

We Stand Here Together This Day: Yom Kippur 5775

Rabbi Lisa J. Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom

This year, I discovered the village. You know, the proverbial village that it takes to raise a child? I found it. I can't locate it precisely on the map, but I know I've found it here in Montreal. I have also discovered, to my delight, that it travels.

Some of you know I spent ten days in July on the faculty at Camp George, the Reform movement's camp in Ontario, and later in the summer, I went with my daughters to a French intensive for a week in Trois-Rivieres. Peut-être que l'année prochaine mon sermon sera en français!

What you may not know is that, this summer, I was the most useless faculty member in the history of Camp George. Over the course of ten days, I had a wicked bout of the stomach flu, and a series of mosquito bites that swelled up various parts of my body so much that I looked like a balloon animal, with all the air pushed to one place. When it wasn't debilitating, it was hilarious. But what all this meant was that instead of running sessions with the teenagers about Jewish perspectives on hunger, like I did last summer at camp, this year I spent mostly avoiding the sight or smell of food and counting on the other faculty to take my daughter to meals. I dragged my sorry self back to Montreal for a week and then went on to Trois-Rivieres, where I promptly rolled a couch over my foot. I was curled up on the floor with a melting fudgsicle wrapped around my toe and the girls gathered around me with a mix of fascination and concern, when one of the other mothers appeared at the door to say hello. As it turned out, she was one of those magical parents who always carry a first aid kit and actually know what to do with it. Like I said, it takes a village.

Atem nitzavim hayom kulcham – we stand here together this day. These are the words we will read this morning from the Torah. Our passage, which focuses on choosing life, replaces the traditional passage about the scapegoat and the Yom Kippur ritual in ancient days. But even the opening line of our text tells us something about what we are doing here, and why we are doing it together.

There is a Spanish story told of a father and son who became estranged. When he was old enough, the son left home; after some time the father set off to find him. He searched for months, in little towns and big cities alike. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper: The ad read: "Dear Paco, meet me in the town square at noon one week from today. All is forgiven. Your father." One week later, at noon, in the town square, 800 people named Paco showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

We stand here together this day. Repentance, forgiveness: these have the potential to bring us together. Our hunger for them can be so great. But there are different levels of repentance, and there are different levels of forgiveness. This time of year, in our Selichot discussion and our Torah study, many questions emerge: What if someone has done something unforgivable? What if the person who has wronged us doesn't even ask for forgiveness? It isn't always as easy as 800 people named Paco, showing up in the square.

Dr. Stephen Marmer, a psychiatrist who specializes in helping survivors of childhood and adult trauma, suggests that there are three kinds of forgiveness in Judaism:

The first and most complete type of forgiveness is exoneration, in which you completely wipe the slate clean and restore a person to a full standard of trust.

In the second kind of forgiveness, which I call forbearance, you know that you can't wipe the slate clean because the other individual hasn't fully repented. But the relationship is still important, and you don't want it to be destroyed by grudges. So you exercise forbearance to maintain the relationship while still keeping a watchful eye. This is very close to the concept of "forgive but don't forget..."

The third level of forgiveness applies when the other individual is either no longer alive or has no intention of making any kind of reparation. But the preoccupation with what they've done to you is eating away at you, and for that you need to release. You don't have to exonerate, and you don't have to have forbearance. But, for your own sake, you have to let it go.¹

The first level of forgiveness restores a relationship; the second makes room for it, within certain bounds; and the third acknowledges a relationship is impossible, and finds a way to release it.

I imagine that most of us have experienced most of these different levels of forgiveness in our lives, and if we are honest with ourselves, many of us have been on both sides. We have hurt others and we have been hurt. That is one of the fundamental truths of these days.

What is striking to me is that the first level of forgiveness allows for a relationship to be restored. On Rosh Hashanah, we mark the creation of the world. On Yom Kippur, it seems to me, we mark the recreation of the world, by reconnecting with each other. *Lo tov l'adam lihiyot levado*, the Torah tells us in Genesis. It is not good for a person to be alone – and look, here we are, together. Even if we cannot fix each relationship, we still seek out connection. Even if we have suffered unspeakable loss, there is something in us that reaches out. Roger Angell, in an extraordinary article about aging which I shared with our seniors earlier this fall, writes: "Getting old is the second-biggest surprise in my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love."² It takes a village not only to raise a child; it takes a village to live a full life, whether we are 90 years old or whether we are nine. *We stand here together this day.*

We stand here together, but we don't always feel together. At another covenant moment, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai, God instructed him to "be there." Why? Because even when our bodies are present, our minds can draw us away. Even when we are standing together, we can still feel terribly alone.

Later this year, Rabbi Lerner will do a book review on Elie Wiesel's most recent book, *Open Heart*, about his open heart surgery and resultant reflections on life. In an interview about the

1 Danny Sichel, "The Psychology of Repentance," *The Jewish Journal*, September 11, 2013.

http://www.jewishjournal.com/yom_kippur/article/the_psychology_of_repentance. My thanks to Anna Lilliman for bringing this teaching to my attention.

2 Roger Angell, "This Old Man: Life in the nineties," in *The New Yorker*, February 17 & 24, 2014, pp.60-65.

book, Wiesel was asked: “Was facing death in the hospital different from facing death in Auschwitz?” To this, he replied:

There [in Auschwitz] I wasn’t alone. I was with my father, as long as he was alive. I was always with others... So it’s not the same thing. Here [in hospital], I was alone in this condition. I knew I could die. I had, of course, as I say, lived in death over there. But here, it was an “I”—not “us.”³

Illness makes us profoundly aware of how alone we can be, of how we are a solitary “I” even if we also are part of an “us.” In a Modern Love column in the New York Times, Tim McEown writes about his own heart attack, which took place when he was 50 years old.⁴ “Early in my adult life,” McEown writes:

I had decided I would do whatever I liked whenever I liked and sort it out as I went along. I got away with that for 20 years, but as a lifestyle it’s sustainable only if you are both independently wealthy and a complete misanthrope. The former has never been the case and the latter never really worked for me. So I found myself close to 50 with a life I didn’t much care for and no way out I could see.

Waiting for the E.M.T.’s, McEown writes he was ready for his life to be done. And then Sarah, his fiancée, put together a bag of things she thought he would need at the hospital.

My initial reaction to what she was doing was resentment. Why should she want to complicate this? Why couldn’t she just let me go? But then I pictured her returning to our apartment alone in the event of my death, carrying that bag of stuff I would never use. And that image stuck with me, and started taking up space in my head.

It is not that this act alone saved him; McEown gives full credit to his doctors and the emergency team. But, he suggests:

What Sarah did in packing that bag for me, the quiet hope her act spoke to – that was the reason I listened to my doctors, took my medication and even quit smoking. As much as her intention was affirming and positive, it also exposed my own selfishness, the pettiness of giving up on life because sometimes life is hard. It embarrassed me the way being caught in a lie is embarrassing. Love doesn’t afford us the luxury of caring, or not caring, only about ourselves.

What McEown describes is the move from “us” to “I” and back to a different “us.” It is not an easy path to navigate – both for the person who is ill, and for the person who loves that person, that “I” within the “us.” Our congregant Susan Wener wrote an extraordinary book this year, titled *Resilience: a story of courage in the face of recurrent cancer*.⁵ One of the aspects of the book I found most moving was her honesty about the push and the pull that she experienced with

3 Nadine Epstein, “Heart to Heart with Elie Wiesel,” *Moment Magazine*, May-June 2013.
<http://www.momentmag.com/heart-to-heart-with-elie-wiesel/>.

4 Tim McEown, “In a Small Bag, She Packed All Our Hopes,” *Modern Love*, *The New York Times*, June 5, 2014.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/08/fashion/in-a-small-bag-she-packed-all-our-hopes.html? r=0>.

5 Susan Wener, *Resilience* (Vancouver, 2014).

the people who mattered to her most. Sometimes she wanted them around her, other times she wanted to be alone. Even when we have the good fortune to be surrounded by love, the journey of illness is a lonely one. Lonely for the person suffering, and lonely, in a different way, for those who love them. But we learn from who is there for us, from who packs that hospital bag, from who persists in showing up. *We stand here together this day.*

If this is true of physical illness, how much more so of mental illness. In the wake of Robin Williams's death by suicide, there has been a lot of much-needed conversation about the taboos around the struggles faced not just by our bodies, but also by our minds. Especially in the Jewish community, we carry these taboos. We are willing to see ourselves as neurotic, in a Woody Allen kind of way, but Jews who are addicts? Jews who are clinically anxious? Jews who are schizophrenic or bipolar or depressed? About these, we are too often silent.

Now, mental illness can no sooner be cured by the proverbial village than cancer could. Reverend Jean-Daniel Williams is the ecumenical Protestant pastor at McGill University. He is a young pastor with a young family, and we have had the pleasure of crossing paths. When Robin Williams died, Reverend Williams wrote a response to those who were condemning the actor, for having given up on life. He wrote about his own struggle with depression, and his own successes despite it. But then he says:

...my success story is not about my will power conquering depression. Because that did not happen. Depression and I are in a constant struggle. And sometimes I win. But let me tell you something about what I want. "I" want to live. I want to raise my children. I want to hug them and tell them I love them every day until I'm too old to lift my arms around them, and even then, I will still want to. I want to work as a pastor until my eyes can't read the words on Bible's page, until my voice can't even whisper any more Good News. I want people to come to me and tell me what is going on in their lives, to seek advice, to seek assurance that I love them, that God loves them, until they are stunned such a wrinkly old man is even breathing. That is what "I" want.

But... I have spent more than half my life listening to my own body betray me, my own mind telling me that it would be better to die. And while my external life circumstances have varied how tempting those whispers are, nothing has ever gone so well that they have stopped. No saving relationship with [God]. No compassionate bride holding my hands at the altar. No giggling twins in my arms. Nothing has made depression go away.⁶

We cannot make it go away. But we can listen, and we can support. *We stand here together this day.*

I think too of the words of a young woman, whose writing about anxiety was first runner up in the Royal Commonwealth Society essay competition, on the theme, "United We Stand." Like Reverend Williams, she insists that we take seriously these ongoing struggles:

My story isn't the kind of story where when I would be at my darkest, lowest point, I would find a special person/God/a bright light at the end of the tunnel, triumphantly

⁶ Reverend Jean-Daniel Williams, "Suicide and Choice," blog post, August 12, 2014. <http://www.pastorjd.com/eng/suicide-and-choice-an-open-letter-to-matt-walsh/>.

conquer the anxiety, and then go on to become an Olympic athlete and/or the first female president of America, which is impossible because I am neither athletic nor American. In fact, I still struggle with anxiety. Anxiety will be a hurdle that will continuously try to block me, but that I will have to leap over. It will be part of me all my life, opposite to what those myths say. People believe that once you find happiness again, all your problems will flutter away. Sadly, happiness is not perpetual. People who are anxious and depressed will need support all their lives...

When I was struggling with anxiety, my mother told me not to bring it up in front of my friends, ever. She wanted to protect me, for me not to get hurt or be made fun of because of my anxiety... It was only months later that I realized that I was *worsening* the stigma surrounding anxiety. We need to be able to speak freely about our anxiety or the stigma will never be broken, but where does the stigma come from?

To be honest, the stigma comes from those *with the anxiety issues*. We build these walls around ourselves, afraid of what the world will think of us, not realizing that millions of others are going through the same thing as us. We can only help ourselves and others if we talk about it, make people understand what we are going through. Those silenced by anxiety, including myself, must learn to speak up. United we *must* stand, those with and without anxiety issues hand in hand to conquer it. We must be brave and accept anxiety as a fact of life, but to do it with the support of others. I want to live in a world where one day, my children will speak of their fears without being afraid.⁷

These words were written by Leah Plante-Wiener, the young woman who will read this morning's haftarah. She stood on this bima last year as a bat mitzvah. Her dvar Torah on that day was pretty spectacular, but it is this essay – chosen from 9500 submissions from 500 schools in 44 countries – that convinces me that she knows what it means to be an adult. I am very, very proud that she is a member of this Temple. She makes our village better.

We stand here together this day. In the Book of Jonah, which we will read this afternoon, Jonah does everything in his power to be alone. He gets on a ship to run from God, who is trying to send him to Nineveh to tell the people to repent. He lets himself be thrown off the ship to run from the sailors who are trying to help them. In my daughter Alice's version of the story, he says to them, "it's not you, it's me." But God doesn't let him go. When Jonah falls into the sea, God sends a big fish to hold him. And when Jonah gets back to dry land, God sends him right back to Nineveh. And then, as the Ninevites are on the journey of repentance and forgiveness, of getting back to each other and to God, Jonah leaves town, angry at this happily-ever-after. But even in the wilderness, God gives him a plant to shade and sustain him. And it is only when God destroys the plant that Jonah realizes he has come to value another living being after all. Because the story isn't about the Ninevites, it's about Jonah. And the story isn't about Jonah, it's about you and it's about me. It's about how deep our despair can get, how lost we can be. And how essential is the lesson: it's not good to be alone.

We stand here together this day. Let Temple be part of your village. When your neighbourhood captains email or call, and they will soon, please answer. When you see a class or a gathering that

⁷ The full text can be found at <https://www.thercs.org/assets/Essay-Competition/2014-Junior-Runner-up-Leah-Annia-Plante-Wiener.pdf>. My thanks to Leah and her family for allowing me to share this in my sermon.

might be of interest, take a chance and show up. When we launch our Temple café next week, come and have a coffee, and talk to the person beside you (yes, you can check it out in the space outside the Chapel, and no, today there is no coffee, alas).

We stand here together this day. Our ancestors, in their wisdom, built us this place. We have the here. Our tradition, in its wisdom, gave us this time to reflect on how to live our lives. We have the day. What we need is each other, together. *We stand here together this day.*