



# High Holidays 2021/5782

## Rabbi Ain's Sermon – Kol Nidre:

### How do we present ourselves in the present moment to ensure a changed future?

Earlier this summer I noticed a phenomenon as I was observing a group of parents looking at their children. Sort of. They weren't looking at them directly, rather they were looking at them through their screens through their phones recording a specific moment in time. I realized that I am definitely guilty of doing this as well. I watch my kids' sporting events with my phones held out, often trying to capture the perfect shot rather than being in the moment. And of course there are times when we record others or ourselves through a screen and we realize we are trying to get a perfect picture. So then, what happens if it doesn't look perfect, what do we do? Do we delete it and start again? I think about this when I watch teens take selfies over and over again before they post them and of course I think about social media platforms where, with the swipe of a screen and a touch of a square we can add filters to make a "perfect picture."

When you hear me tell these stories and ask these questions I imagine some of you think this is awful—can't we just be in the moment can't we just be where we are.

A friend, Sara Beth Berman, recently had an experience that captures this feeling: She realized that she was in a moment where a picture wouldn't do justice to what she was experiencing she shared:

She was reflecting on her recent move to California with her husband and wrote "Things that are good: from where I'm sitting, the sunset is like a fiery color wheel, rolling to dark.

She continues...Can't get a photo to do it justice, so enjoy remembering what it was like when we read books without pictures and imagined the words as they took shape in our minds."

YES. This is amazing. How do we remember what we want something to look like? What does a perfect image look like? Is there even such thing as perfection?

Is this what we're doing when we add filters to our pictures? Is it that we just want to fix something to make it perfect? And yet, is that so bad? Here we are on Yom Kippur we're fixing things looking at ourselves critically and honestly is a part of this holiday so how do we find this balance? Over the next 25 hours we will recite, moment after moment, liturgy that reflects just how bad we "look." We will say:

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ Our God and God of our fathers,  
תְּבֹא לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ, let our prayer come before you  
וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִתְחִנָּתֵנוּ and do not ignore our supplication.  
שָׂאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֵזִי פָּנִים For we are not so brazen-faced  
וְקִשֵׁי עֲרָךְ and stiff-necked  
לֹא לֵאמֹר לְפָנֶיךָ to say to you,  
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ Adonoy, our God, and God of our fathers,  
צַדִּיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטָאנוּ "We are righteous and have not sinned."  
אָבָל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטָאנוּ: But, indeed, we and our fathers have sinned.  
אֲשַׁמְנוּ.

בִּגְדָנוּ.

גָּזַלְנוּ. דִּבְרָנוּ דִּפִּי.

We have abused, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have slandered.

הָעֵוִינוּ.



וְהִרְשָׁעוּנוּ.

זָדָנוּ.

We have caused others to commit sins for which they are called רָשָׁעִים, wicked;

טָפְלָנוּ שָׁקָר.

יַעֲצָנוּ רָע.

We have added falsehood upon falsehood; We have joined with evil individuals or groups;

We have given harmful advice;

כָּזַבְנוּ. לָצָנוּ.

We have deceived; we have mocked;

סָרְרָנוּ.

We have turned away from God's Torah;

עֲוִינוּ.

And so on...

WOAH. This is a pretty unfiltered list. Now, I am sure that none of us have done all of these but all of us have done some of these. So how do we remove the filters we use to mask our blemishes so that we can take a hard look at ourselves and improve our spiritual experience for the year ahead.

Yom Kippur is the ultimate removal of a filter which gives us the most clarity to see who we are and who we can become.

There's a story that is told-there was once a king who had a magnificent collection of jewels. Among his jewels was his very favorite, a great perfect diamond. After each long hard day of governing the king would look at that diamond he would hold on to it he would caress it he was so happy that it looked perfect. One night of tragedy occurred while the King was caressing the diamond. It fell from his hands and it smashed. With trembling fingers the king picked it up and peered into its interior and to his horror the king received a long spindle of a crack running from the very top of the gem to the very bottom. The King was distraught-it was now flawed. Its Perfection forever ruined. His servants brought many people, jewelers, gemologists, scientists; they all failed to repair the crack. Finally there came the wise old craftsman he looked carefully into the diamond for a long time and said- "give me a week and I will repair you're done you can repair it." the king said a week?" Yes. Give me a week and I'll bring it back more perfect than before. The Craftsman brought it home and a week later returned as promised he handed the Diamond To The King. The King lifted it to the light and there was a crack just added to where it been before long spindly marring the Perfection of the gem.

Do you mock me, the king asked? It is still broken-it is still flawed.

Look again, said the craftsman.

The king held it up to the light. And now he saw. At the top, where the crack met the tip of the diamond, the craftsman had carved a tiny rose. Now, instead of a long crack marring the perfection of the gem, the diamond had within it the most exquisite flower. Here, my lord. It is not only repaired, but in truth, it is now unique. Remarkable. More perfect than before.

So here is the question-we don't want to live in a fake world where everything is about creating the Perfect Image because if we do that, then we aren't acknowledging the blemishes that each and everyone of us have and we don't want to be obsessed with them but- how do we live in the present but improve upon ourselves to make ourselves uniquely us where we see the beauty, even amidst blemishes?

First, we need to acknowledge that we just aren't perfect but that doesn't mean we aren't whole."There is



nothing as whole as a broken heart,” said the Kotsker Rebbe (Hasidic rabbi, 1787-1859).

In the V’ahavta, we are told to place these words of love on our hearts. In a Hasidic tale, a disciple asked the rebbe: “Why does Torah tell us to place these words upon your hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?” The rebbe answered: “It is because our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the 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.” which demonstrates the line I just shared that “There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.”

The first way to determine if we are whole is to make the distinction between being the best you, and being a perfect you, because as Anna Quindlen wrote in her book “Being Perfect” that being perfect became like carrying a backpack filled with bricks every single day.” She wrote “And o, how I wanted to lay my burden down,” So if this sounds in any way familiar to you, if you have been trying to be perfect, too, then perhaps today is the day to put down that backpack before you develop permanent curvature of the spirit.

Rather, Quindlen says, “nothing important or meaningful or beautiful or interesting or great ever came out of imitations. What is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.”

For as famous musician Leonard Cohen sang:

In his song Anthem  
“You can add up the parts  
but you won’t have the sum  
You can strike up the march,  
there is no drum  
Every heart, every heart  
to love will come  
but like a refugee.  
Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.”

So then it is time to get to work:

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said in 1972 when asked what his message is for young people: “Let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them remember that every deed counts, that every world has power and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all the absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And ABOVE ALL-let them remember...To build a life as if it were a work of art. To me this should be a guiding principle for tonight. Kol Nidre. A night where each of us are supposed to look deeply at our own selves and our own flaws and begin to wonder where can we improve? Just as an artist doesn’t have just one coat of paint but they go back and they were and finish it with different brushes making improvements along the way just as a sculptor doesn’t approach a piece of clay, so too we should look and relook at ourselves.

But let’s be honest that one of the challenges of the last 18 months is that all we do is stare at ourselves on screens. One could say that we are getting a close up version so we know what we need to improve on but it is hard to look at ourselves all of the time.

Research suggests that there’s plenty of precedent for feeling camera-shy. One 2011 paper (pdf) by Philippe Rochat and Dan Zehavi, published in the journal Consciousness and Cognition, explains that humans



seem to be universally uncomfortable with looking in the mirror: “When seeing myself in the mirror, I am seeing myself as others see me. I am confronted with the appearance I present to others. In fact, not only am I seeing myself as others see me, I am also seeing myself as if I was another, i.e., I am adopting an alienating perspective on myself.” When we regard ourselves this way, we start imagining the judgments that other people would render upon us. This reminds us of the fact that other people must be judging our appearance all the time, perhaps very harshly?

And yes, this is true. So again, how do we take on the criticism that we see but find a way forward.

In Lori Gottlieb’s book *Maybe You Should Talk To Someone* she realized that there is of course a relationship between the past and the present as she wrote “by Google stalking my boyfriend I have been watching his future unfold, while I stayed frozen in the past. But if I live in the present I have to accept the loss of my future.” she asks, “can I sit through the pain or do I want to suffer?” of course she answers her own question “I guess I should stop interrogating my boyfriend and stop Google stalking him—basically spend less time on his future and more time on my present.” that’s really what we need to figure out. How do we spend more time on the present even if we are not particularly satisfied with it at the moment? How do we begin to see it as the rose within the diamond.

How might we begin to see ourselves the way others see us, which is often better than the way we see ourselves:

#### The Cracked Pot: A Story For Anyone Who’s Not Quite Perfect

A waterbearer in India had two large pots, one hung on each end of a pole, which she carried across her neck.

One of the pots had a crack in it. While the other pot was perfect, and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the mistress’s house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to her master’s house.

The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream: “I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you.”

Why?” asked the bearer. “What are you ashamed of?”

“I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your mistress’s house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don’t get full value from your efforts,” the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in her compassion she said, “As we return to the mistress’s house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.”

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some.

But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.



The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?"

"That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them.

"For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my mistress's table. Without you being just the way you are, she would not have this beauty to grace her house."

It isn't easy to get to a point where we can appreciate the cracks and then see how we can use them for growth but in a book called *Wintering* by Katherine May we read, "plants and animals don't fight the winter they don't pretend it's not happening and attempt to carry on living the same lives that they lived in the summer they prepare they adapt they perform extraordinary acts of metamorphosis to get them through winter is it time of withdrawing from the world maximizing scant resources carrying out acts of brutal efficiency and Vanishing from sight but that's where the transformation occurs winter is not the death of the life cycle but it's Crucible once we stop wishing it were summer winter can be a glorious season in which the world takes on a sparse Beauty and even the Pavements Sparkle it's time for reflection and recuperation for slow replenishment for putting your house in order."

So too, we have been spending weeks getting to this moment of Kol Nidre, preparing ourselves to look and grow and change?

So-how do we adapt and change and improve?

We see this in Judaism this year 5782 is the shmita year the year that we let the land go on sabbatical a year where we take stock, just like we do every Shabbat. Since last year when my family and I got inflicted with covid-19 we made a commitment to ourselves to getting healthier physically and so like many others we made the covid purchase of a Peloton as I spoke about on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. One of the things that is talked about in the Peloton world is that self-care is Soul Care. that when we're taking care of ourselves it's not just a momentary action it's something we're doing to really see ourselves as if we are a work of art-we are working to see where we can improve, not so we are perfect but that we are better than yesterday.

So what are the steps:

Acknowledging that we need to change:

Admitting where we need to change:

Taking stock of the time we need to have to go through teshuva-this is probably the hardest for us overachieving NYers. And yet,

We all know the term PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder but Dr Betsy Stone has written about -Post Traumatic Growth. She writes that researchers looking at how people grow after trauma find there are six areas of Post-Traumatic Growth, also known as PTG.

None of us does all of them. And we never finish – growth is a continuous process. They are:

- Awareness of personal strengths
- Reprioritization of values
- Deeper and more meaningful relationships
- Appreciation of life
- Creativity
- Spiritual change



In many ways, doing teshuva well, allows us to go through these steps.

The chasidic rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, taught the idea that we are to praise God with each and every breath since each breath is new, a gift from God. Whatever praise we may have offered already no longer applies; each moment demands its own response. And, if each breath is new, then we are also new. We can present ourselves as new before God, truly transformed through teshuvah (repentance).

When my family and I had covid I reflected on this notion of breath and I shared that we often say “take a breath” to get someone to relax, or calm down, or shift perspective. But we need to do that for ourselves. We need to give ourselves the time to do better, to be better, so that we will be here not only next week and next year. As we enter 5782 let us breathe in appreciation for what we have. And let us each take a breath, knowing that we have potential to do something with each new day as we get to work on ourselves, because only then, can we begin to repair a broken world.