

“My Feelings are Real but not Always Right”

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I really wanted this, my last official communication with all of you this season, to contain a truly positive uplifting message. It has not been easy. Not because I am a pessimist, if anything I err toward optimism, but because as a Jew, with many of you, I feel the anguish of October 7th, the frustration of the war on Gaza and now Lebanon, and the trepidation of a possible war with Iran, the commitment to a Jewish future in the Diaspora, and the desire for a robust Jewish religious revival in America. In this moment I feel somewhat paralyzed. On the one hand, things seem to be moving at breakneck speed. And on the other hand, I feel a sense of arrested development, that we are not actually moving at all but spending much of our time either absorbing information that confirms our feelings of vulnerability, or protesting information that contests that vulnerability.

Vulnerability is, of course, an affect, it is not really about facts or figures. We don't feel vulnerable *because* of something, we *feel* vulnerable because an event, or a moment, pushes the vulnerability that already exists, to the surface. The hazard, of course is that we often immediately universalize that feelings, rationalize them, as if to say, is someone doesn't feel that same vulnerability, there is something wrong with them. That is, we become very invested in our feelings not only being real, but being “right.” Given that, I would like to talk about vulnerability.

But where does that vulnerability come from? It is not reactive, but part of the human condition, sometimes produced by traditions, collective or family traditions, often used as a protective layer to fend off fear, even if it often produces fear? It is probably all of these, and more. From where I stand we Jews spend too much of our time these days justifying our own vulnerability, questioning other's vulnerability, or throwing so-called “proofs” one way or the other to prove that what I feel really coheres to how things are.

I have a friend on FB who I call a “linkologist.” Every time someone says something he doesn't agree with, he posts a link. And another. And another. As if enough links will get the person to

rescind their view, or agree with his. But of course, it never works, because the links are curated and thus often begin with premises his interlocutor doesn't agree with. In some way that seems to me an apt metaphor for so much of our communication. We are all linkologists of a sort. "Did you see this study?" "Or maybe this one." "How about that interview?" "Here, this is from the NYT, or WaPo, or the Atlantic," as if the place of publication offer a sense of authenticity that strengthens an argument. We cite experts that we agree with, and shun experts that we oppose, often accusing them of bias and thus not reliable. But this of course misses the point. We do not feel vulnerable because of facts, nor will we feel safe because of studies. All these things do is authenticate how we feel anyway.

But why do we feel that way? Many of us will say "because its true." But that is really evasive, because truth in these matters is determined by how we relate, react, respond, to data which may or may not accurately describe the reality we all share, if in fact there is a reality we all share. As Jews we can say, many of us do say, the reality is our history, and yes it is true, history has not been kind to us. But even our history is to some extent a "story." And the story we are told is perhaps encapsulated in the famous line of the Passover Hagaddah "In every generation they rose to destroy us, and God saved us from their grasp." And, as the joke goes, "let's eat." That is on one reading all the Jews needs to know "on one foot." Is that true? Probably one the greatest Jewish historians in the 20th century Salo Baron, one of the most important Jewish figures you never heard of. He was the first chair in Jewish history in an American university (Columbia) spent decades of his career to prove that it wasn't. In his critique of what he called the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history, that Jews were always persecuted and maligned, Baron claimed it did not bear the weight of actual history. Yes, there were times of great animus toward us, pogroms, persecutions, etc. but there were also long periods of relatively peaceful co-existence between Jews and their neighbors. I'm not here to argue for Baron's view, but to note that I dare say many of you never heard of him, and his view of the lachrymose nature of Jewish history, historically verifiable or not, is who we are. Its how we feel. And it drives how we respond, react, and understand our times.

There is an even more potent example. The liturgy of Yom Kippur. The sages gave us a gift, if one can call it that, of vulnerability. Or so it seems. The YK liturgy is a course in feeling vulnerable. In fact, if one does not feel vulnerable on YK, certainly by this time of day, there

may be something amiss. The dark side of vulnerability is, of course, fatalism. The upside of vulnerability is hope. I am preternaturally not a fatalist; as a matter of principle, I often say “I am a believer against my better judgement.” But hope is not easy to find in a state of vulnerability. The YK liturgy has a response to that: faith. But faith in what, exactly? In facts, in humanity, in oneself, in some transcendent being that will atone for your sins? We know what the liturgy chooses, but for many of us, that is a hard choice to make, post-Holocaust a very hard sell.

Today one can say that faith is insane. Maybe it was always insane. If that is the case, where does one find hope? Because, without hope there is really no Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur does not offer a full alternative to fatalism; we all will pass away at some time, like those before us. This is why Yizkor was traditionally only said on Yim Kippur, if only as a reminder of our own mortality. What Yom Kippur offers is a different interpretive lens of the finality of all life. And that lens is meaning. It suggests to us that we can live in the world in myriad ways. We can live our lives as slaves of God, we can live devoted to self-interest, we can live as slaves to the world. As Dylan said, “you gotta serve somebody,” and the choice we have is who to serve. In some way, that stands between the believers and unbelievers.

The sages divide into mitzvot into two categories; “between the individual and God’ and “the individual and humanity.” It views both as necessary, but only if they are exercised in tandem. If your focus is on God, it should also be on creation, and if on creation, then also its creator. Over-emphasis on God can lead to fundamentalism, over-emphasis on humanity can lead to secularism. But we know it doesn’t always work that way, and thus we inhabit this world in a state of vulnerability. YK does not come to solve that dilemma but exacerbate it. And its remedy of atonement does not erase vulnerability but at most prevents it from slipping into fatalism.

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One could suggest that feeling vulnerable is something we want to avoid. Students want to feel “safe” on campus, we want to feel “safe” on our streets, safety is viewed in our society as a right and not a privilege. But is it a right? Is society obligated to produce safety for all its citizens? The only society that can do that is a totalitarian one because free societies, the one’s we want to live in, always contain aspects of unsafety or vulnerability, by definition. One person’s freedom is

another person's vulnerability. Thus free societies have to calculate acceptable forms of vulnerability, not its absence, the laws of free speech being a prime example. If we curtail free speech, we are less vulnerable, but we are also less free. This is one of America's greatest contributions to human society.

But I want to ask another question. Do we really *want* to feel less vulnerable? Let me take antisemitism as an example. And as we know, there has been a significant rise in antisemitic incidents this past year. One question of course is how the term antisemitism is defined and we were fortunate enough to have Ken Stern, who spoke here this summer, who wrote the IHRA definition that has become so ubiquitous and also so contentious. For some, this rise in antisemitic incidents exacerbates vulnerability. But it doesn't produce it. The vulnerability must already be there, and the reports only confirm the affect. And so, arguing that the reports are exaggerated, or even wrong, or questioning the calculus or evaluative processes won't erase the vulnerability because that vulnerability existed beforehand. And here is where I find so many of the debates on this issue ludicrous. As if to say that the reports show that we all should feel, need to feel, vulnerable; or challenging the reports with other data shows us that we needn't feel, or shouldn't feel, so vulnerable. And then we engage in this endless loop with each side either defending vulnerability or contesting it.

But I also notice something else more relevant to Yom Kippur. There is in some inchoate way, precarious and yet palpable, that this new rise in antisemitism makes many of us feel vulnerable yet also strangely comfortable. I do not mean comfortable in a way of relaxation, but comfortable in a kind of "comfort zone." There is almost a kind of "I told you so" whisper that gets passed around as these reports come out. And in some way, this is understandable. We fear the consequences of vulnerability as much as vulnerability enables us to make sense of the world. We have been made to believe, in part by our liturgy and in part by how history has been transmitted to us, that antisemitism is inevitable, even "eternal." When our lives do not fit into that paradigm, we don't feel vulnerable, but we feel anxious, even anticipatory, like waiting for an alarm to go off. We know its coming, we were taught it would come, and now its just a matter of time. If someone comes along and says "that data is mistaken, or exaggerated, the rise in antisemitism is less than we thought" instead of saying "Oh thank God, what a relief" many of us say, "that's impossible, you're wrong." Why is that - what underlies that strange reaction that

suggests we are less vulnerable than we thought? Why does vulnerability feel less invasive than comforting? Why does antisemitism both repel and compel us?

The Jewish historian Arthur Hertzberg was right when he said, “The only thing worse for American Jews than antisemitism, is no antisemitism.” He meant it in a certain way, that is, to suggest that no antisemitism will only quicken assimilation. But there may be something else in his comment. It may be, and here I think vulnerability plays a role, that a lack of antisemitism makes us more nervous whereas increased antisemitism makes us more vulnerable. Like the relief we feel when the alarm on our phone finally goes off. Just as I expected, which ironically seems as comforting for us Jews as it feels destabilizing?

I’ll give you one example. A recent Jim Joseph Foundation poll asked Jewish college students whether they felt unsafe or vulnerable on campus. The results: 12% of Jewish students answered in the affirmative. 12%. When the question was asked of non-Jewish students, the number was about 10%. I don’t bring this to prove anything either way. I bring it because when I mentioned this to a Jewish friend, his response was, “I can’t believe that.” I told him that the Jim Joseph Foundation (a large foundation dedicated to Jewish education) is a reputable organization, he said “I don’t care, the number is too low.” So, what is really happening in this exchange? Its not that he distrusts the organization. If it had said 90%, he would have been satisfied. It’s that the results counter his feeling of vulnerability. It makes him feel uncomfortable that a poll seems to counter his affective response to world as he sees it.

Let me be clear that by antisemitism I don’t mean violence against Jews. Nor do I mean legal action taken against Jews. If anything, the opposite has been the case. Violent and legislative antisemitism has, thankfully, actually not seen a large increase this year. In the thousands of protests against the Gaza War on campuses last year, there were very few instances of actual violence, and if anything, university polices have legislated *against* the protestors. University presidents resigned or were fired not because they protected Jews, but because they allegedly didn’t.

This is not to diminish non-violent expressions of antisemitism, nor the vulnerability people feel, but to draw a distinction. Pogroms, the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, these were cases where Jews indeed were, and should have been, afraid and threatened. But vulnerability is a different thing. I don’t think one needs to be afraid to feel vulnerable.

And here I want to return to Yom Kippur. YK does not, “the world hates you.” You will not find that focus in the liturgy. Rather, YK is saying “we are all fragile creatures, who will one day pass away from this world. How do you want to live your life,” or, how do you want to proceed with, and in, that vulnerability? That vulnerability will not disappear because it is built into what it is to be human, and what it is to be a Jew. If you choose to come to a synagogue on YK, that vulnerability will be re-affirmed every year. Judaism will not enable us to bypass our mortality, even if God atones for our sins. YK promotes reflection of to live in that vulnerability.

There are at least two ways to react to that vulnerability both of which, I submit, are not the way of Torah in my view. We can react by minimizing vulnerability through power. And we can react by submission. In a text we studied on Rosh Ha-Shana by Aaron Shmuel Tamares “Teshuva me-Ahavah” (1908), he argues against both reactions. Power for him is an illusion that we have the agency to overcome our vulnerability. One of the many things we learned from October 7th is that even a nation-state does not, cannot, erase one’s vulnerability. The second way is to become moribund, trapped in a web of our own fragility, as Tamares writes, “breast-beating, deprivation, and wailing, the multiplication of confessionals...lamenting over the end of life.” Both are illusory, the first because it is impossible, and the second because it undercuts the charge in Deuteronomy 30:15 to “choose life.” It doesn’t say “life with security,” but just life as it is, life as we find it.

Many of us find that in the work that we do, in our families, in experiencing the beauty of creation. But then we are dogged by this feeling of vulnerability, this precarious discomfort that curtails our experience of life. YK both affirms and responds to that. It affirms it by saying “yes, one day you will die,” and it answers it by saying “you are now atoned, go and live your life better than you did before.

The vulnerability we feel is real, and yet we also want it to be *right*. It is the space between “real” and “right” where things go awry. We want others to both affirm it, yet we also want others to take it away. But vulnerability doesn’t require affirmation, and it doesn’t respond to negation, it is part of who we are, and part of who we are as Jews. We can, and should, protect ourselves from real danger, but we cannot protect ourselves from the feeling of vulnerability.

I recently published an essay that began with the following sentence: “When did antisemitism become a problem”? I meant it both provocatively and seriously. Antisemitism is an aspect of

Jewish vulnerability. As an aspect of vulnerability it has always been there, not always in real time, but in our collective imaginations, real or contrived, actual or fantastical. In terms of a serious threat to Jews, that requires more context and a sharper definition. It is not that antisemitism makes us feel vulnerable as much as it gives such vulnerability an occasion to surface. It enables us to feel it more acutely. But it's been there all along. The hazard here is viewing vulnerability as reactive rather than essential, as if to say, my vulnerability is the fault of someone else.

Don't get me wrong, where antisemitism truly exists, we should expose it and fight it. But that will not make us feel less vulnerable. And I think YK is the great illustration of that. In that way YK is the opposite of Passover. On Passover we say, "they tried to kill us, and God saved us." Passover has villains (Pharaoh) and heroes (Moses). On YK we have none of that (except in the stories of the Ten Martyrs). We have ourselves, in a vulnerable state, not because someone hates us, but because God loves us, asking for forgiveness and getting atonement. YK doesn't solve our vulnerability problem. It doesn't solve how we are seen in the world and how we see the world. That will depend on how we act, as God gives us the agency to act as we wish. As even there, the world is a harsh place, and human life is as the Scottish philosopher David Hume once said, "nasty brutish, and short."

Tamara asks us, from the perspective of reason, why should we even have YK? Why dwell on our past deeds, why lament and get depressed about our lot in life? Why not just live life to the fullest given our limited time on this planet. It is because, I submit, YK gives us hope; hope that we can be better, that the world can be better, that humanity can self-correct. We can do this not in place of vulnerability, but because of it. If we are looking to be saved from vulnerability, we won't find it in YK. And we won't find it in power. In some way, I think, vulnerability is our biggest asset.

Audre Lorde said, "My feelings are real but not always right." If we can live with that distinction, if we can live in that distinction, we have a chance to live inside the vulnerability that YK bequeaths to us.