

Rosh Hashanah 2015

The Courage to Be

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**Every life is shaped by two great love stories.** The first, philosopher Alain de Botton explains in his book Status Anxiety, is our quest for intimacy with another human being, a story well known, the inspiration for art and music, literature and movies, a story celebrated across time and space.

The second, a tale kept more private and often a source of shame and ridicule, is our quest for love from the world: for approval, respect, and admiration. “And yet”, de Botton cautions us, *“this second love story is no less intense than the first, it is no less complicated, important or universal, and its setbacks are no less painful. There is heartbreak here too.”*

While his book looks at these themes through the lens of economic and material disparities between people, when I read these words this summer, it struck me that de Botton had offered us a paradigm in which to understand so much of the angst that fills us as we enter this New Year, one that can explain the personal baggage we labor to carry as we move from season to season, as well as the global suffering that strains our ability to feel hopeful about the future of our country, of our world, and of our planet. It may also explain what prevents us from truly doing teshuvah, repenting and returning to living the lives we dream of living.

For to be loved -- by family, friends or fellow citizens -- to be the object of someone's concern, is to have our existence acknowledged, our feelings listened to, our mistakes forgiven, and our needs provided. And when we feel that love, we thrive.

But when we don't, when we feel invisible, unheeded, marginalized, we wrestle with shame and rage, envy and despair.

Why? Again, de Botton:

*“The attentions of others matter to us because we are afflicted by a congenital uncertainty as to our own value, as a result of which affliction we tend to allow others’ appraisals to play a determining role in how we see ourselves. Our sense of identity is held captive by the judgments of those we live among. If they are amused by our jokes, we grow confident in our power to amuse. If they praise us, we develop an impression of high merit. And if they avoid our gaze when we enter a room or look impatient after we have revealed our occupation, we may fall into feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.”*

Such feelings may help explain so much that threatens our world today.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our *Yamim Noraim*, arrive this year to a world filled with *yir'ah*, a word meant to convey *awe* but more colloquially, and today, more aptly, defined as *fear*. We're feeling afraid and vulnerable in just about every dimension of our lives: on a personal and interpersonal level, this time of year reminds us of our mortality and the gulf between our dreams and our reality which we may, or may not, have the chance to bridge. On a societal level, guns have stolen our innocence. We can't even go to a movie without wondering if someone in the theater is carrying a weapon and may explode in a murderous rage if a cell phone rings during the show. Black Americans fear police officers. Police officers fear black Americans. Protests rage and our cities burn, recreating scenes we thought had found their final resting place in the pages of history books.

In the Jewish community, fear has been wielded as a tool on both side of the divide over the Iran deal: threats of another Holocaust, warnings of nuclear war. And most

frightening of all: the Jewish people made vulnerable by our own inability to tolerate, never mind respect, dissent and difference. Moreover, while we all remain anxious over Israel's security, we don't all understand the crucial connection between her physical, existential safety, and her moral and spiritual power.

The grotesque and barbaric terrorism throughout the globe defies whatever we have left of our faith in humanity and, quite simply, terrifies us: Jewish men wearing tefillin having their limbs cut off and slaughtered while in shul, Christian children beheaded, Yazidi women systematically raped and forced into sexual slavery, chemical weapons unleashed against a regime's own citizens, journalists murdered in their Paris offices over cartoons. To paraphrase Rabbi Heschel, sometimes it is so embarrassing to be a human being. To rid the world of these evils is complex and dangerous, I understand. Still, I am ashamed before my children, and yours, that this is the world we may bequeath to them.

The link between insecurity and suffering is well known. While I am not so naïve as to suggest it can explain all that is wrong in our world, it does figure in the calculus of our challenges, and in the solutions we're here to contemplate.

As de Botton stated, not trusting our inner sense of our own value, we rely on others to tell us our worth. We become anxious about our place in the world, defined by how much love it offers us, which in turn becomes the measure of our own self-love. Lacking confidence in ourselves, lacking our own internal source of affirmation, we struggle to invest in ourselves, to take risks in order to grow into the people we know we have the potential to be. We get stuck in our anxiety: what if we fail to reach the markers of success set by those around us? What if we look stupid or incapable in the eyes of others? What if we can't convince the world of our merits and we end up humiliated, bitter and ashamed?

The drive for status, for recognition, has its place, no doubt. It fuels hard work, good judgment, and often, morality. But in excess, it's toxic, sometimes even fatal – to ourselves and to those we love.

For children and adults alike, where there is love and validation, self-esteem and confidence, there is no motive for cruelty. People tend to put others down when they feel low themselves. We look for ways to earn fame and status when we lack our own inner treasures. We recognize that in the schoolyard and we've worked hard to combat bullying. In its most pathological form, we see it in the endless gun violence that is destroying our nation. Yes, we need better mental health services, but we also need real gun control. County clerks as well as bakers and photographers who feel their opinions should trump someone else's civil rights might also consider how the forcefulness of their actions betrays weakness, not strength, in their personal convictions. When we're confident in our own values, we're not deluded into thinking that someone else's are a reflection of, or can in any way diminish, our own.

In his highly acclaimed book, Between the World and Me, which takes the form of a letter to his 15 year-old son, author Ta-Nehisi Coates even explains the often provocative clothing, music, jewelry and style of inner city black youth as a defiant reaction to the internalized dread of oppression that the black experience in America has seared into the hearts and souls of generations of black families and communities. Fear works in mysterious ways.

The players, causes, alliances and enmities are complex and confusing, but to me, not a politician but an observer of life and humanity, what rages as violently as war and terrorism in the Middle East is insecurity. When people fear that their narrative, their culture, their values, their identity lacks relevance or respect in the world's eyes, when they fail to draw strength and courage from own their inner convictions and

commitments, when they endlessly compare themselves to others and feel less-than, some will stop at nothing to grab the world by its throat and in the most unconscionable ways, scream out: “Look at me. Take me seriously. I have something to say.” But whatever of value that may be, it becomes meaningless when annexing countries, blowing up civilians, beheading children and raping women is their chosen language of communication.

I am not going to comment on the Iran deal itself, but I will say something in this context about our shared concern for Israel. Rabbi Chaim Strauchler of the Shaarei Shomayim synagogue in Toronto said it well when I heard him speak on the Shabbat following the murder of Shira Banki, z”l, at the Jerusalem Pride Parade and the arson attack on a Palestinian home in Duma killing Reham Dawabsheh, her son Ali and her husband Sa’ad (their son Ahmed is still in hospital struggling to recover from his injuries). Rabbi Strauchler’s insight is that **we would be naïve to think that Israel’s physical security is separate from her moral and spiritual security. Indeed they are all bound up with one another.**

While Shira’s murder was decried by many across the Jewish spectrum, too often a community’s inability to accept different interpretations of law and ethics, or even politics as we saw recently, betrays a deeper insecurity with their own choices and beliefs. When this leads to attempts to force the rightness of their positions upon others through immoral and violent action, such as it did this summer in Israel, action that degrades Israel and the Jewish people, that distorts Judaism and Jewish values in the eyes of the world, it only serves to further alienate our beloved Jewish State, weaken our alliances, embolden our critics, and make Israel more vulnerable to attacks – political and military.

Insecurity is also emotionally dangerous. When we lack self-esteem, we often respond to another’s pain based not on what *they* need but on how it makes *us* feel.

Our spouse shares with us that they're feeling lost or incomplete, that there's something missing from their lives, but all we can hear is that we're incapable of making our partner feel whole. Hurt masquerades as defensiveness, self-protection in the form of a harsh tongue, and we're unable to respond with compassion and sensitivity. Relationships break down. People get hurt. We get hurt.

In a moving book called Radical Acceptance, psychologist Tara Brach writes of what she describes as the most serious disease (dis-ease) facing us today, one of epidemic proportions, that of the sense of unworthiness, of not belonging or deserving to belong with which so many of us struggle.

Something as innocuous as hearing about someone else's success, making a mistake at work, or having a disagreement with someone could send us away thinking there is something wrong with us. Just the other day my son sent me a link to a book his roommate's father recently published. My first reaction: *Wow, that's cool!* My second: *What is wrong with me that I can't get my act together to write a book?*

Brach describes it as a trance: while we're talking to our kids or spouses or reading or eating, inside our heads we're replaying our worries and insecurities that we're always coming up short.

Feeling unworthy, she teaches, leads us to feeling separate from others. If we're so imperfect, how can we possibly belong? It becomes a vicious cycle: the more unworthy we feel, the less we feel we belong. And we suffer.

For some of us, the suffering takes the form of addiction: to alcohol, drugs, to food. Even to a particular person who makes us feel more complete. Some become addicted to work, trying to feel important in one distorted way our society seems to

respect. Some become addicted to conflict with others, creating enemies over whom we can feel superior and right and in control.

Some of us become depressed and anxious, feeling unlovable, worried that if others discover we're boring or selfish or insecure, they won't want us. We fear turning to others for help or letting ourselves feel supported. We abandon our dreams. We're exhausted from the endless shopping, working, emailing, rushing, "connecting", from the pressure of always having to prove ourselves – to colleagues, friends, even family – that we're intelligent, capable, powerful, wealthy.

And we try to avoid acknowledging our feelings of unworthiness. We diet, exercise, take workshops, make lists, volunteer, color our hair, which can all be valuable commitments except when they are driven by our sense that we're just not "good enough" compared to the world's ideal.

We play it safe instead of taking risks: at work, in love, with play. And we miss out.

We withdraw from the present and turn away from reality by telling ourselves all kinds of stories and excuses for why things are the way they are: this is why things haven't worked out, here's something bad that might happen if I do things differently, someone else is to blame and so on. We suffer from continuous anxiety even as we create the illusion that we're managing our own life.

We judge ourselves endlessly. We judge others endlessly.

And all we accomplish with these misguided coping mechanisms, Brach explains, is to deepen the well-worn pathways in our hearts and souls and brains that lead us to feeling unworthy, deepening the trance.

Wanting more for ourselves yet fearing how we achieve it are natural human inclinations, both helping us to thrive and also protecting us, her book teaches. But when that fear and that sense of deficiency becomes the essence of who we are, we lose sight of our core identities and the potential embedded within us. We forget about our capacity for love, compassion and joy. We live with half our hearts, half our souls. We live defensively, lashing out to protect ourselves from the world whose love we long for, attacking it before, in our warped self-understanding, it inevitably attacks us.

But what happens when our insecurity is replaced with confidence? When our focus shifts from what we desperately want from the world to what we most passionately wish to share with those around us?

Alain de Botton divides his book, Status Anxiety, into two sections: Causes and Solutions. In a discourse on the power of community, de Botton notes how most of us are taught to try to distinguish ourselves from the crowd, to prove our worthiness by standing out and above the rest in whatever way we can to become noticed. We're terrified of being like everyone else, being ordinary, unremarkable, because then we'd get no attention from the world and we'd experience that as no love coming our way. The more debased and shameful being ordinary becomes, the more urgently we'll try to make ourselves different.

But doesn't that run contrary to everything our spiritual traditions teach us about the fundamental equality of all human beings, he challenges? Our own Jewish narratives tell us that every single human being, those we admire and identify with and those we don't, bears the divine image.

In de Botton's words, *"there is no such thing as a stranger... only the impression of strangeness, born out of a failure to acknowledge that others share both our needs and*



*our weaknesses. Nothing could be nobler, or more fully human, than to perceive that we are indeed fundamentally, in every way that really matters, just like everyone else.”*

Maybe that’s what’s behind the Torah’s repeated command to deal kindly with the stranger, for we ourselves were strangers. It’s not that the Israelites were essentially different from the Egyptians, or that an immigrant, or a refugee, is essentially different from us so we need to be polite and hospitable. It’s that **there is no such thing as a stranger once you understand yourself to be a member of the human family.** In our complex world, how we respond to immigrants or refugees requires careful thinking and planning in addition to kindness and compassion. But categorizing someone as a stranger is to send them into exile in a world no less their home than it is ours.

There are real and substantive distinctions between people and countries. There are variations in culture, in ethnicity, in wealth, and laws must carefully advance both fairness and opportunity. But *strangeness* erupts when we attach judgment to racial and income inequality and build walls of prejudice to keep those who are different away from us and feeling down about themselves and their situation. The self-loathing that follows isn’t only damaging to them. As we know, it can become a source of aggression towards us.

De Botton notes how in countries where public housing, transportation, education and healthcare are so inferior, most will do anything to distance themselves from association with the masses. When there isn’t access to a basic modicum of dignity and comfort for all, being ordinary is the last thing anyone would want.

In contrast, in countries where the public square both looks and feels clean, dignified, and respectful, people are more apt to stake some claim to it with pride. Our hunger for personal glory subsides when public life is itself glorious, he teaches.

For example, with Zurich's clean, safe, and efficient network of public trams, there's less of a need or desire to own a private vehicle to avoid sharing a ride with others because everyone is afforded a dignified mode of travel without regard to personal wealth or status. Though it's not perfect, socialized medicine also reduces otherness between people. When confidence and self-esteem are available to all, the obsessive drive to be better than anyone else weakens, to everyone's emotional and psychological benefit, and the toxicity between the strong and the weak, the successful and the struggling, is neutralized.

Many have bemoaned the rampant discrepancies between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel (I'm not even speaking about Palestinians), in such basic public services as having access to clean water, decent schools, garbage pick up, road maintenance, healthcare, and other basic rights of citizenship. We've decried them as an affront to our Jewish values of justice and equality. But the reality is that the damage these discrepancies do to our understanding of our own humanity and the despair it causes those who feel rejected by their fellow citizens puts us all in mortal danger. Providing access to such basic elements of civilized life to all who call Israel home would boost much needed self-esteem amongst those with whom we must make peace, which just may bring us a little bit closer.

On a related note, in the wake of the stalled peace process with the Palestinians, the growing agitation within the West Bank, the intensification of anti-Israelism on college campuses and around the world as well as the extreme reactions to the Iran deal, Jewish historians and analysts, and even Hollywood actors, have begun to question Israel's emphasis on the Holocaust when it comes to justifying its right to exist. Their aim is not dismiss or belittle the Shoah. Their point is that both for Jews in Israel and around the world as well as for everyone else, trumpeting Israel's incredible contributions to modern life and statesmanship would help strengthen her

own confidence and that of others in her to take the steps necessary to protect herself while relentlessly pursuing a meaningful détente with her enemies, those within and beyond her borders. Israel's innovations in medicine, science, biotechnology, irrigation and agriculture, desalinization and clean water projects, technology, web-design, communications, architecture, music, museum science, military ethics, disaster relief and so many other fields, have quite literally changed the world. There should be no self-doubt, or doubt on the part of anyone else, as to Israel's value and legitimacy. The trope of *Hasbarah*, or Israeli public relations, should be about Israel's capacity to make life better for people around the globe as well as for her own people and her neighbors. To exude pride in Israel's accomplishments and not just fear for her security, to assert her value and not just her vulnerability, just may embolden her leadership and leaders around the world to engage in a more substantive approach to a negotiated peace.

In another interesting, hopeful example, the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem where Aaron studied last year has been bringing young Muslim clerics and scholars from the United States to Israel to study Judaism and the Jewish people in an effort to build trust and fellowship. It's not an interfaith program where both sides share of themselves. The Muslim Leadership Initiative is a program about Judaism and the Jews. It's an effort to help the Muslim world understand who we really are.

The courageous Imam Abdullah Antepli who heads Muslim life at Duke is the driving force behind this program, together with noted author Yossi Klein Halevi whom Aaron interned for. When interviewed recently, Imam Antepli spoke of the “the self-destructive, toxic poison” of Muslim anti-Semitism — “how it is disempowering us”, he said. “The paranoid obsession that all the problems (in the Muslim world) are because of these people, and what they did, and how they are behind anything and everything — it's killing and freezing our willpower and also pumping hate. It's so destructive.” The desire to challenge that, he says, is “a self-interest: to save us from

ourselves in this regard.” While the Imam respectfully but honestly spoke about Islam’s issues with Israel, he acknowledged the dangers of Muslim self-loathing when its directed outward at a world they feel has marginalized and disenfranchised them, and he spoke of the need for Muslim self-respect to replace its thinly veiled low self-esteem. This project is a beacon of much needed light in a darkening Middle East and a fractious United States.

Here in our own community, this redeeming power of confidence may be the most precious resource in our ability to renew and strengthen American Jewish life. Over the summer in the virtual pages of the online newsletter “eJewishPhilanthropy”, leaders and community workers from all over North America debated the ongoing relevance of the Jewish Federation model in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clarion calls were made for Federations to innovate and catch up to creative trends in Jewish engagement and Jewish charitable giving. Over the same weeks, as an entrepreneur in the Jewish innovation economy, I was invited to address a few different gatherings of Federation leaders on this very topic. The discussions that ensued were fascinating and yielded a clear insight: while change of any kind is threatening and portends losses as well as gains, those communities that were sure of their mission and purpose were the most comfortable taking risks to change their practices in order to engage the Jewish community more effectively. Confidence breeds creativity.

A few months ago Gal Beckerman wrote an article in the Forward in which he tried to understand American Jews’ obsession with Jewish continuity, Jewish engagement and Jewish identity building. In Israel, where he grew up, Jewish identity was an indivisible part of life, and people didn’t dwell on it too much. To him, our endless population studies, research projects, articles, workshops, trainings and campaigning on behalf of these issues reflects a profound insecurity and uncertainty we feel about our Jewish identity and about our Jewish future. Notwithstanding the reality that

native Israeli connections to Jewish learning and practice outside of the Orthodox world there tend to be rather superficial, does he have a point about us?

When I started Sha'ar Communities, I took a big risk redefining the traditional frameworks in which Jewish life was built. Offering the synagogue as but one setting for meaningful Jewish experience while building several other "Gates" which are self-standing Jewish communities outside the parameters of prayer and observance, I challenged the central notion with which I had been ordained: that the Jewish life I personally lead is the one I ought to inspire people to embrace. Confident that the choices others make are not reflections upon me – for better or for worse – and clear about my sense of mission to motivate people to cultivate their own Jewish lives around values and experiences that are authentic and relevant to them in fellowship with others, I was able to implement, together with you, Sha'ar's innovative model of Jewish living, one which casts the widest net possible around those who wish to be part of our Jewish legacy and our Jewish destiny.

This same confidence, after much struggle, is what enabled me to reach my position on intermarriage that I spoke about last Yom Kippur. I am proud to have served as a rabbi to many couples since then, people who are committed to Jewish life and Jewish families and who treasured the opportunity to have a rabbi guide them through their marriage and the weeks and months and years beyond. While my data set is still small, I'm also proud to share that all but one of the non-Jewish partners in those marriages has expressed interest in conversion, an outgrowth, at least in part I have to believe, of the warm and affirming welcome they received. I'm further gratified to share that since last High Holy Days there have been several high-level rabbinic discussions launched to address this reality in a way that strengthens the Jewish community and deepens Jewish commitment.

There's no doubt this kind of self-assuredness also explains the bold step taken recently by several Orthodox organizations to start ordaining women as rabbis, and the open, creative and welcoming spirit behind Chabad's inimitable outreach efforts to Jews of all backgrounds, to non-Jews, and to all who seek to elevate their lives towards holiness.

Someone once said to me: You don't walk into a stranger's home and move around the furniture; you only do that in your mother's home. It's true. You don't go somewhere you lack a sense of belonging and begin to change things up. When we feel rooted and clear about who we are is when we are able to consider life from different perspectives and even make changes in our own behavior without worry that these will corrode our selfhood or undermine our values.

And perhaps most relevant is the insight that when we are truly self-possessed, grounded in an understanding of who we are and who we aren't, we are better able to tolerate our own mistakes, and those of others. When we achieve a worldview of ourselves that affirms our strengths without demanding perfection, we can better assimilate, and address, our weaknesses, and one another's.

There is no more sacred message from our tradition that this one, and it's one that's central to our Rosh Hashanah rituals.

Perhaps the greatest gifts the Torah has given us are the flawed characters in the stories of Bereishit, the very stories the Rabbis chose for us explore on Rosh Hashanah. Much has been said about our ability to relate to the figures in the Torah who achieve greatness as much because of their mistakes as because of their wisdom or compassion. We are presented with human beings, with all their strengths and weaknesses, pettiness and generosity. We are not asked to emulate saints but to learn and grow from our interactions with biblical heroes who are people just like

ourselves – human beings who strive to walk a purposeful and righteous path in life but who often meander and sometimes even abandon the trail distracted by selfishness, fear or self-doubt.

That Genesis was crafted in this way is perhaps the greatest hint of its divine essence. The permission to journey through life not as someone other than whom we are, but as someone struggling to be the best that we can be is, in my book, what accounts for the never-ending relevance and spiritual genius of Judaism.

It's crucial to articulate the deepest truth of this gift: that imperfection is the Torah's definition of perfection; that acknowledging the fractured and fragmented experience of human life and striving for integrity and purpose within that imperfect reality is the fullest, most honest, most perfect expression of our human spirit. As the Hasidim say it, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. With renewed self-confidence, maybe we could more lovingly nurture our own and each other's heartbreak.

In her book, Tara Brach quotes a Zen Master who said that true freedom is living without anxiety about imperfection. That means living with radical acceptance of our capacities to fail, to hurt, to disappoint – which are all a function of being human -- and to nonetheless live with pride and confidence in our capacity to do good, to bring pleasure and joy to others, to be whole, to be a part of something. It means to awaken from the trance of separateness and unworthiness to the realization of our own wisdom, our own compassion, and our own belonging to the human family, to our own families, to our selves.

We speak about awakening to deeper understandings of ourselves through the sounds of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Brach speaks about how so many of us make new year's resolutions to bring more care and compassion to ourselves but end

up getting stuck in the judgment part, another theme of this day. But awakening can also mean becoming more aware of what's happening in our lives and learning to lessen our unhealthy identification with it all; learning to understand ourselves without being limited by that understanding, without thinking that we are, in essence, defined by our mistakes; realizing that we may know less than we think we do, but that we're more capable of standing within the mysteries of life. As she puts it: awakening can mean gaining more trust in ourselves and in our lives, even if we have less certainty.

Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, the father of modern Hassidut and the Jewish Renewal Movement, was raised and ordained in the Lubavitch world. Emulating the Rebbe, he would invite his community to a regular Shabbat “*tisch*” at which he would teach Torah, sing, and provide spiritual nourishment and inspiration. But then he would do something different, something never done by any Rebbe. After his teaching, he would ask everyone, including himself, to rise and move one seat to the left, vacating his big cushy seat with armrests at the head of the table from where a Rebbe would naturally speak to allow for the person to his right to now assume it. And he would say to his people, “*Look inside for the Rebbe-spark within you, and teach from there.*” This would go on and on until everyone had a chance to sit in the Rebbe’s chair and share something meaningful to them, becoming a source of wisdom for themselves and their community.

As one of his students, Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, recalled, “*It was important to him that all of us learn that "rebbe" is a function, a role, into which we too can step. That we too have wisdom to give over. That we too can open our hearts to something beyond ourselves and learn to trust that the wisdom which will flow through us will be the right wisdom for this moment.*”



This is what it means to do teshuvah: to come home and feel the nurturing embrace of your own worth, to return to the confidence within you, to your faith in yourself that in spite of whatever shortcomings or failures you have to reckon with, you possess infinite value, that you have important and wise things to say, that you are worthy of healing and being healed, that you are capable of making things right, that you are deserving of the love you seek and the love you have to share.

**Every life is shaped by two great love stories: the one about our quest for intimacy with another human being, and the one about our quest for love from the world. Today, with pride and confidence, we write ours, and that of the Jewish people's, anew.**

Shanah Tovah.