

Since having my first child, like many other women, I continue to experience a fertility journey that has not been so easy. In my own moments of confusion and hurt, I connect deeply with Hannah, the mother of Samuel, a major figure in our tradition. Samuel was a judge and high priest in our tradition, but his story begins with his mother Hannah, which we read this morning.

Hannah was married to an Ephraimite, Elkanah. Elkanah had another wife, Peninah, who was able to give birth, unlike Hannah. Although Hannah was Elkanah's favorite wife, God had closed her womb, and she was childless. Peninah would taunt Hannah about her infertility. Every year, Hannah would enter the House of God and pray for a child. Our Haftarah this morning shares the following interaction between Hannah, Eli (the high priest), and God.

“In her wretchedness, Hannah prayed to God, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: ‘O God of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a child like the others have, I will dedicate it to God for all the days of its life; and no razor shall ever touch its head.’ And she kept on praying before God, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, ‘How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!’ And Hannah replied, ‘Oh no my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to God.’”

Eli, the high priest, blessed Hannah, and God remembered her. The following year, she bore a son and named him Samuel, meaning, “I have asked God for him.”

Hannah was in deep pain. In her suffering, she prayed to God, while becoming vulnerable in front of the high priest, Eli. According to a midrash, Hannah was the first to use the term ‘*Adonai Tzevaot*’, Lord of Hosts, when calling out to God.

Hannah said before God, ‘Sovereign of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that you have created in your world, is it so hard in your eyes to give me one son?’ A parable continues to explain Hannah’s use of “Lord of Hosts” to say that this matter is like a king who made a feast for his servants, and a poor man came and stood by the door and said to him, give me a bite, and no one took any notice of him, so he forced his way into the presence of the king and said to him, Your Majesty, out of all the feast which thou hast made, is it so hard in your eyes to give me one bite?”

Similarly, Hannah said to God, among all the things that You have created in a woman, You have not created one without a purpose, eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with, breasts

to give suck. These breasts that You have put on my heart,  
are they not to give suck? Give me a son, so I may suckle  
with them!"

Similarly to Hannah, many men and women experience the great, undeniable pain of infertility. In their fertility journeys they are exposed to frequent medical exams and treatments, numerous conversations filled with unwanted advice and criticisms, and the internal questioning of one's own faith, religion or God. Hannah was vulnerable - capable of being physically or emotionally wounded. In Hebrew, vulnerability is called *pageeah*, which means to be hurt by. Each of us, like Hannah, has something that makes us vulnerable, but our vulnerability does not mean we are weak - it can be a source of great strength.

**Vulnerability is a human experience that strengthens our relationship with God, others, and ourselves.**

This Rosh Hashanah, we make ourselves vulnerable before God in order to become closer to and walk in Her divine path. We recite the prayer, Unetaneh Tokef, these holidays to remind us that God is the true Judge who will inscribe each of us in the book of life. It shall be written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur - who will live and who will die; who in good time and who by untimely death. Standing today and reciting these haunting words is a vulnerable act before God, because we are acknowledging the little control we have over our fate this new year. The prayer states that only through three acts - repentance, charity, and worship - may God lessen the harsh decree we might endure. This might provide us some sense of control over our fate. However, we are ultimately vulnerable to God's judgements, while understanding that our actions determine if we are walking in God's divine path that was set out for each of us.

When we have felt distant from God in our times of sorrow, it is challenging to allow ourselves to submit to God in our emotional nakedness. Reciting a prayer like the Unetaneh Tokef can be painful, especially when we are already experiencing hurt in our lives. We might already feel abandoned by God. Therefore, when we submit ourselves before God as a people affected by God's judgments, our pain may be exacerbated. For example, ten years ago, a week before Rosh Hashanah, my father passed away. I attended Rosh Hashanah services the following week. When the Unetaneh Tokef prayer was recited, I felt so distraught by the words that I left the service. How could I stand before God and say "who shall live and who shall die" when my own father was taken away from me. He was obviously not inscribed in the book of life for the new Jewish year. In my pain, I could not stand before God and acknowledge that God was a righteous judge, when the pain I was feeling in my personal life was so great.

These Days of Awe, we have the opportunity to mend our relationship with God, as we reflect on how God can strengthen us in our most vulnerable moments. Through time, growth, learning, and deep reflection, I began to reinterpret my understanding of the Divine. Author and thinker David Wolpe wrote the following:

“God is intimately tied to the night. The depths night touches, the conflicts it evokes in us, produce the curious combination of fear, passion, intimacy, and mystery that is the Jewish God. In the greatest dark, the dark of Egypt, redemption occurs. In the ultimate night, that of the future, redemption is promised. God moves between the poles of night, danger and promise.” (David Wolpe “The Healer of Shattered Hearts” p.24)

In our most vulnerable moments, God is there. God is present in our pain and longing, and God is present in our healing and redemption. We can view our vulnerable moments as chances for us to welcome in the Divine, in which God provides comfort.

Becoming vulnerable in front of those we trust may allow us to build stronger bonds and a deeper understanding of those around us. Brene Brown, researcher and author, has written extensively on the power of belonging, the emotions of shame, and the necessity of vulnerability. Brown shares that connection is our purpose in life, while shame is the fear of disconnection. Underpinning the power of connection is our ability to be vulnerable to others. Vulnerability is the courage to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart. Vulnerability is the ability to be compassionate to yourself, then to others. Vulnerability is the willingness to connect to others through authenticity - a willingness to let go of who you were in order to truly be yourself.

We are most vulnerable when we allow ourselves to be seen, even if there is no guarantee of the outcome. When we answer a call from a doctor's office after a medical test, when we enter a new relationship, or when we pursue a new job, we are expressing vulnerability to others and releasing a control over what may be. Becoming vulnerable to others inspires worthiness. It inspires others to share their stories, open up, and have the courage to find connection.

We might think that holding back our vulnerability around others helps shield us from the risk of being hurt or rejected. Brene Brown shares that most of the time we deal with our vulnerability by numbing it. We spend money, eat too much, become addicted, or overmedicate. We try to numb our emotions that are a cause of pain or grief. We hide from others the triggers that cause us pain in life out of the avoidance of shame, which is the fear of disconnection. Vulnerability is a risk, and if we numb our pain, we numb our joy. In our authenticity, we take the risk of becoming hurt.

Rejection or hurt might be inevitable at times, therefore, becoming our truest selves in front of others may allow for deeper connections or understanding. In pastoral care, it is expected to be "...fully present to others as we walk in God's ways, by helping them to give birth to new visions of themselves and of God. [By doing this] we emulate the compassion, caring face of the Infinite, even amid the apparent eclipse of God's presence." Being vulnerable gives us the power to bring joy, belonging, and love to the spaces we are in. We illustrate true kindness and generosity to ourselves when we are vulnerable to those we trust. While each outcome of different situations remains uncertain when we seek connection, there is a certainty that being vulnerable creates authenticity and belonging.

When we embrace vulnerability, we begin to learn more about ourselves. These Days of Awe are a time for us to look inward. Prayer allows us to do so, especially when we are seeking to learn more about ourselves. Modern scholar and rabbi, Dalia Marx, explains three roles of liturgy in moments of a personal or global crisis. The first function of prayers is to connect us to the past. We remember moments of our own past, personally or as a people, to commemorate the victims and give meaning to life and death. The second function of prayer is to help us cope with extreme circumstances that have befallen us or the community. “Contextualizing an event through religious ritual can help process... extreme events, [while] recalling painful events and reviewing them ritually can provide a sense of control over events that renders survivors powerless.” (Marx) Finally, the third function of prayer is to ask God for redemption. We ask God to end our pain, and guide us towards peace and healing. Prayer exposes our vulnerabilities - our need for connection, search for answers, and a yearning for redemption.

Confronting aspects about ourselves that we perceive as weak may resurface earlier sorrows or traumas we were trying to subvert. Breaking down walls and facing the uncontrollable and hurt seems antithetical to the strength we look to rebuild in with us. An example of subverting our vulnerability is the blocking of nostalgic feelings like homesickness. Writer Susan Matt suggests, “In a society that values independence, ambition, and optimism, many adults feel compelled to repress their homesickness. Mobility is regarded as a time-honored American tradition, moving on a painless and natural activity. Those who feel grief at parting hide the emotion, believing it to be a sign of immaturity, maladjustment, and weakness. Instead of displaying homesickness, Americans express hopefulness and cheerfulness, two character attributes much valued in American society. Trepidations about breaking home ties must be subordinated to sunny hopes for the future.” (Matt in *Falling Upward*)

Immaturity, maladjustment, and weakness are emotions we all hide in fear of judgement from others and trauma that may resurface. These are aspects within us that we do not want to confront. These are characteristics we perceive as ugly and unworthy. They are the opposite of the characteristics we try to portray in front of our friends, family, coworkers, or fellow congregants. Repressing the emotions that make us vulnerable can seem safe. However, when we hide these authentic feelings, our pain can increase.

Healing our internal struggles begins when we understand our vulnerabilities and find strength in them. Doing this takes major internal work. First, we are asked to expose what makes us vulnerable. Second, we confront the cause of our pain. Finally, we claim this vulnerability as a part of who we are while demonstrating that what makes us feel weak can actually make us strong.

Today, on this Rosh Hashanah, we access our own “spiritual vending machine”. We request our needs or wants in prayer, and in exchange, we pay with our memories, actions and deeds. We view payment to access God’s acceptance and forgiveness on this day as our vulnerabilities - - our good and evil deeds, pains and traumas, and indifference and ambivalence. However, God is not transactional in our relationship with Him. God intimately knows our vulnerabilities - what causes us to be hurt. God promises God’s people on Mount Sinai and throughout time, that He will be compassionate, loving, merciful, and show iniquity to future generations.

These Days of Awe, let us understand that vulnerability and weakness are not synonymous. Our vulnerabilities open us up to love, understanding, and acceptance. Today, we are given permission to feel, pray, and hope as we face ongoing or new battles in the new Jewish year ahead.

With our vulnerability casted on our sleeves, I am going to close with a poem called “Permission” by Rabbi Shira Levine:

With the consent of the Almighty

And consent of this congregation

In a convocation of the heavenly court

And a convocation of the lower court....

In honoring those who passed before me

I hereby enter this service with a broken heart and with awe.

At this time, when the gates of heaven are open,

Let us pray for swift deliverance in near time

Let us pray to sweeten the harsh decree

Let us pray for the return of the hostages

Our well-being is tied to theirs!

Please, Eternal, do this for their behalf if not for ours.

May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to You.

And together we say, Amen.