

Yom Kippur 2014  
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An experiment was done this past year.  
I'm sure some of you heard about it.  
It was covered on NPR, the New York Times and  
published in the journal Science.<sup>1</sup>  
The experiment showed just how far people will go  
to avoid being alone with their thoughts.  
Of the hundreds of people in the study, the majority found it  
unpleasant to be alone in a room with their thoughts for a few minutes.  
But what's truly stunning is that when given the choice of a distraction  
from just sitting there thinking, 15% of women and 64% of men chose  
to self-administer a severe electric shock to their body.  
Stripped of the usual distractions of their cellphones and the internet,  
they voluntarily chose  
the only form of electronic distraction available to them.

As we begin Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year,  
the day that's *all about* introspection, let's spend a few minutes  
being honest about how technology and all of our various gadgets and  
devices have habituated us to avoid introspection  
and to feeling our feelings. Just consider: Many of us  
would rather receive a painful electric shock than sit quietly and think?!

There was a poignant and hilarious interview with comedian Louis CK<sup>2</sup>  
about how people use their phones compulsively to avoid the  
existential sadness and emptiness of life and of being alone:  
He says: look around when you're on the road,  
pretty much 100% of the people are using their phone.  
People are risking their lives and others' texting and driving –  
because they don't want to be alone for a second.

He tells the story of how he's driving  
and a Bruce Springsteen song comes on the radio  
(it's "Jungleland" if that's important to you),  
and it makes him feel sad. And he just reflexively goes:  
Oh, I'm getting sad, I got to get out my phone.  
Then he said, no – I'm just going to feel it.  
And he pulls over to the side of the road, and just lets go and sobs,  
and then he felt happy;  
he felt better because he actually let himself feel his feelings.

I bring this up today on Yom Kippur  
NOT because I want to preach about the rules of no cell phones in shul  
but rather because this reflex to avoid introspection and  
just focus on whatever is outside of us  
is exactly what Yom Kippur is designed to counteract.

Our ancient sages instituted five so-called afflictions of Yom Kippur:  
No eating and drinking, no bathing, no anointing (oils, perfumes),  
no leather shoes and no sex. Think about it:  
each of these prohibitions forces us to look inside, to be real,  
to be honest with ourselves and feel our vulnerability -  
By not distracting ourselves from the uncomfortable truths of our lives  
by mindlessly grabbing a chocolate or a drink  
to fill up the emptiness we feel.  
Without make-up and grooming and nice clothes to try to cover up the  
fact that we're getting older and grayer and wrinklier,  
we become even more aware of our mortality on this day that asks us  
to consider our own deaths and  
to dress as if we're trying on our own burial shrouds.  
With all the usual distractions removed,  
we are left with nothing else to do but introspect.

Yom Kippur is the opposite of facebook.

With facebook, we post our status to the world so everyone can see how great we look and how accomplished our children are.

But today on Yom Kippur, we let all that go and speak the unedited-for-cleverness, the unphotoshopped truth of what's really inside our hearts.

Recent studies by psychologists found that facebook use is driven by our need to be seen and to be validated.

We all have these needs.

I spend a lot of time with a 3 year old, so I see it clearly:

"Mommy, Mommy, look at me! Look at this picture I'm drawing.

Is it good?" We're not any different when we get older:

Look at me! Am I good?

We post a carefully edited presentation of ourselves on facebook and then feel validated when 47 people "like" what we've posted.

Yom Kippur is the opposite. Instead of facebook, we have the book of life, which we desperately pray we will be written in. And instead of looking out to have everyone in the world tell us we're ok, we look inside ourselves, and get real with our most vulnerable places, with our most shameful truths, with our biggest fears, and with our deepest regrets. We say confessions throughout the day, and we speak to the Holy One basically whatever it is that we would *never* post on facebook, and through this day of coming clean with the truth, we find purification and healing.

Putting down the distractions, getting real, being vulnerable, and finding healing.

That's what Yom Kippur is about, and that's what I want to spend a few minutes on with you now - because, you know what?

Even being at high holyday services can be distracting from what's really in the heart. Seeing old friends, gathering with family, keeping up with all the many words in the machzor, it's easy to stay distracted and miss the point of Yom Kippur.

So, to help us, three stories.

The first story is about King David, who tradition holds as the author of our psalms. The 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm has been read as part of our liturgy every day since the beginning of Elul last month and is read throughout the high holyday season. The psalm begins with David full of complete faith and assurance that God will protect him and that he has nothing to fear, even if he is surrounded by an army of enemies. He sounds completely confident, he's cool, no problem. But then something shifts halfway through the Psalm; his faith is shaken and suddenly he's crying and begging God not to abandon him.

The psalm conveys such a different emotional and spiritual state between the first half and the second half, it almost seems like two different psalms. What might be the cause for the shift from solid faith of the first half to the desperate pleading of the second half? Perhaps there's a chronological progression, and in the first half of the song, David is young and idealistic and hasn't yet faced any of the real-life challenges that make us struggle with our faith. Or perhaps it's not chronological, and it's just the two voices within us - that struggle between faith and doubt that comes once we experience suffering.

It occurred to me that something interesting happens in the text just as it shifts from the first half to the second half, that is, the psalm says: *Lecha amar libi bakshu fanai*. To you, my heart says: seek my face.

After all these verses about how full of faith he is, David's *heart* starts talking and says: seek what's inside of me. And at that moment, the David gets real and drops this whole "my faith is perfect and I have no fears" thing and starts being honest about how desperate he is.

Another interesting shift from the first half to the second half is – At first, the psalm speaks of God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person and talks *about* God, saying lots of lovely and pious things, but after David really listens to his heart and gets honest about his fears and his struggles, he starts speaking to God directly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, saying "You": "Don't forsake me, God. Don't hide Your face from me."

We read this psalm twice a day during the high holyday period, and it's an invitation to truly listen to what our hearts are saying. And to see that prayer doesn't have to be a bunch of pious words that we're supposed to say, like David says at the beginning of the Psalm. The heart is saying: Seek me, listen, pay attention to me (and put down that damn phone), and from this place of honest struggle, We can talk directly to God with words that are real. (or, if you like, sit parked on the side of the road listening to a Bruce Springsteen song and sobbing our eyes out)

The Psalm ends with *Kaveh El Adonai Chazak V'ya'amez libecha...* "Hope in God, be strong and courageous in your heart, and hope in God."  
 Hope and courage are born in that place of honesty about our struggles, where we listen to what our hearts need us to hear, not in pretending that we're fine and that our lives are as perfect as the pictures we post of ourselves online.

That's what I learned from my friend Erin Hyman, who was diagnosed a couple of years ago with breast cancer. Erin wrote frequently and publicly, about the "veneer of invulnerability" we in our culture usually attempt to maintain and how it comes at a cost, how we lose the opportunities for real love, support, connection, and joy when we pretend "everything is ok," when it's not. The mother of young children, Erin wrote a column in the J about parenting with cancer, about being real with her kids, about being honest about her illness, letting them see her bald, and crying in front of them. She wrote:

"An early-childhood educator advised us to reinforce the saccharine notion that "Everything will be OK." I won't do that. I want [my kids] to feel safe and loved and to know that they will be OK, but not everything will be... How else will they learn what it means to face challenges and deal with them? If we put on a facade of normalcy — and they would sense all the cracks anyway — we're conveying that it's better to stifle our emotions than communicate them...If we don't show them what we feel deeply — pain and grief included — we're not showing them that there's a way to move through these emotions and find your way forward."<sup>3</sup>

Erin died two weeks ago at the age of 42. You realize that all of our high holiday prayers about the Book of Life and "who shall live and who shall die?" are not just poetic metaphors when you lose friends your age, like Erin and like Sarah Fenner. Why we get to live and they didn't, we cannot understand, but perhaps we can honor them and the memories of all those who didn't make it into the Book of Life by taking this day seriously

By realizing the preciousness and unpredictability of our lives  
And getting real and honest  
And looking inside and doing the work that this day invites us to do  
while we have the chance.

American culture prefers cheerfulness and control,  
but our attempt to suppress sorrow propagates its own kind of pain.<sup>4</sup>  
Because we can't selectively numb.  
If we numb vulnerability, fear, and grief  
for the sake of control and the façade that everything is ok,  
then we also numb joy, beauty, love, creativity, and connection.<sup>5</sup>

So Judaism gives us this day that takes away all of our numbing  
distractions so that we can look inside and get real with ourselves –  
with our pain and our shame and our fears and our regrets –  
not so that we can stay there, but so that we can release them and  
move through them to joy and connection.

That's why Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur is so joyful –  
it's not just because we're happy that the fast is almost over –  
it's because we've looked inside and gotten real with our most difficult  
truths and then released them in forgiveness.

Which brings me to my third story, to Aaron (not "Erin").  
Our Yom Kippur is a reenactment of the original Yom Kippur ritual  
performed by Aaron the high priest, as we'll read about tomorrow.  
Aaron goes into the Holy of Holies to purify the tabernacle and to make  
expiation for the sins of himself, his family, and for all of Israel.  
Aaron gives us the model for how healing and release and purification  
happen through the raw honesty of this day.

The first thing the Torah tells us about the first Yom Kippur ritual is that  
it took place *Acharei Mot Shnei B'nei Aharon*,  
after the deaths of Aaron's two sons.

So when Aaron goes in to meet God in the heart of the whole world, He brings with him his vulnerability, his greatest sorrow, his loss. Aaron takes off his fancy priestly garments and wears simple white linen – There's no pretense to cover up his grief.

Now in biblical times, the atonement was automatic – Aaron splattered blood on the tabernacle and sent our sins away on a scapegoat.

But for us, the release happens in our hearts, and the commentators over the centuries have indeed equated the tabernacle with the human heart.

So for us, it's allowing our hearts to admit our deepest regrets, our biggest mistakes, our fears, our sorrows, our secret truths, and releasing them.

(Do not worry, I am not about to say:  
now turn to the person sitting next to you and share these secrets)  
No, this is just for you. For you and God.  
Aaron walked into the holy of holies all alone.  
And there everything is released and forgiven.

In other words, when we walk into the holy of holies, that place of raw honesty and vulnerability, where we drop the facades and the phones and the distractions, we are met with divine Compassion and tenderness and love – Like we said earlier tonight: *Vayomer Adonai Salachti Kidvarecha*, God says: I have forgiven as you have asked. Yom Kippur is designed to have us listen to the difficult truths that are in our hearts, so that they can be released and met with Divine Compassion.

So when you feel that twitch of  
“I just need to grab that electronic device or that other distraction so I know I'm in control and I'm ok and I can fill that difficult moment,”  
I invite you to breathe into introspection.

Rather than update your status on facebook,  
 update your status in the book of life –  
 consider carefully what’s being written in there.  
 Allow yourself on this day that’s all about  
 feeling your vulnerability and your uncomfortable truths  
 to feel your vulnerability and your uncomfortable truths.  
 Listen to what your heart is telling you.  
 That place is called the holy of holies, and it’s there that joy,  
 connection, forgiveness and compassion can be found.

Links to sources mentioned:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2014/07/03/328137640/surrounded-by-digital-distractions-we-cant-even-stop-to-think>

and

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/sunday-review/no-time-to-think.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/sunday-review/no-time-to-think.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYSctf1c>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/66459/parenting-for-the-perplexed-children-should-know-that-everything-is-not-alw/>

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Melissa Weintraub for directing me to this quote from Eva Hoffman. The full quote is: “Surely, all our attempts to escape sorrow twist themselves into the specific, acrid pain of self-suppression. And if that is so, then a culture that insists on cheerfulness and staying in control is a culture that—in one of those ironies that prevails in the unruly realm of the inner life—propagates its own kind of pain.”

<sup>5</sup> see Brene Brown on vulnerability

[http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)