

“Perfect Imperfections”
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Finding love worthy of marriage once is hard. Finding love worthy of marriage twice is even harder. Keeping love alive is the hardest of all. This law of love applies not only to marriage but to all of our relationships - with friends, with siblings, with parents and most of all with ourselves.

This past summer I officiated at a deeply moving wedding between a young widow, Holly, and a young widower, Joe. Many of you may know them. As a clergy person and friend, I walked with them through their journeys from the diagnosis of spouses' cancers, to challenging treatments, to hospice, to tearful burials and bereavements, back to living life and ultimately finding love again.

The wedding was hard, even as it was beautiful. In this sanctuary were so many people I had gotten to know by hospital beds, hospice beds, and in houses of mourning. For all of us, celebrating new love was mixed with missing those who were gone.

At the party Joe got up to make a toast but did something different. He explained that in High School and college he was in musical theater and has been singing ever since. Yet two and a half years ago when Rona died, so did the music. Now it was back. Joe then sang a song to Holly that made all the wives wonder why their husbands had never sung to them.

It was not his great voice or thoughtful act that moved me most but the words of his song that I have been singing ever since. The lyrics by John Legend go like this: *All of me loves all of you, Love your curves and all your edges all your perfect imperfections. Give your all to me, I'll give my all to you. You're my end and my beginning. Even when I lose I'm winning.*¹

At that moment I got it. The secret to finding love and keeping love is accepting our own perfect imperfections even as we try to grow, being forgiving of other's imperfections and lastly, accepting life's imperfections.

It is human nature to look in the mirror and see the imperfections – the wrinkles and gray hair of age, the folds of fat, the acne of adolescence, the birth marks and age marks that have shown up in places we'd rather they not be.

But looking deeper into our souls is harder. Is our anger out of control? Are we judgmental? Do we say one thing with our words yet do the opposite with our actions?

¹ Legend, John, and Toby Gad. *All of Me*. John Legend. Columbia Records, 2013. MP3.

Our liturgy knows this to be true. We just read our viddui – our confessional: the acrostic list of our sins from arrogance to having zeal for bad causes, for the sins we've done privately and publicly, knowingly or unknowingly, for the deep hurt we have caused. Today forces us to face who we are. Like a psychological intervention where family and friends struggle to make us aware of the damage we are doing, today is our self-intervention.

Welcome to our 25 hour Yom Kippur Rehab program. Jews across the globe are taking part. I encourage you to stay through the shofar's blast that will come tomorrow night so that you can get the most out of this program designed and refined by sages over the past 3000 years. I encourage you to take this time seriously and use it to sober up and work on yourselves. Our personal failings are tearing the fabric of our relationships stealing sacred moments from our all too short lives.

Today we offer not a twelve step program but three step path to renewal.

Our first step to finding that wholeness and health we seek is to accept our own imperfections even as we strive to work on them.

None of us is perfect. Rachel Naomi Remen writes: "Human being" is more a verb than a noun. Each of us is unfinished, a work in progress. Perhaps it would be most accurate to add the word "yet" to all our assessments of ourselves and each other... If life is process, all judgments are provisional, we can't judge something until it is finished."²

Today let us say: I am not loving enough... yet. I am not patient enough... yet. I am not generous enough, I am not kind enough, I am not learned enough, I am not healthy... yet.

Even Moses was slow of speech and had anger management issues – he shattered tablets and struck rocks. Yet despite his failings and in moving beyond his failings, Moses remains a model for leadership today.

In July, Chip and I were blessed to go to Italy. It was the trip of a lifetime. We went to see the statue David carved by Michelangelo at the Accademia in Florence. David was pretty near perfect. I have never seen anyone as perfectly sculpted as that! Two things impressed me most. First, Michelangelo sculpted David out of a flawed piece of marble that another artist had cast away. If Michelangelo could make David out of flawed marble, imagine what we could make out of the flawed material of our lives.

Second, while I loved seeing David, I was more taken with the two rows of Michelangelo's sculptures opposite him. Some call them "the prisoners" as they look like forms of people emerging from rock. They were incomplete, imperfect, unfinished, beauty coming out of a block

² Remen, Rachel Naomi. *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*. New York: Riverhead, 1996. Print. p. 223.

of stone. They are us - incomplete, imperfect, unfinished. They were being freed from the matter that bound them just we strive to free the goodness of our souls from our earthly bodies that are brought down by emotions such as jealousy, selfishness, and fatigue.

As we engage in the task of loving ourselves as we accept our imperfections even while working on them I want to teach you three Hebrew words:

Ehyeh asher ehyeh. Repeat each word after me: *Ehyeh – ehyeh. Asher- asher. Ehyeh – ehyeh.*

These words have a double meaning: “I am who I am” and “I will be who I will be.”

Moses wanted to know God’s name. He asked the Divine: “When I go to Egypt to help free the Israelites, who shall I say sent me?”

“*Ehyeh asher ehyeh,*” God replied meaning either “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.”

I, Rabbi Judy, am who I am with my preoccupied mind. Sometimes I am so tired and overwhelmed or my brain gets so deep in thought that I actually might miss hearing what you say or might walk by you without seeing you. When I was once upset by this recurring criticism in my annual review that I cannot seem to fully overcome, my sister, Lisa, let me know that my father received the exact same criticism. People would complain that he’d walk past them in the hallways as if they weren’t there. Once, when my brother was in college and my father was speaking nearby and in a receiving line greeting congregants, my dad didn’t even recognize his own son! He reached out his hand and said to my brother, Josh, “Nice to meet you.”

Even though “I am who I am,” I strive “to be who I will be.” I will strive to be as fully present with you as I can – even in crowded rooms when my brain or body is overloaded. Sometimes I will succeed and sometimes I will fail.

We all will fail, at times, and when we do let us remember the words of the Kol Nidre prayer we just uttered: Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make to You, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them.

May we love who we are with our curves and our edges with our perfect imperfections. May we strive to be who we will be so that our imperfections do not hurt others. When we fall short, may God forgive us, may others forgive us, most of all, may we forgive ourselves.

The second step of our Yom Kippur rehab and journey to our wholeness is loving and forgiving others despite their imperfections.

There was a musical comedy entitled, “I love you, you’re perfect now change.” It was the second longest running Off Broadway musical -- translated into 14 languages – even Hebrew!

Dating, marriage, siblings, friendships, colleagues – all relationships test us. In our minds, we set unattainable expectations.

A Muslim story that captures well our human condition:

One afternoon, Nasruddin and his friend were sitting in a cafe, drinking tea, and talking about life and love.

“How come you never got married, Nasruddin?” asked his friend.

“Well,” said Nasruddin, “to tell you the truth, I spent my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo, I met a beautiful, intelligent woman, with eyes like dark olives, but she was unkind. Then in Baghdad, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous, but we had no interests in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there was always something missing. Then one day, I met her. She was beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had everything in common. In fact she was perfect.”

“What happened?” Nasruddin’s friend asked, “Why didn’t you marry her?”

Nasruddin replied, “It’s a sad thing. Seems she was looking for the perfect man.”³

If we seek perfection in those we love, I promise, we will end up alone. This does not reflect marital status or living physically alone but a greater existential aloneness. One can be single and surrounded by amazing relationships and one can married and painfully isolated.

Ironically, relatives often find it easier to accept imperfection at the end of life or after death. My teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner, would say: “My mother has been dead for ten years now and my relationship with her has never been better.” Forgiveness in the midst of life is a greater challenge.

In Judaism, there are three levels of forgiveness: *selichah*, *mechilah*, and *kapparah*. We just asked God for all three. “S’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu – forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement,” we prayed.

The first level of forgiveness we hope to give and attain is *selichah*. “Forgive us,” we say. Selichot entails accepting apology and pardoning from punishment.

At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph’s eleven brothers approach him. They apologize for their actions long ago of throwing him into a pit and selling him as a slave. Joseph forgives them. “It was for a greater good that it all happened. Let’s move forward,” he said.

³ "24 Pearls Of Wisdom From Mullah Nasrudin." *24 Pearls Of Wisdom From Mullah Nasrudin*. Sompong Yusoontorn, 23 Mar. 2011. Web. 05 Oct. 2014.

The next level of forgiveness is *méchilah*. “Pardon us,” we pray. In monetary terms, the word *méchilah* is about forgiving debt. I lent you money, but I now wipe clear that debt. In guilt terms, you hurt me, but I release you from the weight of guilt. The negative feelings caused by the act are gone.

Esau and Jacob of Genesis, no doubt carried with them for twenty years the pain of betrayal and being betrayed. When they reunited, “They kissed and wept.”

And then there is *kapparah*. “Grant us atonement,” we say. The ultimate goal of this 25 hour rehab and repentance program is to wipe the slate clean, to start anew.

In the Torah, we committed the ultimate act of adultery against God. We built and worshipped a Golden Calf. The tablets and terms of our first covenant, our first marriage agreement, were shattered.

God invites Moses to ascend Sinai a second time, to receive a new set of tablets, to metaphorically renew our vows. The words *kaparah* and Yom Kippur comes from the root *kofer* meaning to cover. We have contained the sin. We have gotten control of the *yetzer harah* – the evil inclination that led to our wrongdoing.

The story is told of a father who calls his son and tells him casually, “By the way, your mother and I are getting a divorce.”

The son exclaims, “But you’ve been married for 45 years.”

The father replies, “I can’t take another day with your mother. I’m going down to the courthouse tomorrow and filing.”

“Dad, Yom Kippur is Saturday. I’ll drive home on Friday. Promise me you won’t do anything till afterwards.”

The father agrees, hangs up the phone, turns to his wife and says, “That worked. We got him to come home for Yom Kippur. Now what are we going to do for Thanksgiving?”

As Jews we are not only experts in guilt, we are experts in forgiveness.

Guilt, shame and blame can destroy our lives. Forgiveness can heal us and set us free. (Often, it takes time.)

The third and final step to our Yom Kippur journey of rehab and renewal is accepting the imperfections of our world.

Nothing is perfect. Only the Temple in Jerusalem was perfect and it no longer stands. When we build our homes we are meant leave a piece unfinished reflecting the realities of our imperfect world. Most of us, do that well!

Nothing is perfect. Marriages can end. Jobs can be terminated. Storms can shake our community to its core. Car accidents can throw us into crisis. Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that Moses never makes it to the Promised Land. He writes: “The sad but inescapable truth is that very few people make it to the ‘promised land’... I wish there was a world I could move to where everyone who loved would be loved in return, where every kind person would be treated kindly by fate and by her neighbors, a world where all ailments could be cured by the weekend and the all the biopsies turned out to be benign. But I don’t live in that world and neither does anyone else.”⁴

Only the Temple in Jerusalem was perfect. Yet here’s the transformational teaching. On one day of the year, on Yom Kippur, one person, the High Priest, would enter one place, the Holy of Holies. Inside that most sacred spot was the ark that held both the broken tablets representing our greatest failing and the whole tablets representing God’s forgiveness.

On Yom Kippur we are meant to encounter our brokenness as we journey to wholeness. Allowing the shards of our own, others’, and the world’s imperfections to continually wound us is missing the purpose life.

Gilda Radner who died at 42 of ovarian cancer wrote, “I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.”

When my twin brother’s son, Jax, was born with biliary atresia and would need a liver transplant, I cried for months. Teaching about God was an enormous challenge. Finally my brother said to me, “Judy, your crying is not helping me.”

I admire the way he, his wife Heather, and kids, Jax, who is now 9, and Ella, celebrate life so fully. They embrace the Jewish tradition of lifting our cups at holy times and at mundane times and saying “l’chayim-- to life” even with its imperfections and ambiguities.

Just as no one races to rehab to reassess their lives and change, no one races to Yom Kippur services. But here we all are today with a lot of work to do. As Jews we confess not only now but before we die. I am regularly called to bedsides to facilitate the sharing of final words of forgiveness, love, and letting go. Today is our rehearsal with death. Let us not wait till our final day to express regret and forgive, let us face ourselves now and say:

Ehyeyeh asher ehyieh - I am who I am. At times I will disappoint you and I am profoundly sorry. I will continually work to be better.

S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu – You are who you are. I love you and I need you. I pardon you as I ask for pardon. I forgive you as I ask for forgiveness. Today, may we start anew building on both the brokenness and wholeness of our past.

⁴Kushner, Harold S. *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*. New York: Knopf, 2006. Print. p. 171.

God is who God is. There will be days God is good and there will be days when we will wonder exactly where God is and what God is doing. Yet still may we maintain that relationship that we so strongly need.

Tomorrow evening at 6:30 the shofar's blast will mark the conclusion of our Yom Kippur rehab and repentance program. May we do this day's work well so that then we can re-embrace and reaffirm life by lifting our Kiddush cups and saying "l'chaim," as we live with faith in ourselves, in others and in God for we need all three.

May we love ourselves, may we love others and may we love life – with our curves and our edges with our perfect imperfections.¹

¹ Others sources used for inspiration in writing this sermon:

Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010. Electronic.

Kula, Irwin, and Linda Loewenthal. *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2006. Print.