

Assistant Rabbi Lisa Berney

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“Radical Acceptance”

“Kathryn conquered high school like a gold-medal decathlete. She ran track, represented her school at a statewide girls’ leadership program, and took 8 AP tests...” As you might expect, Kathryn graduated high school a perfect student – straight A’s, and it was no surprise when Kathryn was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania. She began her first two weeks on campus with the same attitude she had used to tackle high school – she signed up for a coed fraternity, volunteered to tutor elementary school students, and joined a myriad of clubs – all in her quest to be the best. Yet, Kathryn was soon overwhelmed with self-doubt. At Penn, everyone was smart, or at least that’s how it seemed. One classmate was a world class figure skater, another the winner of the international science competition, and yet another had already written his own novel.<sup>1</sup>

As this once confident young woman watched those same outstanding students and intrepid athletes glide through the halls, dressed for success and sporting perfect make-up, like they just walked off the pages of a fashion magazine... as she received notice after notice from the administration detailing her peers’ latest accomplishments... as her friends became immersed in dating and parties... Kathryn began to sense something she had never felt before in her life. She was no longer the best. Life and peers were passing her by. On Facebook and Instagram, Kathryn watched classmates seemingly having fun all the time, making friends *and* making grades, going to the best parties, getting the best internships...and all the while, Kathryn could barely finish her homework. And after a young lifetime of always being at the top, she was completely unprepared for anything but perfection. Soon, she began to wonder whether or not life was still worth living.

Unfortunately, Kathryn’s story is not unique. Volumes of research and literature have been dedicated to our quest for scholastic perfection – a far-reaching dilemma which inspired the renowned documentary, *Race to Nowhere*. The film explores the relentless pressure for students to succeed and gain acceptance into the best universities, a pressure that has pushed many, like Kathryn, to the brink... a pressure, if we’re being honest about it, that is pushing many of our own children and grandchildren to the brink. *Race to Nowhere* is but one of many efforts to challenge our assumptions about success and redefine a culture of competition and perfectionism that now plagues an entire generation.

In 2003, a report at Duke University revealed that female students felt pressured to be “effortlessly perfect” – smart, accomplished, fit, popular. And, of course, each student had to achieve all of this without any visible effort – the girl who just happens to get out of bed with a flawless appearance, not unlike our favorite TV

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Scelfo, “[Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection](#),” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2015.

characters. At Stanford, students call this phenomenon the “Duck Syndrome.” **Though a duck appears to glide calmly across the water, it paddles frantically beneath the surface.**

Meanwhile, back at Penn... a recent task force suggested, “The perception that one has to be perfect in every academic, co-curricular and social endeavor can manifest itself with demoralization, alienation, or conditions like anxiety and depression.”<sup>2</sup> The effects of our human quest for perfection are truly traumatizing for students, their schools, and their families... but this malady affects far more than just our young adults. In truth, it is the disease of an entire nation, young and old alike.

Recently voted as one of the top cardiologists in his region, James, a 50 year-old father of two, was diagnosed with heart disease this past July. Healthy his whole life, James is now discovering what it means to be on the other side of the doctor-patient relationship. After undergoing one surgery, he is now waiting for his body to become strong enough to endure another. Aside from his wife and mother, James has told no one about his condition. Citing the case of a fellow physician who lost all of his patients after they had heard he was ill, James feels that he can’t let people know of his illness, his vulnerability, without losing his livelihood and identity. So, instead, he suffers in silence, displaying a carefully crafted appearance of perfect health and pride, while paddling frantically beneath the surface.

How many of *us* feel like we can’t share our health issues, fearing they might make us appear weak? How many of us feel like we can’t admit that we are having financial difficulty? That we don’t feel like we are succeeding at our jobs? That we are afraid we can’t actually provide for our families? That we are worried about our kids, or don’t know how we are going to care for our aging parents? That we’re lonely? That our marriage is falling apart? That we don’t feel smart enough, or educated enough, or talented enough, or unique enough or wealthy enough or sophisticated enough or masculine enough or pretty enough? How many of *us* try to project ourselves as the picture of perfection, gliding calmly across the water, while we are really paddling frantically beneath the surface?

Today, many in our society experience a version of what is often referred to as “Imposter Syndrome.” Typical among young professionals, “Imposter Syndrome” strikes when people feel they are feigning competence in their fields, in their relationships, or in other aspects of their lives. Of course, when you are a brand new lawyer, or doctor... or even a rabbi... it makes sense that you might not feel prepared enough, intelligent enough, or wise enough to stand beside your peers. But what is more disconcerting is that, for so many people, this feeling of pretense seems to last forever. Countless people feel as if they are constantly pretending – to be adept enough, skilled enough, rich enough... perhaps, at Leo Baeck, liberal enough... to belong among their peers. And so, they continue to hide their vulnerability – publicly portraying confidence and resourcefulness, while paddling frantically beneath the surface, lest anyone discover that they are merely human.

Recent developments in technology, designed to aid us in our work and expand our reach, have only compounded this issue. Now, social media platforms allow us to curate our outward looking lives however we like. Regardless of what is going on inside of us, we can portray an immaculately manicured and flawless appearance, increasing our collective sense of unworthiness. In fact, a recent report from the American

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery indicates a dramatic surge in demand for cosmetic surgery, as people have begun comparing themselves with disappointment against their carefully collected and published selfie catalogs.<sup>3</sup> We are literally starting to compete with our own carefully manufactured versions of ourselves.

In response, several celebrities, including Kate Winslet, Scarlett Johansson, and just last week, Julia Roberts, launched a no-makeup campaign by posting cosmetic-free photos to Facebook and Instagram. As part of the campaign, Roberts suggested that, "Perfection is a disease of a nation... We try to fix something but you can't fix what you can't see. It's the soul that needs surgery."

It is a gallant effort, and, yet just two weeks after the movement went viral, beauty sites began advertising, 'how to take the perfect no-makeup selfies,' explaining which angles and lighting would allow women to look their best while trying to appear as if they don't care. Even a no-makeup campaign has become another arena in which to strive for perfection. The costs of our pursuit of perfection, however, don't afflict just the individual. They afflict our entire society, as well.

In 2010, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work, explained in a famous TED Talk that attracted more than 21 million viewers: "We live in a vulnerable world, and one of the ways we deal with it is by numbing our vulnerability."<sup>4</sup> Self-medicating with gambling, food, alcohol, narcotics... binge watching TV or playing video games for days at a time, obsessively checking social media (ironic, huh?), we tend to numb ourselves or hide ourselves from our imperfections. In fact, Brown suggests that this need to escape our inadequacies and limitations has led us to become, "the most in-debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohorts in United States history."<sup>5</sup>

Brown identifies the culprit for this phenomenon as *shame*, the swampland of the soul, the fear that if we own our vulnerabilities, people may think less of us...or worse... that we may think less of us...the fear that no matter what we do, we are never enough...Who wouldn't want to numb that feeling? However, as Brown suggests, *shame* loves secrets – it thrives on remaining hidden and undisclosed. Though we might think that we can hide our insecurities in the darkest corners of our minds, they bubble to the surface in all aspects of our lives. And what's worse is that when we hide from our vulnerability, when we numb ourselves to the effects of our shame, we also numb ourselves to other emotions – to the possibilities of joy, of love, and of real connections with others, preventing us from sharing the unique gifts that each of us is meant to fulfill in the world.

So... while society tells us to perfect ourselves and our lives...sometimes even to try to perfect others...we must find a way to embrace our imperfections and accept ourselves. And while it might feel like our tradition, especially during these High Holy Days, encourages us to continually ask for perfection, we must also acknowledge that our tradition wants us to unleash our Divine spark, our unique gift, upon the world, and that from the beginning, Judaism reminds us that we humans were created "*tov*," good, not perfect... and that good is enough.

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Murphy, "What Selfie Sticks Really Tell Us About Ourselves," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Brené Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," *TED*, June 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

We all know that acknowledging our imperfections and showing kindness to ourselves is not an easy task. It takes real mettle to stop hiding the things we like the least about ourselves. It takes true courage to face the uncertainty, the criticism, and the shame that can result from admitting our vulnerabilities, and at its core, that's what courage is – the bravery to share what's inside our *couer*, the Latin for 'heart,' and to tell the story of who we are with our whole heart.<sup>6</sup> By discovering courage, we can rediscover ourselves, our true selves, and the unique gift we have to offer the world.

So... as a society which has more access to information than ever before... as a society that is increasingly aware of the individual and social costs of our ubiquitous quest for perfection... why do we permit it to endure? Perhaps because, like Kathryn and James, we feel so threatened by the possibility of shame that we're still searching for the courage to reveal our true selves. Or, perhaps, because the message of unworthiness has become so deeply inculcated in our society that some of us don't even realize we help proliferate this cultural norm. Far too often, people muster the courage to share their truths with an open heart, only to be spurned by judgment and the expectation of perfection.

A recovering alcoholic, Marjorie had finally worked up the courage to tell her neighbor about her past, only to hear her neighbor say, "Well I'm not sure I'm comfortable having my kids play at your house anymore." Pushing through her shame and fear, Marjorie responded, "But they have played together for years, and I have been sober for more than 25 years! I'm not different than I was 10 minutes ago...why are you?"<sup>7</sup>

At Leo Baeck, we have witnessed people share their truths...their losses...their struggles...their insecurities... and certainly their joys as well. We strive to be a place where people can come to see and be seen, and yet, even we can remain quick to judge... to censure... to demand perfection... from ourselves and from others.

There is a story about the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidim. He would hold a competition each year to select the very best shofar blower to assist him on Rosh Hashanah. Picture a sort of Ashkenazi Jewish version of American Idol. Now, if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar with gusto, dazzling the likes of anyone who came to pray, but you also had to learn an array of kavanot – quiet prayers that are said before you blow the shofar to direct its blasts and ensure that they have the proper effect in the divine realm. All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these kavanot for months...some for years! They were quite difficult and complex. When one such man came to audition before the Ba'al Shem Tov, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him enough for this moment – to stand before one of the great rabbis and perform this important ritual act. And...he choked. His mind froze, he couldn't remember the kavanot he had been practicing for years. He just stood before the Ba'al Shem Tov in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously, how clearly he had failed this great test, his heart broke, his body heaved, and he just wept.

"All right...you're hired," the Ba'al Shem Tov said.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Center City: Hazelden Publishers, 2010), e-book.

<sup>8</sup> Lew, Alan, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 98-99.

The shofar blower discovered how vital it is to have a community that embraces vulnerability. Just like Marjorie did. Just like Kathryn did back at Penn. You see, after her roommate openly and lovingly inquired about her detachment, Kathryn sought out counseling and ultimately shared her story with the world. Her healing, like that of the shofar blower, was only possible because they had communities which welcomed vulnerability, which rewarded courage, and which refused to define their members by a single experience.

What might it look like to be a place where each one of us, no matter how different we may be, could walk in, take a deep breath and truly shed that need to arm ourselves, shed that feeling of inadequacy, and trust that we are entering a place where we will be seen for our whole selves – vulnerabilities, gifts, and all... a sanctuary from the message of perfection, in which *each and every one* of us can enter and be affirmed before God and our community, *regardless of our imperfections*. What if... instead of having a sign in the lobby, like many institutions, that reads, “No cell phones in the sanctuary,” our sign instead read, “NO JUDGMENTS IN THE SANCTUARY. VULNERABILITY WELCOMED.” And we agreed to see this sign as directed not just to others, but to ourselves. After all, we can never accept others for who they truly are until we learn to accept ourselves for who *we* truly are. The judgments we render upon others are but reflections of the judgments we render upon ourselves.

We often speak of the High Holy Days as an opportunity to repent, to seek out our best selves, to become better people and better Jews in the year to come... but what if, instead of ruthlessly seeking out our best selves, we discover how to love our existing selves, despite our imperfections? What if our sacred task was to name our vulnerabilities and our shortcomings without reproof, and to begin to welcome those of others... in full acceptance? What if *that* was the foundation upon which we would choose to build our growth during this new Jewish year?

Believe it or not, that’s exactly what our Jewish tradition demands first of we Jews who wear the white robes on these Holy Days. The first prayer the worship leader traditionally utters on Erev Rosh Hashanah, *Hinenni*, is an admission that *we* are flawed, imperfect, and humbled, standing before God... broken... and frightened by our brokenness. Yet, we implore God to accept us as we are. “Behold me, of little merit, trembling and afraid, as I stand before You to plead for Your people. O, gracious God of compassion and love, accept my petition and that of my people. Let them not be put to shame because of me, nor I because of them...” Our liturgy flows from one entreaty to the next, each admitting our vulnerability and humility before God...each acknowledging the limitations of the human condition...and each... asking God to accept and love us anyway.

Tomorrow, we shall recite the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, with its foreboding portents, “On Rosh HaShanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live, and who shall die?” Is there any greater reminder of our imperfection? We are but blood and guts. The fate of our existence is to be fallible, limited, broken, mortal...vulnerable. Regardless of our income, our success, our accolades, we all pass as equals underneath the Shepherd’s rod, all flawed, all at the mercy of circumstances bigger than ourselves that we cannot hope to comprehend. Though this realization is terrifying, it is also comforting, as it reminds us that we are all connected to one another in our fallibility. If God can accept our imperfections, why can’t we?

No, I'm not suggesting that we should receive a get-out-of-*teshuvah*-free card or ride through the High Holy Days clinging to the status quo. But, for many of us, the greatest change we can make during the next ten days is to find the courage to accept ourselves for who we are in *this moment*.

Because... try as we may, we'll never be perfect, and we cannot actually relate to one another while we fruitlessly pursue perfection.

Because... shame cannot survive when there is empathy, and embracing our weakness will bring us back to one another.

Because... this community, this fortress of justice, can be something more – a bastion of hope and acceptance, a house where people come to see and be seen, a place where we never need to hide our frantic paddling beneath the surface.

And because one day... Kathryn, James, Marjorie, and each of us should be able to cry out in truth: "*Hinenni*, Behold me, of little merit, trembling and afraid, as I stand before You...O gracious God of compassion and love, accept my petition and that of my people. Let them not be put to shame because of me, nor I because of them..."

Ken Yehi Ratzon, May this be God's will.