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Temple Reyim  
Kol Nidrei  
5776/2015

Reckless

*L'shanab tovah and gmar tov.*

This past year, I met a woman who told me that her life had been ruined.

She was mid-twenties, and like most young adults, she communicated with her friends and colleagues primarily in quick, sometimes rapid-fire notes and texts, often funny, witty, whimsical. In one particular exchange, she sent a satirical note that made distinctions among races.

It was forwarded to others whom she had not anticipated would see it.

Her life as she knew it ended. She was fired from her job, and she lost friends.

Sad and humbled, she told me that her intent was not intentionally racist; she meant the note as a parody of privilege.

An obviously ill advised and senseless note.

But twelve words changed her life.

I was stunned to realize how quickly things had fallen apart.

In a time of constant innovation in how we form friendships, communicate, stay in touch, and how we tell our stories to others, this past year I came to more deeply understand how vulnerable we are within this system.

What feels anonymous can be exposed; what feels private can be public. There is almost no such thing as context. What is intended as irony, satire, or parody typically won't be read that way.

Perhaps most painfully, what feels fleeting or meaningless - a throwaway comment - can become permanent.

In response to this reality, a number of organizations across the nation have developed programs to help us navigate how, where, and when we can safely express ourselves.

The main teachings of their programs?

even if you try to take something back that you've said or written, it's almost never gone. Say the wrong thing and it can come to define you. In the worst cases, you could be subject to public shaming. This may be true even with defensible opinions that other people just don't like.

A book published recently by a noted author and journalist profiles stories of shaming; how mistakes have led to ruined careers or in some cases, lives.

These are horrible accounts that paint a portrait of a crisis in ethics, which is struggling to keep up with the constant, sometimes radical, shifts in how we communicate and reveal ourselves..

While the worlds of family, school, work and public life that we inhabit may not prove as dramatic, it has become clear to me that concerns about saying or doing the wrong thing are real, and at times paralyzing.

And I have to wonder:

Have we accepted that mistakes are risky, even dangerous?

Or is it still possible to offer spaces that fully allow us to make mistakes from which we can grow and learn?

Is our primary message simply now: be extremely careful in what you say or you will forever regret it?

Or is there still hope to cultivate an ethos in our communities of teshuvah and forgiveness?

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In his code of Jewish Law called the Mishna Torah, the medieval Rabbi and scholar Maimonides, known as Rambam, wrote that in ancient times the Jewish people received three crowns. The crown of the Torah; the crown of the priesthood and the crown of the monarchy. The crown of the Torah is the highest crown. There is no other mitzvah with as much weight, as much spiritual merit, as the study and teaching of Torah. Torah here does not mean just the Chumash, the five books of Moses, but rather, *chochma*, universal wisdom and insight

According to tradition, the crown of Torah and all of its merit is at its height when it propels human creativity. To be creative, interpretive and imaginative is to be holy.

To be creative is to be an explorer.

To be constantly curious, our minds wide open;

to experiment with personal voice and persona.

To dwell in subtlety, nuance, irony, and the truths hidden in paradox. Yes, we're going to say the opposite of what we actually mean.

It means giving ourselves fully over to *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Victor Frankel's *Man's Search for Meaning* - so that we can learn about forming identity and transcending trauma, and the tormented search for existential meaning.

It means honoring multiple narratives of the same event; both noticing and respecting their differences and discovering what they share. It means being careful of any single claim to truth.

And, in the Jewish intellectual and spiritual traditions, it means trying on different opinions and approaches to the important questions of our times. Our primary sources are stories of scholars engaged in *machloket l'shem shamayim* - debate for the sake of heaven, a shared project requires complete trust in one another as hevruta, learning partners and friends.

I'm afraid, however, that we also are receiving a far more penetrating message:

Be very cautious.

Because if you make a mistake - even if you are simply misunderstood - your life will be changed. Whatever you say will be written permanently in our collective memory and recorded in your personal history that cannot be expunged or undone.

And you will not be forgiven.

This message is not coming from a bad place. I think it's well intentioned. It's coming from a frightened place, a protective one. But the message accepts that mistakes are risky - so be very cautious of them.

In their place, we have created an app called Yo and its only function will be for us to send our friends the word "yo."

The shocking success of apps like Yo is a reminder of our urgent need to be in contact with others; for our mere existence to be recognized and acknowledged. Humming beneath that need is a horrible fear that if we dare say more than this two letter word, we are at risk. "Yo" is the solution to making mistakes; it is also the definition of succumbing, and conformity.

Our work is not to accept and react; the crown of Torah requires more of us than that.

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Dean Young is a poet, author and college professor. A few years ago, he was asked to write a book as part of a series called “the Art of...” The series examines specific aspects of creative writing. His book is entitled “The Art of Recklessness,” reflections on the use of contradiction in poetry.

The book cover itself playfully reflects its title, the letters of the word “Recklessness” either running into each other or awkwardly set extra spaces apart. Yes, an examination of recklessness within poetry is sure to be a subtle book.

Its primary theme, captured by its title, is a counterpoint to predominant culture. In place of caution and perfection as our underlying ethos, he offers a far more human, more fragile, and therefore more hopeful and redemptive possibility.

He begins, “Let us suppose that everyone in the world wakes up today and tries to write a poem. It is impossible to know what will happen next, but certainly we may be assured that the world will not be made worse....To write a poem is to explore the unknown capacities of the mind and the heart; it is an emotive, empathetic exercise, and, like being struck by lightning, it will probably leave you stunned, singed, but also a bit brighter...

Sometimes when we feel we disappointed with a poem...it’s because it seems to fall short of our intentions...Let us forgive ourselves for writing poems that aren’t better than every other poem that has ever been written....

To approach the practice of poetry as an acquiring of skill sets may provide the stability of a curriculum, but the source of inspiration is instability, recklessness. If the poet does not have the *chutzpah*” - that’s his word - “to jeopardize habituated presumptions and practices, what will be produced will be sleep without a dream, a copy of a copy of a copy. [Poetry] is and needs to be a messy process, a devotion to unpredictability, the papers blowing around the room as the wind comes in.”

I love this passage because it offers us a complete contrast to what has become predominant culture.

On one hand, we have a message of caution, even paralysis: before putting one sentence, maybe one word, or one image into the worlds you inhabit - at work, in school, in public - be certain it's safe.

On the other hand, we have the unknown, the mind, the heart, emotion, empathy, lightning. We are stunned, singed and struck, but we are brighter and higher. We are disappointed, we have fallen short and we are forgiven. We are inspired, unstable, devoted and unpredictable.

This process, Dean Young would tell us, is called recklessness. Messy and ambiguous, and hopeful.

This process, Jewish tradition tells us, is called teshuvah. Truthful and accepting of our flaws, and failings, and hopeful.

This process is what we are doing here tonight, as we pound our hearts, turning with humility and honesty, to God.

And it's why we are doing it together, announcing our mistakes in the plural "we." Every one of us did something this past year that could have alienated or humiliated us, causing us pain or shame.

The crowns of Judaism demand that we grant to one another the freedom to make mistakes, and to be able to count on an ethos of support, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is embedded deeply in our tradition.

In ancient Israel, the entire system of religious practice was premised on mistake-making. Offerings were brought to the Temple as a mechanism for cleansing and reconnecting with the compassionate qualities of God.

The later rabbinic midrash imagines God taking our souls as we sleep as recompense for all the things we have done wrong; and by morning, returning our souls back to us in forgiveness and love.  
[Exodus Rabba Parashat Mishpatim 16]

Even Halacha, our collective body of Jewish law and narrative, custom and tradition, is not, as is sometimes imagined, a guide to practicing Judaism correctly. It is a training guide - built not on a binary of right and wrong but on potential and progress, failure and growth. In fact much of halacha explicitly integrates how to work with mistakes. Think of the role of gabbai, whom halacha instructs to help the Torah reader by very quietly whispering any corrections - so the reader is honored, not embarrassed.

A college professor of mine in the Jewish History Department at Columbia kept a quote by Mahatma Gandhi on his desk. It said: "Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."

When we look back over the last few years, how many times have we lost the opportunity for personal growth, professional success, a new relationship or meaningful experience for fear of making a mistake? A culture that opts to shame or silence leaves us stuck, overwhelmed by a sense of guilt or shame from which it is very hard to heal. But a culture that teaches how we can grow from messiness, experimentation and vulnerability, leaves us trusting, open hearted, and true.

I have observed, again and again, that the success and health of a spiritual community is not based on its particular set of religious practices, educational vibrancy, or clarity in its organizational goals; but rather on the support and forgiveness, compassion, kindness and care it offers in immediate response to mistakes. At Reyim, this is our spiritual mission. This is our crown. There is very little else we will ever do that is more important.

It's what makes us a shul, full of Yiddishkeit, moved by Torah, elevated by prayer, comforted by acts of chesed. You get to be countercultural here. Unlike anywhere else, here you get to be flawed, confused, inadequate, insecure and worried. This is where we take deep care of the soul.

Though traditionally known as a rehearsal for our death, with our white kittels and break from physical nourishment, Yom Kippur is not a time for grieving - but for celebrating the full potential of the human spirit.

That means that on this night, we are filled with the unknown, the mind, the heart, emotion, empathy. Like being struck by lightning, we are stunned and singed; we are brighter and higher. We are disappointed, we have fallen short. We are inspired, unstable, messy, devoted and unpredictable.

We are reckless.

And we are forgiven.

l'shanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.

May you be blessed,

may you be loved,

may you be sealed in the book of life.