

Fasting on Yom Kippur is intended to put us in touch with the part of our selves - our souls - which will ultimately stand before God in judgement. As our Yom Kippur fast progresses over the course of the day, we'll be able to feel our bodies slowly weakening. This, combined with liturgy which will feature death in the form of remembering the merit of ancestors who were martyred for their devotion to Torah and death in the form of remembering our own loved ones who have passed away, intends to direct our thoughts towards our mortality. Even without facing Yom Kippur, we have ample opportunity to be reminding of the fragile and vulnerable nature of the human being. There have been a disturbingly large number of shootings in Grand Rapids this past summer, and rarely a day went by without seeing a story of an accident caused by an impaired or distracted driver. Most of us, I imagine, have continued to live and travel around the city normally, without thinking of all of things which could happen to us, most of which are beyond our ability to control.

The problem is, if we spend too much time thinking about all of the bad things that could potentially happen, we could cripple ourselves with anxiety over what might happen. Most of us have the capacity for some level of self-delusion. We consciously set aside bad thoughts and convince ourselves that they are not going to happen to us. This ability to deceive ourselves is what allows us to drive a 2000 pound vehicle at 70 miles per hour and trust that the other drivers on the road are going to follow the same rules that we do. It allows us to travel by air, confident that a sudden mechanical breakdown won't cripple the airplane. It also allows us normal human interactions without fearing that every person we meet is going to pull out a knife and hurt us. Some people have a greater capacity than others to set aside the fear of danger. Those who race cars, hang glide, jump out of airplanes, or serve in the military have taught themselves or been trained to ignore the risk at a higher level than the rest of us.

I call this capacity Sacred Self-Delusion, and I believe that the ability to delude oneself helps us live holy lives! To live holy lives, we need to let ourselves be vulnerable. To be vulnerable is to be aware that I might be hurt, wronged, rejected, pushed away, ignored, or made to feel uncomfortable or awkward. Without this openness to vulnerability, without opening ourselves up to other people, we can't form relationships. We can't welcome new people into our lives without taking the leap of faith that they are not going to cause us harm. Sometimes, we are wrong and we let people into our lives who later turn out to be destructive. But if we try to avoid any measure of risk or harm, we will find ourselves living our lives closed up within a very small box. No one can hurt us, but no one can get close enough to help us when we need help.

Brene Brown, research professor in social work, shared in a recent TED talk her belief that avoiding or numbing vulnerability also affects our ability to feel joy, gratitude, and happiness. She says that we numb our ability to feel vulnerable with food, drugs, alcohol, or by appealing to certainty; that is, by removing ourselves from any uncertain situation where we might feel vulnerable. Within a religious institution, avoiding vulnerability transforms religion from belief in faith and mystery into belief in fundamentalism and certainty.

Proverbs (3:5) says, "Trust in Adonai with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding." Pirkei Avot (4:1) helps to explain the phrase, "do not rely on your own understanding."

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from all people, as it is said: 'From all those who taught me I gained understanding' (Psalms 119:99).

Trusting God with all our heart means that when we open ourselves to a new person or experience, we trust God that we have something to learn from that person or that experience. If we rely solely on our own current understanding, our current knowledge base, we'll never grow. We need new people with new insights, we need to incorporate their understanding of the world alongside our own in order to expand ourselves.

Trust means that we understand that not every new person or experience or new job is going to last, but we trust that in the end God will be there to guide us. As a religious community, we open up to vulnerability and new people and new ideas. We keep Torah at our center guiding our way so that we don't lose sight of our essential mission, to create a vibrant egalitarian Conservative Jewish community helping each one of us follow a spiritual path using traditional Jewish practice.

The Torah readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah reminded us that trust is an essential ingredient in order to fulfill our mission. Abraham, old as he was, trusted that God would follow through with the promise of a child for him and Sarah. In contrast, Hagar demonstrated a lack of trust that God would take care of her and her son. She gave up and left Ishmael to die. God intervened and reassured her that he would continue to take care of her. The Akeidah or binding of Isaac, is a story of Abraham's trust in God and Isaac's trust of both his father and God. The Rosh Hashanah message is that if you let yourself be vulnerable enough to do the right thing and trust that God will take care of you, then you will have the strength to manage whatever comes your way.

Leading a holy life can mean both that we extend ourselves to help others and that we are not afraid to ask others to help us. Both possibilities require the willingness to be vulnerable, to let another person into our lives.

To lead a holy life, we need to delude ourselves into thinking that what we do is important and makes a difference, even if the empirical evidence suggests that the problems around us are so huge that the efforts of a single person are a teaspoon in Lake Michigan. How can one person possibly make a difference when it comes to caring for the environment, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, healing racism, handling the refugee crisis, or any of the other massive social problems in our world?

Our tradition can give us several answers. First, we define God as infinite possibility. Faith in God means faith that anything, no matter how unlikely, can happen. Faith in God means embracing vulnerability, imperfection, uncertainty, and the satisfaction that we are and have enough because anything is possible.

Second, we might recall the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon (Pirkei Avot 2:16): לא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּךָ חוֹרְתִין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּצִיחָה. "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either." We don't have to believe in solving the problem, we only have to believe that if we do our share, others will do their share. One person cannot solve the problem, but one person can inspire another person, a small team can inspire a group, a group can inspire a movement, and a movement can begin to solve a problem.

**In tomorrow's Haftarah, Isaiah will remind us that fasting alone is insufficient without also paying attention to human needs.**

Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began his work. Early one morning, he

was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions.<sup>a</sup>

Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?”

The young boy paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can’t return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water.”

The old man replied, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I’m afraid you won’t really be able to make much of a difference.”

The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, “It made a difference to that one!”

May we embrace the notion of sacred self-delusion; may we embrace vulnerability and uncertainty and be open to the wisdom of new people and new experiences; and may we embrace the idea that we can make a difference with our lives.