

**Vulnerability**  
Rosh Hashanah 5774  
Rabbi Dara Frimmer<sup>1</sup>

This is a sermon about vulnerability.

6 years ago, when I first arrived at Isaiah, we joined One LA, a broad-based community-organizing group. One LA seeks to strengthen our city by building bonds across lines of race, social class and faith. At a meeting of “leaders” in a church downtown, we were instructed to find someone we didn’t know, introduce ourselves, and share something about our justice work. I connected with a Latina woman in her 40’s, and she began to talk: In the past year she had organized a meeting between the police and members of her church to share stories and concerns about violence in the neighborhood. Then she paused, and it was my turn to share. I was 6 months into the job, not exactly sure what to say...so I said: “Hi. I’m one of the new rabbis at Temple Isaiah...it’s on the Westside...”

“Sure,” she said. “I know Temple Isaiah. I work for one of your families.”

“Oh?” I said.

“Mm-hm. Sure. I was just washing the children’s shirts for preschool. They have a field trip this week.”

“Ohhh,” I said.

And I had no idea what to say next.

She was a leader with One LA, capable of bringing low-income, Spanish-speaking parishioners into conversation with LAPD, and, she was a nanny for one of our families.

Do I ask her about her work? Which family? What field trip? Oh god...have I seen you in the hallways of Isaiah and walked right past you?

I felt totally exposed. I felt judged. My brain was sending signals to run as fast as possible in the other direction. Unfortunately, instead of staying with that moment of unexpected vulnerability, I stumbled back to my script: Rabbi. Isaiah. Justice...

I locked up all of those questions that might have actually gotten us talking about who we are and the world we shared. We never spoke about it again.

I look back at that moment and wish I could have told my former self: Stay there in that place of discomfort. You will learn so much more if you stay there and talk with her. Yes, you risk sounding awkward. The outcome is uncertain – who knows what she’ll say. You might feel exposed, embarrassed. You might hear something that disturbs you...but this conversation won’t break you. In fact, it will make you wiser, more secure, more capable of pursuing justice across lines of race and social class... Lean into the discomfort.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Lauren Applebaum and Rabbis Yael Ridberg, Marc Katz, and Stephanie Kolin for their feedback and suggestions.

It's no small thing to ask people to embrace vulnerability. Here's a dictionary definition<sup>2</sup>:

**Vulnerability:**

- capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt
- open to moral attack, criticism
- open to assault; difficult to defend

Except that the standard definition doesn't tell the whole story...

Let me tell you about Dr. Brené Brown. She delivered a 20 minute TED talk on "The Power of Vulnerability"<sup>3</sup> and, like most of the 10 million people who have watched her talk, I loved it. Here's the 6-sentence summary:

We fear vulnerability...but, we should rethink our approach.

For most of us, she says, vulnerability means: "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure."

"What most of us fail to understand...is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."<sup>4</sup>

Here's the hard truth: Whether we want to or not, we will encounter moments of vulnerability in the next year. It's going to happen. To everyone. So the question is not WHEN or even WHY, but rather HOW: How will we respond? Will we retreat and hide or will we encounter and embrace?

So here's the plan:

- a) Let's talk about vulnerability.
- b) Let's identify some tools within those vulnerable moments that will give us strength and resilience -- not to defeat vulnerability -- but rather to stay in the moment.
- c) Let's make some commitments to how we might live differently in 5774.

*Sound good? Great. Let's do this.*

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Last year on Yom Kippur I asked you to imagine your final days. This year, in order to talk about vulnerability, I'm going to ask you for about 60 seconds to get into a space where you remember what it feels like to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is about the kishkas – the butterflies winging. The sweaty palms. The race of adrenaline signaling fight or flight. (*How you feeling so far?*)

Vulnerability will look and sound different for everyone, but consider these moments part of our shared collection.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vulnerable>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

<sup>4</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p.34

Vulnerability is:

- Asking for help
- Saying no
- Hearing how much your [daughter] wants to make first chair in the orchestra and encouraging [her] while knowing that it's probably not going to happen
- Calling a friend whose child just died
- Signing up a parent for hospice care
- The first date after divorce
- Saying, "I love you," first and not knowing if you're going to be loved back
- Sharing something you wrote [*a sermon!*] or a piece of art that you made.
- Getting promoted and not knowing if you're going to succeed
- Getting pregnant after three miscarriages
- Admitting you're afraid.
- Stepping up to the plate again after a series of strikeouts
- Presenting your product to the world and getting no response
- **Asking for forgiveness<sup>5</sup>**

Why the topic of vulnerability for Rosh Hashanah? Because this holiday should be rebranded as the Festival of Exposure.<sup>6</sup> Seriously, what's more vulnerable than asking for forgiveness? Recognizing you've made a mistake, admitting it to yourself, admitting it to others, and finally asking for someone's forgiveness!? Behold, The Festival of Exposure!

And yet, the promise of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that if you choose the path of teshuvah (the path of return), and you seek forgiveness and offer it to others, you will enter the New Year with the gift of life renewed. You will draw closer to God. You will draw nearer to others.<sup>7</sup> This process of teshuvah may even bring redemption.<sup>8</sup> That's no small thing.

Teshuvah has tapped into the power of vulnerability. Yes, it's risky. It exposes us to the possibility of being shamed. Rejected. But, as many of us know, it can also free us from the bonds of regret. It can reconnect us to a loved one. Someone may break through our feelings of isolation and tell us, "It's okay, I've been there. You're not the only one."

But it won't work if we can't be vulnerable. Sending a mass-email to fifty of our contacts asking for forgiveness won't have the transformative effects promised by our ancestors. We need to garner the strength to start difficult conversations and to stay in the moment. If we do, we will experience what our ancestors knew to be true: we will draw closer to God, nearer to one another, and feel the touch of redemption.

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Here's another reason why this is the right time for the topic: We spend most of the High Holy Days reading, singing, and preaching that it's time to take control of our lives: to reflect, renew and reorient if

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<sup>5</sup> Text and list from *Daring Greatly*, p.35-37

<sup>6</sup> Might cause *some* confusion. Possible PR problems. But, could boost ticket sales. It's a thought.

<sup>7</sup> "Teshuvah is great because it draws a person close to the Shechina...as the prophet Jeremiah states, 'If you will turn/return (tashuv), Israel' declares Adonai, 'to Me you will return.'" "Teshuvah brings close those who are far off." (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6)

<sup>8</sup> "Great is teshuvah, for it brings the redemption closer" (Yoma 86b).

needed. The Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning (Deut. 30:19) quotes God who said: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live!" The choice is ours.

But, here's the crazy part: in the midst of all this encouragement to choose, we chant Unetaneh Tokef, a prayer that challenges the notion that we have any control whatsoever over our lives and the year to come.

Here's part of the prayer in translation:

*On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,  
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.  
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,  
Who shall live and who shall die,  
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,  
Who shall perish by water and who by fire,  
Who by sword and who by wild beast,  
Who by famine and who by thirst,  
Who by earthquake and who by plague...*

We preach and teach and say "Amen!" to setting our course for the New Year and then we recite these words that affirm there is little within our control. And "that," writes Rabbi Yael Ridberg, "is perhaps the most powerful paradox of these holy days. We swing precariously on the pendulum between fragility and stability; between the quest for a sense of security and trust...and the awareness at the edge of consciousness that wakens us in the middle of the night...that at any moment everything that we take for granted might change, might end, might disappear."

We stand on the precipice of the New Year, not enthralled by the view, but dizzy from the height of our potential fall. It can take your breath away.

So let's breathe... In the year to come, we will encounter moments of vulnerability: moments that we choose for ourselves (i.e. the choice to begin a conversation about forgiveness or about race & social class) and moments that are involuntarily placed upon us (i.e. earthquake, illness, loss).

I want to suggest 3 tools that might help us to navigate our way in the New Year:

1. We can recognize that God is with us;
2. We can reach out and connect to others;
3. And, we can fully experience our moments of joy.

### ***Tool #1: God***

Most people assume rabbis are born a) knowing they want to be rabbis, and b) already having a deep understanding and unwavering faith in God.

This is not true.

I began to experience and understand God while working as a hospital chaplain in Boston when I was 23. Here, in a space of illness and uncertainty, I expected most people to be searching for God -- wondering

why God was absent as they suffered. And, some did. But many patients understood that God traveled with them: from home to hospital, from sickness to health.

One time I visited a woman, a Christian, who said quite clearly, “God is with me right now, right here in bed. Right next to me.” She patted the bed beside her. So, I looked. *I looked really carefully.*

And I had no idea what to say next. Do I ask her if that’s a comfortable feeling? Does she have enough room? *(It was a small hospital bed.)*

At the root of my discomfort was a far more complicated question: What if she’s right and I am in the presence of God...why can’t I see it?

At that age, my understanding of God was shaped by stories from the Bible and acceptance speeches during award shows – neither of which I believed. Here was a woman teaching me that God was present and palpable in our moments of vulnerability, and I wanted to learn more.

*Karov Adonai l’nishberay lev*, writes the author of Psalm 34. God is close to the brokenhearted. (Ps 34:18)

*Gam ki eilech. B’gei tsalmavet, Lo ira ra, Ki Atah imadi:* Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; [*Why?*] For You (God) are with me. (Psalm 23:4)

Psalm 23 is most often recited at funerals and memorials, but it’s not just about death. It’s about shadows. Uncertainty. Vulnerability.

Take a look at the screen and please read this excerpt along with me:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup runs over.*

Everyone experiences dark shadows. No one is exempt. But, we are not alone as we take that walk. God is with us. And more than just a traveling companion who can offer comfort, God also makes the moment sacred. God anoints our head with oil, an ancient practice to mark holy time and holy space. The Psalmist is declaring, “shadows, yes...but also sanctity.” In our moments of vulnerability, with God by our side, both are true.

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Now, I recognize that a tool involving God might be hard to access: How exactly do we find God? What if we look and we don’t find anything? How far must we stretch? According to our ancestors, not very far at all. God is closer than we think.

“Our Jewish mystics tell a creation story – of divine light that first fills the world – a light which God contracts to make room for humanity – then breathes back into the world via *kaylim* – beautiful, fragile vessels that contained the sacred light – vessels that made it possible for holiness to dwell in the world.

But a cosmic accident takes place – beyond justice or explanation - and the beautiful, sacred vessels are irretrievably shattered. And equally inexplicably, somehow the light which they once held is not vanquished, nor extinguished, but scattered – spread throughout the world. Somehow, in ways unseen, the light endures, even amidst all that is broken. Hidden sometimes, peering through sometimes, and ever present.”<sup>9</sup>

“There are moments that inalterably change our lives or break our hearts: profound illness, the illnesses or limitations of our children, being abandoned, divorce, death.”<sup>10</sup> Our head spins. Our legs collapse. We can barely breathe. And, yet, eventually, we are able to stand up. We take in another breath. And, somehow, we take a step forward. That strength we find? That spark of hope that emerges in the dark? That is how I recognize God.

Here’s what I’m asking us to do: We have been well trained to see shadows and shards. In the New Year, can we learn to look again and see fragments of light? The table set before us? The cup running over? Can we lean into the vulnerability and look again, even if we’re sure? Even if we’ve already checked?

### ***Tool #2: Others***

If we know that we will all experience vulnerable moments in the year to come, then we should also know that we have a lot in common with the people sitting around us. The capacity we have to connect, to share a moment, to reassure one another that we are not alone...these are opportunities to strengthen one another. We crave these moments. We need these moments.

But, if we’re not careful, we will set up our own barriers to connection. We are so unnerved by vulnerability – so fearful of the exposure and risk – that our response is not to reach out; rather, our response is to work even harder to make it appear as though we’re doing just fine.



← Take a look at this image.<sup>11</sup>

We visited Washington D.C. last year with our 10<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation class and outside of the Supreme Court, one of our students suddenly exclaimed: The façade is fake! Renovations were taking place and the front of the building was covered with a scrim – the 3-D picture of the columns was so realistic, we hadn’t noticed it was fabric. It was an incredible illusion.

**Don’t do this. Don’t build a façade.**

<sup>9</sup> Retold by Rabbi David Stern

<sup>10</sup> Language shared by Honey Kessler Amado

<sup>11</sup> <http://havecamerawilltravel.com/washington-photos/supreme-court-renovations>

My friend and colleague Rabbi Brent Spodek has a beautiful teaching about this:

“Most of us are not frauds [he writes] we don’t perform a self entirely separate from who we know ourselves to be. I don’t pretend to be a medical doctor, a sports fan or a wine connoisseur – those would be distortions of who I am. But many of us perform the “best” version of ourselves – not a false version, but subtly exaggerated. We present the triumphant version of our selves - the successful version, the version we want to be true, the version worthy of being loved and adored.”

“When Abraham Joshua Heschel died, the books on his bed stand were the Best and the Brightest, David Halberstam’s masterpiece on the Vietnam war, and the Keter Shem Tov, a Hasidic classic. Heschel really was one of the leaders of the religious opposition to the War in Vietnam, and he really was a hasid. But when he died, he was reading Newsweek. The books were rearranged by his wife Sylvia, who knew the public performance of “Abraham Joshua Heschel” demanded certain things, and it would be disappointing to many if the performance did not go as planned.”

At this season, as we prepare ourselves for the New Year, in many ways, we are striving to present our best selves. So I want to be really clear about the message: As Rabbi Zoë Klein reminded me, “We should do renovations...” We should not be building facades.

They serve only as obstacles to connection – connections that can strengthen us, help us navigate through our difficult times.

And, yes, reaching out is scary...it’s a risk. As with God, it requires some faith. Our greatest fear is that someone will look at our “scaffolding”, notice our flaws and imperfections, and reject us. Tell us we are unworthy. Far more likely, is that if we choose to reach out, we will be met with understanding and compassion.

The alternative is that we walk around maintaining our façade, and encouraging others to do so, as well. And those “others”, by the way, might be our children, our grandchildren, our next-door neighbor’s children... They watch us and they learn how to be in the world.

What lessons do we hope to teach them in the New Year? Will they be lessons of strength, love, resilience, and belonging? If so, show them what it looks like to not always be certain; to be less than perfect but still loved and adored; to take risks and let yourself be seen. Teach them that along with God, we can discover and reach out to **others** in our moments of vulnerability. And if we reach out to them, we may find the strength we need to take the next step.

### ***Tool #3: Joy***

As it turns out, vulnerability is not just about the times we fear (the difficult conversations, the challenging moments); it’s also about the times we love and crave and celebrate. When Brené Brown started her exploration into the experiences that left people feeling the most vulnerable, she never expected **joy** to be one of the answers. Fear and shame, yes...but not the joyful moments of life. And yet, people said that they were at their most vulnerable when:

- ✓ standing over my children while they’re sleeping
- ✓ knowing how good I’ve got it
- ✓ loving my job

- ✓ watching my parents with my children
- ✓ going into remission
- ✓ having a baby
- ✓ being happy
- ✓ falling in love<sup>12</sup>

It turns out, experiencing joy is filling up your dance card with vulnerability: “I feel so great! So fulfilled. So full of love... [Gasp!] Oh God. Will this feeling last? When it ends, will the letdown be too much to bear?”

Maybe it’s better not to dance at all.

This is the unexpected part: In our moments of joy, we also feel vulnerable, and our reaction (to avoid vulnerability) is to dampen or mute our joy.

She tells the story of a man who, for years, would never get too excited about anything. That way if things didn’t work out, he wasn’t devastated. And if they did, well, it was a pleasant surprise. Then his wife of 40 years died in a car accident. “The second I realized she was gone,” he said, “I knew I should have leaned harder into those moments of joy. Because not doing so did not protect me from what I feel now.”<sup>13</sup>

We need to lean into our moments of vulnerability, especially if that moment is one of joy; and, we need to have faith that within that space of joy and gratitude, we will find the resources we need to take the next steps.

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The holiday of Sukkot is actually called *Z'man Simchateynu* -- our Festival of Rejoicing! So, it’s fitting that God commands us to be particularly joyous: *Vesamachta bechagecha...vehayita ach sameach*, “You shall rejoice on your festivals and you shall be *ach sameach*, especially joyous.”

It’s a strange requirement considering that during Sukkot we dwell in fragile structures that are intentionally built to expose us and to make us feel uncomfortable: the night chill, the occasional rain, the flimsy walls. It’s as if God is saying: Here, let me purposefully put you into the space of discomfort...hold on, I’ll move that over, come sit down...and, there you go. Uncomfortable? Great. Be joyful. It’s a bit of a mixed message – unless, of course, that is the message.

Our lives are constructed with fragile walls. And, within them, we live and we love. We encounter and we embrace. And yes, we will fall and we will fail. We will be hurt. We will be disappointed.

When God commands us to rejoice on Sukkot, it’s not for God’s sake, it’s for our own. It’s a reminder for us that joy is a powerful tool, if we’re courageous enough to use it. To live with an open heart, even if it can be broken. To laugh deeply, even if our next breath ushers in tears. To give thanks for what we have, even when we know it can be taken away.

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<sup>12</sup> Paragraph and list adapted from Daring Greatly, p.118-119

<sup>13</sup> Daring Greatly, p.120

As the New Year begins, there is much that will be out of our control. But, here's what IS:

- feeling joy
- reaching out to connect with others
- searching for God...
  
- and, leaning into vulnerability.

*Hayom Harat Olam* we say in the liturgy. On Rosh Hashanah the world is created anew. How will you choose to live in that world? Last year we lived in a world that taught us to fear vulnerability. This year, we can choose a different narrative, a new path.

A student once asked her Rabbi... "Why does Torah tell us to place these words upon your hearts? (Deut. 11:18) Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The Rabbi thought for a moment and answered... "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."

Hold onto these words. Place them on your heart. Take them into the year to come.

*Shanah Tovah.*