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“The Whole, Broken Heart”

Okay, time to acknowledge the comedy in last year’s Kol Nidre evening. A rabbi who cannot speak at all on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur... a day when talking is the only thing we’re permitted to do. We’re Jews, and we can’t eat. Talking is all that’s left us.

For those who missed it or have joined our community since then, I sustained an injury to my vocal cords two days before Yom Kippur last year, and my ENT was very clear – healing would require total vocal rest... not a sound... for one full week. This made big news overnight in the North American rabbinic community. After all, it’s every rabbi’s nightmare come true. But this didn’t happen to just any rabbi, mind you – this happened to a rabbi who is at least on the ballot for “Most Verbose Human on Planet Earth.”

And I want to be clear – you all played your own part in this comedy to perfection as well. I liked how everyone still talked to me... during the Torah processional... in the lobby – and then got mad at me when I attempted, even silently, to respond. For crying out loud, people, I’m a talkaholic. What did you expect I was going to do? And I especially liked the *way* everyone talked to me. I would approach you, silently of course, and you would begin to whisper to me. I kept thinking: “Your voice works just fine. Why aren’t you using it?”

So yes, there was plenty of comedy on Yom Kippur, looking back on things now. But at the time, I’ll confess that it didn’t feel very funny. It all happened so quickly. An innocent collision, and in the space of a few short seconds, I literally felt my ability to make sound evaporate. I could feel the change. It was like watching a cloud pass in front of the sun, and the entire view changes. And suddenly, I’m thinking: “My God, what is happening?”

I went back to teach the last half-hour of my Confirmation class after being injured, and I could see the fear in my students’ eyes. One said, “Don’t whisper – it’s worse for you than talking.” “I’m not whispering,” I replied, “This is my full speaking voice.” I had never heard of such a thing. A voice instantly vanishing... completely. Those of you who have lived through a significant injury or illness already know that before the full magnitude of the

problem dawns on you, the shorter-range issues take up all the mental space. All I could think was, “How am I going to lead Yom Kippur?” But very soon, the questions became much bigger. What did a vanishing voice mean? I must have broken or damaged something pretty fundamentally. Can it be repaired? What will that require? Where do I go to get help?

Then I realized it was time for me to inform Rabbi Timoner. But I quickly realized: I have no idea what to tell her. I have no clue what has happened to me. I’ve never heard of such a thing happening. I have no idea when or if I’ll be well. And my voice is not just my most essential trade tool. It’s the window of my soul. If I can’t sing... or if I don’t sound like me anymore... maybe I’m *not* me anymore. At least not the me that I know, that others know, that others have counted upon. And that’s when real fear set in: *Maybe it’s over for that me.*

As many of you know, the initial orders I received from my doctor – one week of total voice rest – grew into two weeks... and then three... and then four. And along the way, the confident declarations from my ENT that my voice would recover notably morphed into measured statements that it should recover. When the doctor asked me to try talking for him at the two-week point, I naturally couldn’t resist trying also to sing a little. And not only was the sound of my voice still wounded... I also couldn’t sing in tune. I couldn’t control my voice – make it do what my head heard. It was my chance to understand what it’s like to be tone deaf... and to imagine staying that way forever.

I want to emphasize that our community’s outpouring of love and concern was overwhelming and really very beautiful. When I sent that video message out to our congregation, announcing that I had been permitted to resume gentle vocalizing, so many of you responded with warm embraces and congratulatory emails. Everyone was ready for it to be over. Only I went to the doctor a couple of days later and learned that it wasn’t over. He asked me to go back on total voice rest. And this time, I just couldn’t do it. Couldn’t do it to my family. Couldn’t do it to Rabbi Timoner. Couldn’t do it to all of you – the people in the hospitals, the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, the wedding couples, the individuals in need of counseling. I just couldn’t keep it up anymore. So I was warned of the potential long-term risks... and also told that I might be able to get better gradually with lesser use. Might. Might not. And the longer it lasts, I was told, the greater the risks. “Should I try to get away with talking until my two months of sabbatical time in the winter?” I wondered. “Will I never get better if I do that?”

The questions never really let up, and neither did the lessons – lessons that many of you have had to learn through the often difficult experience of living.

There was the lesson in accepting being dependent – being unable to get through the day without practically everyone, it seemed, having to help me... and accepting their help with graciousness, not prideful resistance.

There was the lesson in living with physical disability – the experience of being in a roomful of people who can, and you can't. Making peace with being "less" in such an evident way. Watching people not know how to deal with me. Seeing myself disappear sometimes – people looking right past me, as though I wasn't there, because I had no voice.

So, too, I should add, was there the very welcome lesson in the spiritual experience of hearing but not sounding. Many of you watched me having a spiritual experience last Yom Kippur, wondering what I was thinking. What I was really doing was hearing you as never before. There is so much in this world that passes us by because we are too busy filling it up. Last year, I got to be filled up – I was forced to learn how. That was a gift.

So yes, there were many lessons that accompanied my vocal cord injury last Yom Kippur – but the predominant one was the one that this High Holydays season is ultimately all about. Our liturgy attempts to shift the conversation toward repentance and forgiveness. But at the end of the day, why are we mobilized to repent so intensely at this precise moment of the year? Because the gates are closing, that's why. Because our real topic of this season is life and death... or more specifically, death. We repent because we want to get it right in our lives before it's too late – for we know that the prayer book is not lying: "Our origin is dust, and dust is our end. Each of us is a shattered urn, grass that must wither, a flower that will fade, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by, a particle of dust floating on the wind, a dream soon forgotten."

This holy day is about our impermanence. Yom Kippur is ultimately about the inevitability of our dying, and that's a topic we don't relish exploring very often. But the liturgy of this day says out loud what we usually don't prefer even to whisper: "All of this is temporary. Everything I cherish, I will lose. Whether that be my money or my power or my life station in the world... whether it be my health, my physical capabilities, my memories... whether it be the lives of those I love, or even my own life – all of it is going to be lost to me." And you better believe that was the hard lesson of last Yom Kippur for me, a middle-aged man who has seen plenty of loss in other people's lives, but had not confronted significant physical decline previously in his own life. You better believe that I sat on this bima and felt very much like a shattered urn, a fading flower. My injury was never life-threatening. But it surely did threaten the life that I have known. It certainly did pose the prospect of my losing something I cherish. And it absolutely reminded me of just how frail I am – and how much frailer I will be with every passing year with which I may be blessed.

Such a realization can prompt feelings of futility. It can turn even the heartiest of souls into a dark existentialist. After all, if I'm going to lose everything anyway, why care about anything or anyone? But Yom Kippur doesn't stop there. The holiday teaches: "Yes, I will lose it all... but life *still* has meaning. It matters that I get it right before it's too late."

This actually is religion's invention – the notion that our lives cannot be dismissed as some sort of random occurrence for a tiny, insignificant snapshot in time... that what we do matters, even if everything will ultimately be lost.

I think that most of us are religionists enough to have bought into that idea. We seek to live principled lives – we come to the temple on Yom Kippur – because we believe somewhere deep inside that our actions and our lives count. And this prevents us from allowing our knowledge of our impermanence to turn us into uncaring, unloving, closed creatures. We choose instead to risk our hearts by caring. We open ourselves to people and places and things and parts of ourselves that bring us joy, fulfillment, and a sense of purpose. We allow them to matter.

Of course, while in the midst of all that caring, we sometimes forget that we are impermanent – we prefer to forget, in fact – so when we lose those people and things that are most precious to us, we become broken... as if we never saw it coming... as if we were entitled for it never to change... as if we've been cheated, ripped off.

And that creates the dilemma. We want to care, but we end up devastated because of it. What protection is there against that fate? How can we confront our impermanence without becoming either closed by it or crushed by it?

The Jewish tradition is, in large part, constructed as the grand answer to that eternal question. Judaism's response to the challenge of impermanence is the discipline of gratitude. Our texts, our prayers, our teachers – they all breathe that discipline which says, "Our pain over what we lose is just the shadow side of our deep joy over what we have. One cannot exist without the other. So if we treat what we have as a blessing – if we name it as such, and acknowledge that it is an unanticipated gift, not an entitlement – we may still be able to declare it a blessing even when its predictable absence someday breaks our hearts."

Judaism's mystical masterpiece, the Zohar, states that when God came to create the world and to reveal what was hidden in the depths, light and darkness were intertwined with each other. They could not be separated. If one wanted to praise the light, the dark had to be accepted as part of the package. Now, that may seem like the kind of reasoning that could hold up under the psychic pressure of damaged vocal cords, but what about the real tragedies in our lives... the instances of loss that are so great, it's hard for us to imagine that the light is still there, intertwined with the dark?

Perhaps the most famous book written by a contemporary rabbi is the New York Times bestseller of a generation ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I know that many here tonight have read it. The book is Rabbi Kushner's response to the experience of raising and losing his firstborn child, Aaron, who suffered from progeria, or rapid aging. It's an especially insidious illness. Aaron looked like a little old man

throughout his childhood. He had to endure people staring and pointing at him throughout his far-too-short life, which ended at the age of fourteen.

On the very first Yom Kippur after Aaron's death, Rabbi Kushner stood upon the bima of his synagogue in suburban Boston, as his congregants anxiously awaited his message. What could be left of their bereaved rabbi? What hope could he still possess, could he still transmit?

Rabbi Kushner chose to tell a story – one he described as “a children's story for grown-ups.” It was Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece*. For those who don't know it, here's how it goes:

“Once upon a time, there was a circle that was missing a piece, and it was very unhappy. It went all over the world looking for its missing piece. Over hills and across rivers, up mountains and down into valleys, through rain and snow and blistering sun, it went looking for its missing piece. Wherever it went, because it was missing a piece, it had to go very slowly. So as it went along, it stopped to look at the flowers and talk to the butterflies. It stopped to rest in the cool grass. Sometimes it passed a snail, and sometimes the snail passed it. Wherever it went, it kept looking for its missing piece.

“But it couldn't find it. Some pieces were too big, and some were too small; some were too square, and some were too pointy. None of them fit. Then suddenly one day, it found a piece that seemed to fit perfectly. The circle was whole again; nothing was missing. It took the piece into itself and started to roll away. Now, because it was a whole, unbroken circle, it could roll much faster. And so it rolled quickly through the world, past the lakes and past the forests, too fast to get a good look at them. It rolled too quickly to notice the flowers, too fast for any of the insects to fly by and talk to it. When the circle realized that it was rolling too fast to do any of the things it had been doing for years, it stopped. It very reluctantly put down its missing piece, and it rolled slowly away, heading out into the world, looking for its missing piece.”

This was the grieving rabbi's answer to losing his fourteen-year-old son in the most gruesome, unspeakable way. He told the story because he had become a tortured expert at living its truth. And as a rabbi, he knew that he was just saying what the mystics of the Zohar had first said – light and dark... intertwined.

Rabbi Kushner explained: “In a strange, mysterious way which we can't really understand, a person is more whole when he's incomplete, when he's missing something. That little bit of incompleteness... opens him up... to feeling more, seeing more, experiencing more.” It is then, while he is staring at that intertwined light and dark, that he somehow senses blessing more acutely than ever.

I don't know about you, but I hear that, and I think that it is very, very hard to live as Rabbi Kushner describes when the going gets really tough. But maybe – just maybe – we already do so more than we think. Let's consider his teaching in the less tragic moments of our lives. I often tell wedding couples whom I am counseling that it's a misconception that people cry sad tears at funerals and happy tears at weddings. The tears at weddings, I say, are also, in some significant part, sad tears. There is loss in that moment of passage. Relationships are changing. Mortality is beckoning. Things will never be the same again, and everyone knows it. Still, no one would deny that there is blessing bursting through the hole created by that missing piece.

The same is true when young people grow up and head out on their own. During these past weeks, I have been privileged to witness a remarkable email exchange between the parents of our temple's incoming college freshmen... an exchange triggered by our temple president, Lori Stein, whose son Jason is in the class. Both the kids and parents in this group have been especially close over the years, so they are feeling their separation intensely. Parent after parent is writing in after leaving their son or daughter at college and heading home without them for the very first time. They are mourning, these families – and also living joy, simultaneously. And not a one of them would deny that there is blessing bursting through the hole created by their missing piece.

For me, when my voice became my missing piece, I confronted a kind of mourning that I had never experienced before. I felt my impermanence, and it frightened me. But then, there came a point where a big thought washed over me like a warm bath: "I have been extraordinarily blessed," I realized. "For forty-seven years, I have drawn the long straw. I was able to sing – worse than some, but better than many. And I never really stopped to think about whether it was fair that I could touch people by singing, while others who wished to do so simply couldn't, through no fault of their own. Maybe now I am going to be one of them – the ones who wish they could move hearts by singing, but can only admire those who do instead. And if that is going to happen, at the very least, I need to acknowledge that for nearly fifty years, I was given a tremendous gift to which I was never entitled. If *this is* to be it for that me, I should take notice of what was in a way that I never have before. And if my blessing of song is destined to return to me, I should be ready to treasure it in a way that I never have before."

Well, I sound pretty much like me again, so I guess I'll never know if I would have been able to hold fast to that thought had I lost my ability to sing permanently. But living with my missing piece, even temporarily, most certainly did inspire that thought – a thought that continues to bless me each and every day.

We humans are actually built to experience impermanence as Rabbi Kushner taught – even the worst kinds of losses, like his. And there is no better time than right now – than this day of Yom Kippur, which is all about the losing we do, the dying we do – to stare at that intermingled light and dark, and to acknowledge how we can become more whole through our incompleteness.

You see, unlike most other Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur was not tied to a historical occurrence in the Bible... to some major event in Jewish history that further defines the day and its meaning. But rabbinic tradition came along and suggested that, in fact, there was a foundational episode in the Bible that occurred on this very day of Yom Kippur. The rabbis taught that it was on this day that Moses brought the second set of tablets – the renewed, restored, whole-again Ten Commandments – to the people of Israel. On this day, the people saw that wholeness can somehow emerge from brokenness, that impermanence need not equal annihilation. For tablets are made only of stone, and everything of stone breaks sooner or later. And so it is true also of hearts. They will break again and again. But, said the great Chasidic sage, the Kotzker Rebbe, “no heart is so whole as a broken heart.”

Every year, I am asked by congregants who are seriously ill as the High Holydays arrive how they should use these Days of Awe. “What should I do differently,” they ask, “given that this really might be my last new year?” My response probably seems overly simple to them, but I don’t think it’s actually simple at all. My advice to everyone, regardless of your health, is to treat each High Holydays season as though it could be your last, to whatever extent you can. Not because I think there is any merit to the idea that those who will die in this new year were somehow unworthy of being written into the Book of Life – that, to me, is a heinous thought. No, the reason to treat each High Holydays season as your last is that it just might be, even if you’re perfectly healthy. It’s that truth we prefer not even to whisper: none of us knows whether we’ll live to tomorrow, much less the next High Holydays. But that reality need not produce only fear and discomfort. Might it not also cause us in this new year to live just a little bit more whole? Aware of our incompleteness, not running from it, might we live with greater beauty, greater honesty, greater presence, greater love – because no heart could be more whole than our broken hearts?

The Talmudic master Rav taught that “we should give thanks to God each day for being able to give thanks.” A blessing just for being here – because being here, broken hearts and all, is so much more than we could ever have expected. This day is ours. Let us give thanks.