

Failure
Yom Kippur Day
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Here on campus, we live in a world where people don't like to speak about failure. We are the successful people, at a wonderful university. Our students and faculty are accomplished. We've excelled in many areas, or we wouldn't be sitting here right now. And yet, there is no life without failure. The fact is that we would not need, or have, the holy day of Yom Kippur if human beings did not fail, in ways large and small, in our lives. But the essential teaching of Yom Kippur is that there are ways to live through failure and find ourselves wiser and stronger for the experience.

I want to share with you the story of the first time I submitted a scholarly article to an academic journal. I was just finishing my Ph.D. in ethnomusicology and I was excited about my work and research. I had presented a paper at a conference and the editor of the field's journal approached me and encouraged to expand the piece and submit it for publication. Yes! I'd be happy to do so. So I worked on it and sent it in. After a month or so, the editor sent the article back, asking me to rework and reframe the piece. Okay, I can do that. I worked on it more and resubmitted. I was feeling pretty good about the revision until I received a three page, single spaced letter from the editor totally tearing apart my article. (I thought about rereading it when I was writing this d'var but it was just too painful to go back there.) His comments were introduced by the words, "Jeff, these are words more honest than kind, but we can't accept the piece in its current form." I was devastated! How could I fail to get this article accepted? I had always thought I was a good writer, but now I felt pretty terrible. What did this say about me as a person and as a scholar?

While we might not be used to failure personally, our tradition takes a very different view of human nature. In the book of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes (7:20), we read "Ki adam ain tzadik ba'aretz asher ya'aseh tov v'lo yekheta. There is no person so perfectly righteous that he does only good and doesn't mess up." People often misunderstand Judaism's conception of human nature. If you ask most Jews, "in our tradition, are people basically good or basically bad?" most people will say, "oh, in Judaism, people are good." But that's not the case. We believe that each person has a good inclination and an evil inclination, an inclination to do the right thing and inclination to screw up. In our tradition, people have the potential to be extraordinary human beings. But as the rabbis (Ben Hei Hei) taught in Pirkei Avot, 5:26, what we achieve is based on our actions. Still, there are the situations when we have invested ourselves, we've worked hard, we did what we thought was the right thing, and it still didn't work out. We still failed.

I'll tell you a story about a walk I took with a student some years ago. We were walking because he was too agitated to sit down. Josh was really upset because he had been working hard and he had received a D in organic chemistry, basically blowing his

chances of getting into medical school. But his upset was much larger than the grade. For as long as he remembered, he was planning to be a doctor. He really looked up to his dad and grandfather, who were both physicians. They had encouraged him to be a doctor all through grade school and high school, where he did well in science. But try as he did, he just couldn't get organic chemistry and he felt like he was letting his whole family down. He felt like a failure on many levels.

As we walked, I tried to get him to think about his life in broader perspectives. Why did he want to be a physician in the first place, besides that fact that it was a "family legacy?" (Not a great reason, in my book, for choosing a profession.) Josh spoke about wanting to help people, to do something meaningful with his life. As we spoke, he was hesitant to admit that while he always thought this was the path, since he'd come to Tufts he had been feeling guilty that he was drawn to many other subjects, very much outside the pre-med courses.

Sometimes a failure tells us things about ourselves that we were simply too blind to see until they hit us head-on. When Josh saw that his plan to go to medical school was not going to happen, he went through some difficult times. At first, his family was disappointed and took the news hard. Josh was one of those rare students who came to college very certain about his path and career goals and as those changed, he had to live with the uncertainty of figuring out what he wanted to do. I reminded him of one of my favorite Alexander Graham Bell quotes (actually, my only Alexander Graham Bell quote): "When one door closes, we often stare at it so long and so regretfully that we fail to see all of the other doors that open in its stead." What happened with Josh was that over time, he actually found out that he had a real talent for business and eventually joined up with some friends to start a home health care-related company that he's still running in Florida. But his failure to go to med school was in many ways a blessing, a step along the line of figuring out what he really was drawn to do in his life.

I spoke with a good friend, former Hillel President and student body President Kevin Thurm, who is now an executive at Citigroup. I told him that I was writing my Yom Kippur d'var on failure and Kevin said, "Be sure to tell students that there can be times when they can experience big failure, and even then, they can emerge stronger and more whole from the experience." I know really good people who are dealing with failures in our lives that are deeply unsettling. Friends who have lost jobs and are working hard to re-establish themselves. I have a number of friends now who are going through divorces and other painful, difficult times. I spoke with one of those friends who is going through a divorce and she said, "This is incredibly hard, but coming out of this marriage, I'm beginning to see the kind of relationship I want, the way I need to act, to make it work hopefully when I get married again in the future." Here's the rule: When you really learn something something and change how you act because of a failure, then it hasn't really been a failure.

I'm always amused when my non-Jewish friends say to me before Yom Kippur, "Have a fun holiday!" Thank you, but no... that's not what this one is about. Oh, there are fun Jewish holidays: Purim, Simhas Torah, Passover after the third cup of wine, Hannukah

before the fourth latka. But Yom Kippur is much more about work than fun. And there is a process to that work: When we symbolically hit our hearts and say, "Al het sh'hatanu lefanecha, For the sin that we've committed before You," we're saying, We're all in this together, I'm not alone. Failing does not put me outside of this room, outside of the Jewish people. Everyone in this room has made mistakes and has experienced failure. The first step in making this right is to admit that we bear responsibility for the direction of our lives. Until we look into our hearts and admit that no one stands guiltless on this day, we're not standing firmly enough to move forward and make changes.

Next, we try very hard to listen to the "kol d'mama u'daka:" the still, small voice inside ourselves. If we really stop and think and listen, we will know the ways in which we have to change. And while our tradition teaches that teshuvah, repentance, is always possible, the image of the day is that the gates of teshuvah are in the process of closing, which reminds us that the time for change in our lives is now. Now, we have a chance. Now, we resolve to live our lives so that the "yes" we say is really yes, and the "no" we say is really no. We resolve to put real energy into the areas of our lives that we know are important: our families, our communities, our friendships, projects that we value. And then, the prayers for Yom Kippur teach us something else essential about confronting failure, about changing our direction. I take this from the prayer "Hayom:" HaYom, hayom, hayom! Today, today, today. Now is the time. We don't wait to make these changes. We start making them immediately, even as we sit here, we resolve and plan how to act differently in our lives. And then one last thing about this process: Do you know why we will blow the shofar at the end of Neilah later today? In one, long tekiah gedolah? Because according to tradition, that is the same blast we hope to hear announcing the coming of the messiah, when the world is perfected and redeemed, when we finally all get it right. So the blast of the shofar symbolizes hope. We are saying, "We know this is hard. We want so much from our lives. We know we're going to screw up again before we get it right. But as Jews, we are a people who don't lose hope."

Let me review that process of teshuvah again. First, we recognize that we all fail at some point, in some way, in our lives. Second, we listen carefully to our own voice, to decide what we have learned from our failures and misdeeds. Next, we acknowledge that the time is now. Hayom, this day, is the time to begin those changes. And finally, we proceed with the hope and belief that teshuvah is possible, that atonement is possible, in our lives. A bone that's broken heals stronger than it was before the break. A heart that's broken does too. When we are able to learn from our mistakes and use them to set a new course, then that failure has been transformed to an opportunity.

I want to return to the story of my first academic article, where I was sure I had failed so badly. As I said, the editor had written three pages criticizing the article and all I had focused on were the points he said I had done wrong. I don't think I had ever received such specific criticism in all my years in college and graduate school. Thank God I sat down with an older friend and colleague who read the letter and had a reaction that was totally different from mine. He said, "Wow. Look at all the time the editor spent on your piece. He must really believe in your work. These are great suggestions." When I

approached the “rejection” with new eyes, I saw how he was moving me to make the piece much, much better. It took a while to recast and rewrite the article, but I did. After a third round of edits, it was accepted and published. But what if I had stopped when the piece was first sent back covered with red ink? What if I had been so paralyzed by the things I did wrong that I didn’t put the energy into correcting them? In truth, I think I learned much more from that failure than from subsequent articles I’ve submitted that were simply accepted and published.

There is a story about a king who owned a beautiful diamond. It was large and luminous and the king valued it not for the monetary worth of the stone but for the perfect beauty that shone when the light hit it. But the stone had an imperfection, a flaw, a thin crack that ran along one side. The fact that this beautiful diamond had such a flaw made the king so sad that he called craftsmen and diamond cutters from all over his kingdom, and offered a large reward to anyone who could remove this flaw from the diamond. And so, one by one they came and held the stone up to the light and looked at it through their jeweler’s glasses. One by one, they said, nothing can be done. The stone will shatter if we try to remove this crack, this imperfection. But the king would not let the matter rest until finally one man came and examined the stone and said, yes, there is something I can do. Then please, sir, said the king, you have my permission to do anything you can to fix the stone and make it even more beautiful. After some time, the man returned and presented the king with the diamond and said, Your Majesty, all those who spoke to you were correct. There was no way to remove this flaw, but I found a way to use it to the stone’s advantage. And the king saw that the man had engraved an exquisite rose on the side of the stone, using the crack, the flaw, as the stem. Our flaws, our failures, our imperfections do not take away from our worth, if we find a way to incorporate them, to use them, to learn from them as we move forward in our lives.

May we all be sealed for blessings in the book of life.