

## Vulnerable, Together<sup>1</sup>

I beat him to the ground.

What I remember most were his eyes, burning with rage. But in the end, I was standing and he wasn't. Just like so many others, before he raised a fist, he had spewed vitriol and threats. By that point in time, my car tires had been slashed again and again, hate and obscenity keyed into the paint of my car. Over the years, friends and strangers alike tried to beat the kippah off my head. The scars still tell those tales.

Seeing him on the ground sparked an inner debate of justice. He started the fight. But I didn't walk away. He deserved seeing what hate reaped. But the lingering truth swept across all other thoughts - a part of me, a large part of me, had wanted this all along.

And then, in an instant, everything changed. Tears fell into sobs, and he called out, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't want to be this."

And he reached out his hand. A plea. An offering. An act of vulnerability.

I still marvel at how the lines of rage melted into streams of tears. How a clenched fist became an open handshake. And in his transformation, I moved from triumph to shame. I had hurt him. Out of pride. Out of anger. Out of believing that hate was something to be obliterated rather than quenched.

In the end, I took his hand.

We went our separate ways. I never saw him again. But his tear-streaked face, his open hand, his vulnerability lingers today. He started it. But he also ended it. Not with hate. But with an outstretched hand. And it's that hand that still holds the source of so much of my struggle and my hope.

The Talmud recounts a tale of Rabbi Eleazar, a poor man who one day fell ill. Rabbi Yochanan went

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<sup>1</sup>With gratitude to Elie Wiesel for the inspiration behind this sermon. "When evil threatens the weak, we must fight back. And yet it is true that sometimes the only way to disarm a threat is to be vulnerable, to share our common humanity, in hopes of awakening the humanity of the other." *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, p. 67.

to visit him and found him lying alone in the dark, weeping. “Why are you crying?” he asked the sick man.

Eleazar answered, “I am weeping because all the beauty of this world will one day disappear.” Yochanan replied, “Then you have good reason to weep,” and the two of them wept together. Yochanan said to Eleazar, “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand, and raised him up.

Once Yochanan himself fell ill and was visited by a friend. After speaking with him, the friend held out his hand and raised Yochanan up. A question is later asked: Why, if Rabbi Yochanan could lift up another, couldn't he raise himself now? The rabbis answered, “Because the prisoner cannot free himself from prison.”<sup>2</sup>

A prisoner cannot free himself from prison. Sometimes the healer becomes the one in need of healing. Sometimes the helper becomes the helped. Self-sufficiency is a cruel illusion; sooner or later we all learn the truth. I need someone else's hand to lift me up, and someone else needs me. Vulnerable are we all.

At one point or another, every one of us in this room will have the myth of self-sufficiency shattered. The 43-year-old spouse diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. The teen suffering depression. The unexpected firing from a 20-year career. And we see suddenly that no amount of money, no political connection, no personal record at the gym will remove our vulnerability. Our veil of delusion that we can armor ourselves against the storms, protect ourselves and our loved ones from the most crushing existential uncertainty—in but an instant the veil is ripped away. And we are left naked and exposed, like Job before the whirlwind, vulnerable and frightened. Most of us, we run for cover, we desperately try to return the veil to our eyes, to push away the uncertainty. We come to confuse feeling with failing and emotions with liability and vulnerability with weakness.

So we imprison ourselves in the myth that we can hide behind concrete and confidence. We shape stories that explain away the cancer or the depression or the loss of job, we blame others for our misfortune, we meet cruelty with rage, and we place armor over our vulnerability.

But in doing so, we imprison ourselves in a broken myth.

Over the past decade, the research and writing of Dr. Brene Brown on shame and guilt has reached all

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<sup>2</sup>Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5b; I made Rabbi Hanina just “a friend” for the sake of reducing name-overwhelm.

corners of the globe. Her TED talk on vulnerability has been watched by over 40 million people, and her lectures, courses, and books have helped reshape companies, national policies, and millions of lives.

Here is the summary of her research: the human experience of vulnerability is both the thing we fear most, and is always the foundation of our best lives. In Dr. Brown's words:

Our rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment—emotions that we don't want to discuss, even when they profoundly affect the way we live, love, work, and even lead. What most of us fail to understand...is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.<sup>3</sup>

This is our season of vulnerability. These days of awe we throw ourselves forcibly into the existential waters of uncertainty. Who by fire and who by water? We define ourselves within these walls not by our stock portfolios or awards, but by our failings, our feelings, our faith. The rest of our days we may walk around believing that the world owes us, but today we, each of us, place ourselves in a position of seeking forgiveness. And surely this position, facing and owning the harm we have caused, the responsibility we claim, is the ultimate vulnerability. And we sit in this together. Vulnerable. Together.<sup>4</sup>

Vulnerable. Together. This is the essence of this season. And indeed the entire Jewish worldview. Perhaps best captured in this rabbinic parable:

[The mindset of one who intentionally sins]—This is to be compared to people who were in a boat, and one of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath his seat. His companions said to him: Why are you doing this? He replied: What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under myself? They replied: But you will flood the boat for us all.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Daring Greatly*, pp. 33–34

<sup>4</sup>For more on this point, see Ramban, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:6 and Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 86b; both suggest that repentance brings both people and redemption closer together.

<sup>5</sup>Midrash *Leviticus Rabbah* 4:6

The purpose of this season, the ultimate Jewish lens, is the collective perspective. It is one that shatters the myth of self-sufficiency that we are solitary islands of existence. Our future, whatever it might be, is one in which we will either rise or sink together. In our liturgy we don the collective voice. In our confessionals, we take on the sins of the world. We are, minute by minute, prayer by prayer, trying to hone a consciousness that recognizes that whatever happens to you ultimately matters to me.<sup>6</sup>

And so it is that we are, all of us, vulnerable. We may feel this in the widest pulls and forces—rising tides and temperatures, uncertain global markets, the threats of nationalism and bigotry. And we may feel this in the most personal of ways, as families divide along political lines, tribalism transforms the workplace and civic life, and fear hammers our next generation in active shooter drills. We can lock all our doors, put our money in mattresses, pile sandbags in front of our buildings, build the highest of walls. But none of it saves us from the truth—we will rise or sink together. And, try as we might, in this global game there is no way to vote someone off the island.

I started walking away from fights after that outstretched hand. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. Around that time, a number of wealthy Jewish families had started buying up struggling businesses. Then, the synagogue was shot at, holes peppering the glass and stone.<sup>7</sup> Protests decrying the shooting were organized. People armored themselves in rage.

Later that year we had a forest fire on the outskirts of the city. Entire hills were consumed by the blaze. I remember how bleak and blackened the hills looked. But within weeks the undergrowth came back. And within months, new Douglas Fir trees were beginning to sprout. Because, of course, the heat of the flames opened enough pinecones for the seeds to replant the hills.

And out of that fire, God called.

Our sages taught that the burning bush had been aflame since the beginning of time. Moses was simply the first to take notice. He was simply the first to hear the voice that was calling since the dawn of creation.<sup>8</sup> Abraham, a knife in hand, ready to strike down his own son, hears the divine voice and

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<sup>6</sup>See Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook—"Penitence, the act of seeking forgiveness, emerges from the depths of being, from such great depths in which the individual stands not as a separate entity, but rather as a continuation of the vastness of existence."

<sup>7</sup>Shooting took place in 1994. 10 rounds of armor-piercing bullets were fired into Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, Oregon. Another shooting took place in 2002 there. Both are mentioned here: <https://www.adl.org/news/article/racist-skinheads-charged-in-oregon-temple-attack>

<sup>8</sup>See *Degel Machane Ephraim*, Shemot, Vayera—this encounter at the bush becomes an example of the divine encounter possible at any moment and place.

sees another path forward.<sup>9</sup> Hagar, suffering and starving, cries out in despair and God opens her eyes to see the redemption right before her.<sup>10</sup> It is in the wilderness, in the places of vulnerability, that God calls to us. All around us are reminders of change, of other ways forward. All around us are reminders that nothing is stagnant forever. We find God's voice in nature in the crumbling of mountains and the blossom of the spring. We find God's voice in relationship in the evolution of psyche and the fall and rise of love. We find God's voice in the face of another, in rage and in tears. God calls out that change is all around us. And if the world can change, if others can change, so can we.

These are more than interesting times. These are terrifying times. As one who bears the scars of anti-Semitism, in a people who has faced this plague in every place and every generation, it isn't the existence of such hate that shocks and awes. It is its 21<sup>st</sup> century bloom and modern mutation.

89% of European Jews believe anti-Semitism is on the rise and now fear for their own safety. In 2018, France reported a 70% increase in anti-Semitic hate crime over the previous year.<sup>11</sup> It nearly doubled in Germany. Here in the United States, the number of violent and non-violent acts of anti-Semitism has reached near-historic heights and continues to rise, with assaults against Jews doubling since 2017.<sup>12</sup> This year, with Jewish blood running in the pews of the Tree of Life Synagogue, we saw two truths ring loudly—first, we saw that as American Jews, we are vulnerable, and as we have seen in other eras, privilege and acceptance across industry has not extinguished the fires of hate; and second, when hate rises in one place towards one people, it grows everywhere and against everyone. We see similar statistics towards Christians, Muslims, people of color, queer communities, and on and on.

The question that remains is: how will we respond?

First comes safety. We are blessed by the leadership of congregants and professionals who have made safety and security a foundation of our synagogue and school. We should pour forth gratitude to our former Director of Security Tom Perry and current Director of Security Ellen Chang for their leadership and their incredible teams and the officers of the NYPD who daily work to make these walls a haven against the storms of hate.

Second, we are obligated to leave our shelters of security and become informed. To make ourselves vulnerable enough to bear witness to the trends and tides of the times. To pick up history books, to

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<sup>9</sup>Genesis 22:11–13

<sup>10</sup>Genesis 21:16–19

<sup>11</sup><https://www.hrv.org/news/2019/06/04/alarming-rise-anti-semitism-europe>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/anti-semitic-incidents-remained-at-near-historic-levels-in-2018-assaults>

listen to survivors, to approach the articles on anti-Semitism today. In doing so, in acknowledging the vulnerability of this place and time, we force ourselves to see our own wellbeing as tied to that of others, and we raise a sense of responsibility to address the holes of hate that threaten to sink us.<sup>13</sup>

Later this fall we will mark this first anniversary of the Tree of Life murders with a panel on anti-Semitism, helping inform us and move us to turn grief and fear into action and change.

Third, we are responsible to be agents of such change with a collective perspective. Sadly, as we have seen already in our history, attempts to directly destroy hate only stoke the fires of enmity. Fists and vitriol do not address the underlying scourge. Anti-Semitism, and bigotry of all kinds, is predicated on the belief that it is possible to cast others off our existential ship. That if we can remove the people we deem to be cancerous citizens, we will be freed from their taint. Surely we who have been so often labeled as such a cancer, can see the absurdity of such an approach. And so obliterating or excising anti-Semites will ultimately fail.

But a small town in Bavaria might inspire a different approach. In Wunsiedel, Bavaria, citizens noticed an increase in neo-Nazi rhetoric and organizing. When protests and legal complaints failed to deter an annual Neo-Nazi march, the town tried a different approach. In 2013, residents flocked to the march, offering refreshments and using hilarious signage to publicize their plan—for each meter the Neo-Nazis marched, local residents and businesses would donate 10 euros to a charity that helps people escape extremist groups through education and support.<sup>14</sup> In this setup, the residents of the city forced a collective perspective—in the neo Nazis' choice to march, they also supported the very mechanism designed to eradicate such hate: education and exposure. Within a year, the march disappeared. This approach is now being used in other towns in Germany and Sweden.

We at Rodeph Sholom want to be a part of this movement to elevate a collective perspective. To take the essence of these days of awe and move them into the many spaces we all occupy. This past February, Marnie Fienberg, daughter-in-law of Joyce Fienberg who was murdered in the Tree of Life synagogue, started a new campaign. She sought to combat anti-Semitism in the most Jewish way

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<sup>13</sup>See Michael L. Morgan, *Interim Judaism: Judaism in a Century of Crisis*, pp. 118, 123—"Today, as Jews in America face the future, it is with a sense of modesty and uncertainty. But it is also with a sense of urgency and need. Even if there is no consensus about what redemption calls for and what actions ought ultimately to achieve, still the need is there—to recover the Jewish past, to study its texts, to tell its stories, to reflect on its principles, and to engage actively in the work of the world...As we scan the centuries of the past, we should realize that we are not alone in this state of uncertainty and practical necessity...For we stand at a moment of urgency and challenge, linked to the past and working toward the future."

<sup>14</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/18/neo-nazis-tricked-into-raising-10000-for-charity>

possible—through food. Noting that the majority of hate crimes are perpetrated by people who have little to no understanding or exposure of the people they have attacked, Marnie wanted to address the ignorance and delusions that underpin hate.

So Marnie started an initiative called 2 for Seder, urging every Jewish household to invite two people in their orbit who have little understanding or experience of Jews and Judaism to attend their Passover seder. Last spring, 1,000 seder tables, from here in NYC to the base camp of Mt. Everest, used our narrative of redemption as an opportunity to educate, expose, and build explicit relationships.<sup>15</sup> For so many of us, our Jewishness may be hidden in the landscape of our daily lives. So many of our colleagues, our friends, our associates may not realize how close to home anti-Semitism really hits. In breaking matzah together, we elevate an awareness that we are woven together. In offering the outstretched hand, we can sit together in the stories of strangers and emerge with connection. This year we will be encouraging our entire Rodeph Sholom community to be a part of the 2 for Seder movement, and not only bring our Jewish out into the world, but also bring that larger world back into our homes.

A student once asked her Rabbi, “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words [of Torah] *upon* your hearts?’<sup>16</sup> Why does it not tell us to place these words *in* our hearts?” The Rabbi thought for a moment and answered, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”<sup>17</sup>

Vulnerable. This is not our weakness, but rather our source of strength. Here we sit, invited into the place we so often avoid. Here we face our missteps, our crushing defeats, the fears that keep us awake, the shame that shadows our days. But we sit together. We call for betterment, together. We lift our voices in hope, together. Together. That is our Jewish worldview. That is our perspective. Vulnerable, we may acknowledge our own humble need for others. Vulnerable, we may see the need others may have for us. Vulnerable, we may recognize that connection is growth from shared tears and laughter and outstretched hands. Vulnerable, we see the myth of self-sufficiency, and that we are not alone.

Vulnerable, we see that our path forward is together.

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<sup>15</sup><https://2forseder.org/story/>

<sup>16</sup>Deut. 11:18

<sup>17</sup>Menahem Mendel of Kotsk. *Emet v'Emunah* No. 887. He offers this teaching regarding Deuteronomy 6:6 as well. See also Morris M. Faierstein, *Truth Springs from the Earth: The Teachings of Menahem Mendel of Kotsk*, 26. Heart B.

We carry the burnt hills and the fading scars. We see the reapings of hate just as we feel the inadequacy of denial. But God calls out of the depths from the ash-covered seeds and the outstretched hand. The prisoner cannot free himself from prison. But we can free each other. The love of rain against parched earth, the open hand lifting out of loneliness. Vulnerable is the only way we come together.

In our fear, may we offer an open hand.

In our failings, may we gaze towards the face of an Other.

In our struggle, may we embrace the possibility of change.

There was once a young man who, alone, tried to beat away his fears. But eventually the armor cracked, and the heart broke open, and the words...

Well, the words finally fell in.

Our future is Together.