

KOL NIDREI 5780- The Sacred but Scary Path to Resilience

A few weeks ago, actress Felicity Huffman was sentenced for her role in last spring's college admissions scandal. Huffman was one of a score of famous and/or wealthy parents who paid large sums of money to get their children into top universities. Her's is only the first conviction. There will surely be more to come¹.

As the full extent of corruption was splashed across the news, there was no shortage of righteous indignation to go around. Yet through it all, I couldn't help but think Not only did these people steal admissions spots from more deserving candidates, But they publicly broadcast their utter lack of faith that their children could succeed on their own or that they possessed the resilience to bounce back when life does not go according to plan.

And you thought your parents were tough? :-)

It's human nature to want to avoid failure. Even though we know it's impossible to always win... Who wouldn't prefer to get it right all the time?

But when we 'll do anything to win no matter what the cost We deprive ourselves of the opportunity to survive failure.

Al Cheyt Shechatanu lifanecha.... Tonight- we must confess. Not only to the ways we have harmed others, But for the ways we have hurt ourselves. For the sin of expecting perfection- to the point of holding ourselves and others back.

¹ Klein Weintraub, Joelle Renstrom, Nick Anderson, *Being too desperate to get girl into college leads Huffman to Jail*, Washington Post, 9/14/2019

Only when we take responsibility for our flawed actions and behavior,
 Can we find our way to return to our best selves.
 Only when we accept our own vulnerability
 And create safe spaces for others to express their's,
 Will the path to teshuvah be complete.
 Each of us has the capacity and the courage
 To find our way on the sacred path to resilience.

The Biblical hero- Caleb- in the book of Numbers modeled this kind of courage.
 As the Israelites were about to enter the promised land,
 Moses sent 12 scouts, leaders from all the tribes, on a reconnaissance mission.
 They came back with tales of a land flowing with milk and honey
 But also with reports that it was occupied by giants with great military prowess.
*We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them,*²
 they said.

Their Insecurity and reports of inevitable failure
 threatened to overtake the entire community.

But Caleb spoke out!

*“Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely
 overcome it.”*³

It's not that Caleb hadn't seen the fortified cities and the giants.
 It's not even to say that Caleb wasn't scared of failure too,
 But he understood- faith in God, faith in ourselves... Necessitate vulnerability.
 So he bravely spoke out, and contradicted his fellow leaders-
 at great risk to himself. But his reward was great too.
 Caleb, along with Joshua, were the only ones of their generation
 to make it into the promised land.

² Numbers 13:33

³ Numbers 13:30

Of course, the actual promised land in Torah is Israel.
But it can also serve as a powerful metaphor for us
when we think about what success means in our lives.
How do we get to our own promised land?

There is no way to deny that in 21st century America
We place an extremely high value on winning.
Winners project an image of perfection....
Of discipline, intelligence and drive that ultimately seem to pay off in the end.

But even the most seemingly 'successful' among us
have faced deep disappointments and crushing defeats.
It is in these moments of uncertainty and vulnerability...of pain,
We show that we can handle it that we can be brave.⁴

Serena Williams, won her first grand slam title when she was 18 years old.
This year, just shy of her 38th birthday,
she lost in the US Open Finals to 19 year old Bianca Andreescu.
It was most likely her last attempt
To tie Margaret Court's record of 24 grand slam titles.
Even with the loss, she is the oldest grand slam finalist ever. (So awesome)

And like the Biblical Caleb,
she epitomizes what it means to show courage through vulnerability.

Not only has she revolutionized the sport- especially for girls and women of color,
But she has faced racism, sexism and public criticism.⁵

⁴ Brown, Brene, *Braving the Wilderness*, pg. 154

⁵ Wallace, Liz, *Watching Serena's US Open Defeat was a stinging reminder of my own age and ambition*, CNN.com, 9/8/2019

As author Liz Wallace reflects,
 “Watching Serena accept her runner-up trophy...was a test of Zen acceptance....
 Serena humorously thanked her team
 for withstanding her "ups and downs and downs and downs"....
 [showing the world] that failure, however painful,
 is an inevitable part of achievement....⁶

For most of us, our victories and defeats will not be on the public stage.
 Figuring out how to find the strength to be vulnerable
 is a much more intimate affair.
 But it’s still very challenging...even scary
 to ask for help from a supervisor or co-worker.
 to tell a life partner that we are struggling...That we are sad or confused.
 To tell our children that we don’t actually know how to fix something.
 To admit we’ve made a mistake.

This kind of vulnerability- requires the greatest courage of all....
 For in opening ourselves up, trusting someone else with our deepest insecurities
 We still face the chance of rejection.

In the Book of Ruth, such vulnerability is revealed.
 When Naomi loses first her husband and then her sons
 She decides to leave Moab and return to the land of Judah and her family.
 She begins the journey with her widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

But soon she releases them, saying:
*“Turn back, each of you to her mother’s house....
 May Adonai grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband.”⁷*

Orpah tearfully departs, but Ruth stays, saying:
“Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you.

⁶ Wallace, Liz

⁷ Book of Ruth 1:8-9

*For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”⁸*

Eventually, Naomi agrees and the two of them continue on their journey together.

It's hard to decide which of these two women is more vulnerable.
As an older widow in Biblical times,
Naomi had few options and faced major financial and social insecurity.
Ruth, while much younger, had the potential to marry again,
And yet she was in a similar situation.
It would have been safer to return to her parents' home.

But instead, Ruth chose to take a risk.
She opened herself up to a new religion,
to a new home, to a new social arrangement.
She intuitively understood that together-
her vulnerability and Naomi's vulnerability would lead to combined strength.

By trusting each other, Naomi and Ruth flourish.
Naomi's relative Boaz marries Ruth, and they continue to care for Naomi.
And their first child Obed becomes grandfather to King David.⁹

I see this kind of risk taking all the time- when members of our congregation
participate in Stepping Stones- and choose to convert to Judaism.
Whether they are about to marry a Jewish partner,
Are raising Jewish children with a Jewish spouse,
Or start a spiritual journey on their own,
Each convert must commit,
not only to learn about Jewish history, customs and belief,
But to open themselves up to the most vulnerable of personal journeys.

⁸ Book of Ruth 1:16

⁹ Book of Ruth 4:17

Like Ruth, they must leave the theological assumptions
and cultural traditions of their family behind.

They must be transparent with family and friends about choosing Judaism
And risk a reaction of anger, disappointment or resentment from those they love.
And they must commit to a spiritual path and a Jewish life
That requires a lifetime of learning.

To embrace a new identity
to create an authentic space for ourselves in *any* community
requires that we take chances...that we make ourselves vulnerable.
Maybe this is why we read from the book of Ruth
at every one of our conversion ceremonies.
Through her life choices, Ruth shows us **all-**
how **blessed** a life of **vulnerability** can be.

This is the core message of our Days of Awe.
We must acknowledge our flaws and admit misdeeds to God and to ourselves.
But the process of teshuvah- of repentance, repair and return
is never about punishment.
It is about deepening an honesty and integrity within ourselves.
It is about understanding that sometimes, despite our best efforts-
we will come up short.
It is about understanding that no one but you
can determine what path your life will take.
And so often it is through experiencing failure and disappointment
That we build the resilience we need to succeed in the end."¹⁰

When I was 17- I got my heart broken.
As a senior in high school and a serious musician,
I applied to dual degree programs so that I could get a BA
And also major in flute performance.

¹⁰ Brown, Brene, pg. 40

I auditioned at some of the best music schools in the country...
But one by one they rejected me....
I had failed in my quest. I figured my life as a musician was over.

I cried a lot. I was deeply disappointed,
but more painfully, I was humiliated.
I was the best musician at my high school.
I studied at Juilliard.
But that was not enough to win one of the limited conservatory spots.
I had reached for my dream...and failed.

Still grieving, I went off to college and soon discovered
that nobody knew or cared where I didn't get in.
I kept playing my flute, I sang, I learned to play the guitar.
My life as a musician was definitely not over.
And the next phase of my life journey had begun.

I had been so sure of who I was and what I was supposed to be
That I had lost sight of other passions- like Judaism.
I have no doubt that this most painful failure in my life-
Led me exactly to where I am right now.

I feel grateful that I was brought up in a family
that emphasized the value of putting yourself out there-
even when victory was not guaranteed.
My father Daniel especially has always encouraged us to take chances
And embrace new experiences- if only to learn and grow from the challenge.

And I've had many successes in my life.
I serve an amazing congregation.
I have a loving and supportive husband and three wonderful children.
But I've also had my fair share of failures and disappointments.

Nevertheless, I see deep value in experiencing more vulnerability in my life.
 to understand how the highs and the lows are all essential...
 We need to open ourselves to those around us,
 stand up for what we believe in,
 surround ourselves with people who encourage us to take chances....
 these are all part of a sacred and resilient life.

Rabbi Alvin Fine expresses this truth beautifully,
 In a poem I feel confident you have heard time and again....
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey...

For me, the most powerful lines of this poem
 Express how important our moments of greatest vulnerability can be.

From defeat to defeat to defeat —
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage.
A sacred pilgrimage.

Each of us has the capacity to be brave.
 To live a life of possibility, take chances..

As human beings- we have flaws and insecurities.
 We will fail.
 But we will also succeed...simply in the trying.
 Tonight, may we commit to opening ourselves up-
 to embracing vulnerability

More certain that no matter what may come,
we don't need to know every inch of the journey before us
we only need to see the next step in order to move forward
And build a sacred resilience within. AMEN