

PITCHU LI – vulnerability as a strength

Yom Kippur Morning / 5768

All things considered, it looked to be like any other high school graduation. It was outdoors, under a white tent. Plastic chairs were set up, split by a center aisle. Family of the graduates coming early in order to get seats up near the front. Everyone with a camera. Then the headmaster asked us to take our seats, the PA system began playing Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, and we all turned around in our seats as the students, wearing powder blue and dark blue caps and gowns, marched single file down that center aisle to take their places on the makeshift stage in front.

The Grove School is a small private academy. Total enrollment is slightly larger than 100. So 28 graduates was, in the larger scheme of things, a small, even intimate size for a graduating class. But we all knew that this was no ordinary graduation. These students, most from the East Coast, were here because they were working to overcome the challenges of adolescence. The Grove School is a therapeutic boarding school. So it was no surprise that every graduate was unique. Every student was a *story*. And on this day every story would be told.

The graduation ceremony that day was perhaps the longest I had ever attended. Twenty-eight graduates—and each of them would be presented by a member of the faculty or staff after which each of them would deliver their own address. Fifty-six speeches. No doubt for some in attendance the afternoon would prove to be intolerable. But for me, it was enlightening. And inspiring. Evocative and moving. In fact, it was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

The tone for the afternoon was set by the first presenter. One of the school's resident advisors walked up to the dais and introduced the first student by telling us that this was a young man she doubted would ever make it past the first week let alone graduate. She proceeded to tell us about his personal struggles, how he wouldn't speak to anyone, how he refused to get out of bed. At first I think most of us were a bit taken aback. "Boy, she isn't pulling any punches," I thought to myself. We all did. There was this kind of nervous laughter that followed her frank and brutally honest assessment of him. But we all knew that honesty and frankness were the program's guiding principles. Then the student got up to speak, and he proceeded to confirm the advisor's analysis. That is, he began to talk about himself in the same open and direct way. And that brought, in a sense, a kind of relief. He wasn't embarrassed by her introduction; he welcomed it. He affirmed it. We then knew this was not going to be like your average high school graduation. This was a day of catharsis.

Over the next three and one-half hours I sat and witnessed extraordinary courage, young men and women sharing their stories in ways most of us would never dream of doing (certainly not in public). On more than one occasion students would stand up and tell us how their first day at Grove was the worst day of their life, but now they realize that it saved their life. Or there was the girl who, through a constant stream of tears, confessed that this was the only home she had ever truly known. On and on, the graduates stood before the crowd of two hundred strangers and laid themselves bare for all to see. They opened their souls, they reflected on their challenges and failures in ways that literally took our collective breath away. And it was then that I knew what I wanted to talk about on Yom Kippur.

Would that we had the courage to reveal to just ourselves and particularly to those we love what we see as our failures. Would that we were willing to take the risk to open up about whom we really are, to take such ownership of our lives. It goes beyond honesty. It's about making yourself vulnerable.

Being vulnerable is not often thought of as a virtue. On the contrary, we use the word almost exclusively in the context of weakness—because invariably we tend to understand the term within the context of struggle. Being vulnerable is about being defenseless. It's about being open to attack. We see it as an undesired state-of-being in relation to another. We rarely *seek* to make ourselves vulnerable.

But, I think, learning to make yourself vulnerable, having the courage to open yourself up, is not merely a virtue—it's the essential component to growing as an individual and forging meaningful and lasting bonds with those we love.

So now, on this the last of these Days of Awe, I think it's about time I addressed why it is I am wearing this *thing*. It's not a robe. It's called a *kittel*. A burial shroud. It's a lot nicer than the ones the funeral homes give you. You actually go out and *shop* for these. There are different styles, some more elaborate than others. You can even get them in satin. I admit it felt a little weird trying them on at the *Judaica Shop* in Teaneck. When I got back to the Temple and showed it to members of the staff, one of them asked, "Are you going to wear it when you die?" To which I replied, "I really don't know. I don't think I'm going to have much say when it comes to that."

The fact of the matter is, other than death, there are customarily only two instances where the wearing of a *kittel* is considered appropriate. One is on Yom Kippur. The other is on the day of your wedding. And although these two occasions might seem at first glance to be an odd combination, in fact what they share in common is a willingness to enter them completely open—and thus, vulnerable. This is especially true for Yom Kippur. Today is a trial day of death. On this day we are to enter the synagogue as if it were our *last* day. There is no more reason to put on the pretense. There is no more reason to hide. After all, what do we have to lose?

Of course, that is among the most important questions we can ever really ask ourselves. For all the times we erect barriers, for all the situations for which we surround ourselves with protective shields—to keep ourselves from becoming *vulnerable*—what are we actually afraid of losing? If you're about to die, what more can happen to you? Even if it's just *pretending* you are about to die, this is an opportunity to shed our defenses, to drop our guard, to put away the pretense. Our walls rarely protect us; they just shut part of us off from the world, even from ourselves.

Among my favorite *midrashim* is the story of a rabbi teaching his disciples that if you repent a day before you die, all will be forgiven. "But," his students asked, "how do you know what day will be the day before you die?" "You don't," he replied.

Teshuvah is something we should be doing every day. Just as this "trial-day-of-death" stuff we're supposed to be doing today is something we should be embracing every day of the year. Yom Kippur is just an annual stop-gap. It's a day designed to keep us honest. And it is in this context, therefore, that doing *teshuvah* should be understood as being about returning *to yourself*. It's about revisiting the person you used to be before you started covering yourself up with all those protective barriers. Yom Kippur comes to challenge us to put away our fears and

masks. This is the day we grapple with the truth that all the things we do to protect ourselves, actually keep us from ourselves. All of those things we do out of fear of losing something, in fact actually cause us to lose what is most valuable—our *self*.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk teaches: “If you wish for something new to come out of you, you must first make yourself like the wilderness.” *Aseh lekha ka-midbar*. And usually this is understood to mean that we need to strip ourselves down, to reduce ourselves to a spiritual state of nothingness—if we hope to grow. In other words, if you hope to become something, then you must first become nothing.

But the more I think about it, the more I think there is another aspect to this teaching. I now see making yourself “like the wilderness” to mean, make yourself *vulnerable*. Just as the *midbar*, just as the wilderness is open and wide, so we need to remove those things we have created that block ourselves—from ourselves. Being vulnerable—like the wilderness—may be frightening, but it is the fear that truly prevents us from climbing the mountain. Lest we forget, Torah was given atop a mountain—in the wilderness, the place of discovery.

And if being vulnerable is the doorway to becoming at-one with our true self, how much the more so vulnerability is the pathway to loving and enduring relationships.

One of my favorite books (which of course was made into a movie) is Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*. It’s a touching story of unrealized love between Mr. Stevens, the chief butler, and Miss Kenton, the housekeeper of a British estate. Clearly the impediment to these two people acting on their mutual affection is Mr. Stevens’ reserve. Perhaps it’s his overwhelming sense of duty to his master, leaving no room for anything or anyone else. But there’s this one scene in the film—which for me embodies the entire tension of the story—that suggests to us that Mr. Stevens’ discomfort with closeness goes beyond the call of duty.

One evening Miss Kenton comes into his study unannounced. A bit surprised and uncomfortable, he clearly sends a message that he would prefer to be left alone. But she will have none of it. She presses on. She tries to engage him in conversation, without much success. Then she approaches him behind his desk. He stands up, clutching the book he has been reading to his chest. Guarding it even. When Miss Kenton inquires of the book, he becomes even more protective. As she moves closer to him, he backs into the corner. She then starts to playfully fantasize about the nature of the book. “Why are you so shy about the book, Mr Stevens? I rather suspect it may be something rather racy...I wonder, is it a perfectly respectable volume, Mr Stevens, or are you in fact protecting me from its shocking influences?” He says nothing. Then she reaches for the book and Stevens, almost like a child, resists her taking the book, yet doesn’t entirely object. He holds onto it just hard enough to mirror the tension between the two of them. Then Miss Kenton wrests the book from his hands, opens it up and exclaims in a kind of disappointing chagrin, “Good gracious Mr Stevens, it isn’t anything so scandalous at all. Simply a sentimental love story.”

It is an extraordinary scene, brilliantly played by both Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. If you’ve seen the film, you know. But even more powerful is Ishiguro’s exposition:

“She reached forward and began gently to release the volume from my grasp. I judged it best to look away while she did so, but with her person positioned so closely, this could only be achieved by my twisting my head away at a somewhat unnatural angle. Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away, practically one finger at a time. The

process seemed to take a very long time—throughout which I managed to maintain my posture...”

“...throughout which I managed to maintain my posture...” At that one moment, she broke through his veneer of invulnerability (even though he *courageously* attempted to “maintain [his] posture”). Yet for me what was most revealing was that the book he was hiding was just a story about simple human emotions. A “sentimental love story”. But then again, is there anything *more* threatening than simple human emotions? Far more threatening than immorality is intimacy. Opening himself up, allowing her to get to know him, was more than he could possibly bear. I wonder if there are not times—in all of our lives—when this is not true for us as well?

Sometimes the closer we get to people the harder it is to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. The walls we create to protect ourselves ultimately become obstacles to our drawing closer to others, because the ones we get closest to then get to know our weaknesses. Our secrets. Our *dark* secrets. And sometimes those weaknesses come between us, and then we fall into a habit of assuming a defensive posture. And so it just gets easier to keep the walls up. And the longer the walls are up, the farther apart people grow. Hence the publicity tagline for the movie *The Painted Veil*: “The greatest journey is the distance between two people.”

The challenge is to learn how to rethink what it means to be vulnerable. It’s not a weakness, it’s a strength. And a virtue. Even more, our willingness to open ourselves up, to make ourselves vulnerable—*ka-midbar*, like the wilderness—is the first and most important step in narrowing the distance in our most important relationships.

This is a topic for which I profess very little expertise. Not only in theory but in practice. But I’m still working on it. Nevertheless, I believe wholeheartedly that the greatest value of relationships, the very reason we have relationships is that it is only through the help of a loving Other in a context of unconditional trust that such openness can be nurtured onto a path of self-discovery. (As I have learned, true forgiveness is forgiving the Other even though you know he will do it again.) While it is true that our darker side often plays itself out within the context of our relationships, it is equally true that those same relationships are the very place where we are best able to address the pain and fears that feed our darker side. As a good friend taught me, “Relationships are the playgrounds where we grow.”

By the same token, I find it intriguing that in the book of Genesis the creation of Adam’s *partner* comes through the removal of Adam’s rib. As if to teach us, you need to be willing to open yourself up for this other—in order that *she* or *he* might grow. That is, *my* growth comes not only when I examine my own issues (with the help of my partner) but also when I nurture my partner’s struggle for self-discovery. It is a true *symbiotic* process.

Vulnerability is the purest form of intimacy. This is what Torah means when it says that Adam *knew* Eve. On its surface level, the text implies they had sexual relations, but it is also possible that the specific use of the Hebrew *yada* might mean that *knowing* the other was more than physical knowledge? And that our desire (or need) to eat from the Tree of Knowledge is all part of this condition we call *Life*. What greater knowledge can there be than knowledge of the *self*? But it is only through “knowing” the Other that one comes to truly see oneself. This is why we seek an Other; to be our partner along this journey of self-discovery.

Harold Kushner tells the story of how he was "...sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand." He then writes:

"I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh."

It was their shared sense of openness, their mutual bond of trust that they were building something together that allowed them to emerge from that momentary disaster unscathed and still rejoicing in life. And what allowed them to laugh in the face of life's pain was their shared sense of "togetherness". By contrast, it is only when we close ourselves up, when we erect walls to seemingly protect ourselves, that we actually weaken ourselves by keeping others out.

To make ourselves vulnerable not merely takes great strength—it is the necessary first-step in making ourselves strong. And in the process we begin—as did those high school graduates—to discover the *self* that hides within.

One of the most dominant motifs of Yom Kippur, especially during the *Ne'ilah* service, is reflected in the phrase *Pitchu Li*. Usually it is offered in the context of "Open for me..." (as in the Gates that open back out onto Life). But maybe we can read it another way? Maybe we can offer this prayer in a way that would make me as the object, as in "Open *me*..."?

Might this not be our deepest desire? Might this not be what Yom Kippur is really about?

Remove, God, my shell that blocks my soul from shining through. Help me, God, to open myself in ways that will allow me to truly be *me*. Give me, God, the courage to trust those I love by making myself vulnerable to them.

Pitchu Li... Open *me*, God, that I might truly enter through Your *Sha'arei Tzedek*, Your Gates of Righteousness.