Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2015, Education Life, Online edition. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>)

Throughout these High Holy Days, our liturgy and our texts, our prayers and our silences press us, force us to confront questions of meaning and purpose, of life and legacy. What am I doing here, they ask us. But, as is often the corollary, they also ask: How am I doing?

A dear friend texted me, in the throes of her struggles with infertility: That's it. I am quitting FertileBook. I can't stand another ultrasound picture.

Another perfect family photo.

Another stunning sunset in some exotic locale.

As early as 1954, the social psychologist Leon Festinger put forward the social comparison theory, which posits that we try to determine our worth based on how we stack up against others.⁵ Today, in the age of Instagram, of Twitter and Facebook, our curated lives are on display for all to see. The filtered vacation pictures, the carefully edited family photos, the artfully cropped scenes provide a constant social barometer. If our tradition asks us, over and over, am I living MY best life—our culture, and particularly our online culture, asks us does my life look as good as her life? As his?

What about the woman, searching for love decades after she thought she'd have found it?

What about the couple who thought they were empty nesters, only to find their kids back home, struggling to find a job?

What about the father, facing the fact that his family can't afford their life?

What are they going to post? What are you? What am I?

If we choose to live our lives online, what if we lived them honestly? If we are going to, as our nature suggests, compare ourselves to others—what if

⁵ ibid.

we saw their real lives, not the curated snapshots we assume make up the whole? What if we declared, online and in real life—no more Fakebook?⁶

We New Yorkers—we spend a lot of time running. We might run for the train, we might run for exercise, and we sure do run from our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities. But these days call out to us. They call us to stop, to take a deep look at who we are and who we want to be. *Teshuvah*—the work of repair and return, the work of these holy days—begins with work of self-confrontation. It is this work that allows us to break down and stand honestly before God, to stand honestly before our families and our friends, to stand honestly before ourselves.

Because I have to keep up the façade that my life is perfect, even in the midst of my own private agonies.

Well, it's lovely, son. But there's no place to cry here.

To live honestly means to confront difficult conversations, and difficult truths about our lives and the world in which we live. For most of us, the tough conversations we have with our children are about ethics and morality, about making good choices in a world that tempts us with bad ones. We fight about grades, we argue about college, we worry about an economic future that seems more and more uncertain. For some us, the conversations are even harder, the ones that shake us to our core—we negotiate over IEPs, and agonize over anxiety and depression; we talk about body image and consent, we lie awake at night filled with worst-case scenarios.

Alison was a young white woman, a congregant at Temple Emanu El in Dallas, who had recently adopted a newborn baby, a black boy. Concerned about the recent police shootings, she wondered how she - a white Jewish woman - would tell her son about race, prejudice, and staying safe. She told her rabbi that she asked a black male colleague, a vice-president of her company, for advice. He told her to teach her son to smile, because people are scared of angry black men. But he

⁶ Sarah Tuttle-Singer, "We Need To Quit Telling Lies On Facebook," Kveller.com, February 25, 2013. (<http://www.kveller.com/we-need-to-quit-telling-lies-on-facebook/>).

*warned that her son can't smile too widely because black men, who look too happy, may look suspicious. With tears, she asked her rabbi, "How do I teach my child to have a half smile?"*⁷

As parents and grandparents, as children, and as friends—we teach so much. We teach values and visions, hopes and dreams, skills and knowledge. But how do you teach someone to live with half a smile?

Two weeks after Michael Brown was shot and killed on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, New York Times magazine editor Jazmine Hughes wrote:

Such is the burden of black parenting. Being a black parent, especially of a black boy, comes with the added onus of having to protect your child from a country that is out to get him—a country that kills someone that looks like him every 28 hours, a country that will likely imprison him by his mid-thirties if he doesn't get his high school diploma, a country that is more than twice as likely to suspend him from school than a white classmate....

*Every black male I've ever met has had this talk, and it's likely that I'll have to give it one day too. There are so many things I need to tell my future son, already, before I've birthed him; so many innocuous, trite thoughts that may not make a single difference. Don't wear a hoodie. Don't try to break up a fight. Don't talk back to cops. Don't ask for help. But they're all variations of a single theme: Don't give them an excuse to kill you.*⁸

Our national story, the founding of the people of Israel, begins with a crying out, a call for justice and mercy, a plea to be heard, a yearning for liberation from oppression. Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, citing Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, teaches that:

The Exodus story is actually all about two varying reactions to the cries of the oppressed. When our people cry out, over and over again,

⁷ As told by Rabbi Asher Knight, shared with permission.

⁸ Jazmine Hughes, "What Black Parents Tell Their Sons About The Police," *Gawker*, August 21, 2014, online. (<http://gawker.com/what-black-parents-tell-their-sons-about-the-police-1624412625>)

*God hears their cries, and is awakened to action. Pharaoh ignores their cries. What we're left with is a very clear choice: do we want to respond like God, or do we want to respond like Pharaoh? There is, of course, only one right answer.*⁹

Last spring, I joined a delegation of rabbis and Jewish activists, marching on the Upper West Side in protest and solidarity after the grand jury failed to indict the officer charged with the killing of Eric Garner on Staten Island. Wrapped in our *tallitot*, we held signs with a Talmudic teaching: *shtikah k'hoda-ah damya*, silence is akin to consent, silence is complicity. We stood to say that even before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere, we are called and called again to protect the stranger, the orphan and the widow—to use our voices to amplify those most silenced in our society.

I know that many of us are, rightly, torn apart by the stories on the news—Syrian toddlers washed up on shores, African migrants detained in Israel, earthquakes in Nepal. We are quick, thank God, to give money and goods, to respond however we can. Sometimes it is harder to see the pain of the person next to you on the subway, harder to hear the fears of your fellow New Yorker, harder to imagine living in a different America than most of us are privileged enough to inhabit. But, that is exactly what we need to do. We need to hear—loud and clear—these voices, the stories and the truths of our neighbors. We need to hear, and we need to respond.

Maybe it means going home and talking about race and racism over your Rosh HaShanah dinner.

Maybe it means reading more, more about what it means to be black in America and what it means to be white, and what it can mean to be a white ally.

Maybe it means advocating for more just policies, for legislative solutions that respond to the implicit racism in the system; solutions like the Voting Rights Advancement Act, or the

⁹ Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, *"The Yetzer of Racism"*, Yom Kippur 5776. Shared with permission.

If you need conversation prompts, or a reading list, or information on how to advocate—talk to me, talk to your educators, see our website (after Yontif).

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes: "I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was "Love your neighbor as yourself". Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbor because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, "Love the stranger because you were once strangers", resonates so often throughout the Bible—more than any other commandment. It is summoning us now."¹⁰

*Because it feels like no one is listening.
Well, it's lovely, son. But there's no place to cry here.*

We live in a world of trigger warnings, of allergen labels and parental controls. We take off our shoes to get on airplanes, buy organic BPA free biodegradable toys, and run active shooter drills in our schools and offices. With a 24 hour news cycle, a global environmental crisis, and inhuman violence in the Middle East, we are living, if not in outright fear, then in what Auden called the Age of Anxiety.

And then there are existential anxieties, the fears and the questions of this season.

Who am I?

What am I doing here?

Can I make a difference?

We are, collectively and individually, deeply in need of safe space. Not space defined by stickers and security procedures—though those also. Not

¹⁰ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "Refugee crisis: 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' calls us now," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2015, Opinion, Online edition. (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/06/refugee-crisis-jonathan-sacks-humanitarian-generosity>)

safe space free of triggers and anxiety, but safe space to work through them. Safe space to laugh and cry, to be fully open and honest, vulnerable and powerful. Safe space to ask and answer the deepest questions of human existence, and safe space to tackle the most intransigent problems of human society.

These are the ideas that animate our Adult Learning this year. From a series of salon conversations on the pressing issues of Jewish life today to a remarkable lecture series sponsored by the Shalom Hartman Institute on Jewish values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; from race and racism to global anti-Semitism and choices at the end of life, from Hebrew classes to unlock the language of prayer to conversations on how exactly to raise a *mentsch*-- this space, these walls, the people in this room—this is what it is about. In the classrooms of our schools, in the music of our worship, in the relationships formed through learning, social action, and prayer—this place, and the people who create it, are designed to hold tears and joy, to guide us in the most difficult conversations and choices we have to make, to celebrate our greatest triumphs and mourn our greatest losses.

We need a place to cry---but more than that, a place to know that our cry will be heard. We need, as Amichai Lau-Lavie describes, to carve out a spacious safe space deep within our busy lives, making room for mystery to dwell, for compassion to blossom, human vulnerability to echo and a deeper connection celebrated with all of our body, all of being, and all of our soul.¹¹

Take a look around.

This space, these walls, the people in this room—we are the answer, not only the space to cry—but the power of saying *Hineni*. I hear you. I am here for you.

Halfway up the mountain, presumably scared and unsure, Isaac calls out to his father. *Avi, avi*—my father. Can you hear me, Isaac wants to know? My

¹¹ Amichai Lau-Lavie, “Why Synagogue? Thinking Out-loud about the Shifting Realities of Sacred Space,” LabShul, <http://labshul.org/why-synagogue-thinking-out-loud-about-the-shifting-realities-of-sacred-space/2266>.

father, my friend, my neighbor—can you hear me? Am I all alone on this journey, alone in this world? *Avi, avi*—where are you?

And, in his own pain, his own loneliness, his own doubt—the answer? *Hineni, b'ni*. Here I am, my son. I hear you. I am here for you.

Who is crying out to you this year? Who is looking for a place to cry? To whom do you need to say *Hineni*?

To whom are you crying out? From whom do you need to hear *Hineni*?

Well, it's lovely son.....and there's a place to cry here.

Well, it's lovely son: and there is someone to hear, someone to heed you.

Amen