



How to Have it All By Not Having it All: (Mis)Representation on Yom Kippur Maharat Ruth Friedman

Class of 2013

(Adapted from a drasha given on Yom Kippur 2018)

I have a 15 lb shih tzu named Cocoa. We love her tremendously, in spite of the fact that she drives us nuts. One of her most annoying habits is the way that she plays fetch. She'll walk into the living room and approach her overflowing basket of toys and demand to play. My husband, Yoni will happily oblige and throw a toy, she'll run to go get it, and then come back a minute later without it in her mouth. We don't know why she doesn't have it - maybe she just got distracted. But she returns, toyless, and expecting to keep playing. Yoni happily obliges, throws a toy, and once again Cocoa runs off and returns toyless, and the pattern continues. So my house can quickly go from having all the toys tidied up in the basket where they belong, to being scattered all over the first floor of our house, having been abandoned or forgotten by Cocoa. This drives me completely insane. Sometimes I feel like all I do in my house is walk around picking up dog toys and returning them to that basket in our living room. I like things to be tidy and put away in their place, and it feels impossible with the dog toys.

I've been thinking of this story as a metaphor for my life in general a lot this year. Not just because it shares a lot about my personality and my need for organization, but also because every time I walk through the house grumbling about all of the dog toys being everywhere, Yoni has the exact same response: "I don't know why you're cleaning them up when they're just going to end right back there in a few hours."

To Yoni, the reality of our lives right now is that the house will be strewn with dog toys (and kid toys and discarded pajamas and crumbs) - that's what it means to have 2 parents, an au pair, 2 kids, and a dog living in one house. There's a basic sense of order, but with plenty of chaos mixed in. But while Yoni accepts our fate, I fight it, and I keep striving to have a house that is tidy. And so the reality of my life right now is that I am perpetually picking up dog toys and straightening the throw pillows on the couches and cleaning up laundry. I need the house to be in order, even if the circumstances of my life set it up for the opposite. I want my home to represent a reality in which everything is in order.

I've been thinking a lot about representation, and misrepresentation, this year. About when we feel the need to look like we have it all together, even if we don't, and when we feel that we can represent ourselves honestly. There is no day that demands honesty more than Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Before Yom Kippur we have to reflect on our sins, and apologize to those we've hurt. We have to come to shul and daven for hours and hours and hours and repeat all of the ways that we have hurt people. In our davening we say that God knows all parts of us. We have to be our full, honest selves and let it all out, in the hopes that God will save us.

But ironically, in a time when we are supposed to fully open ourselves up to God, we are actually misrepresenting our own reality -- because we come to shul dressed in white, and not indulging in any physical pleasures. Our rabbis teach us that on Yom Kippur we wear white and abstain from eating and drinking so that we can emulate the spiritual perfection of the angels. On Yom Kippur, we disregard what it means to be human so that we can mirror beings of spiritual perfection.

This is a nice thought if you want to frame it as modeling a level of spirituality that we should strive for, but it's also kind of strange. Because as anyone whose tummy is grumbling and who is distracted by the image of whatever foods they're craving at the moment knows, we are not actually angels. We are human beings with all sorts of physical and emotional needs that maybe we can deny for 25 hours, but certainly not longer than that! If spiritual perfection means that literally all a person is doing is connecting with God all day, then none of us will ever qualify! We're trying to emulate perfection, which is impossible. I find that idea very overwhelming.

And frankly, I feel similarly overwhelmed with the teshuva process. The Rambam's idea of perfect teshuva is when we confront sinful inclinations that we have and control them so that when the same situation presents itself again we do not sin. We use the *vidui* (the confession) as a series of prompts to generate a massive list of things we wish we would have done differently this past year. In Chapter 7:3 of Hilchot Teshuva, the Rambam states that teshuva applies not just to deeds, but to character traits - we must look for everything that's wrong with us, and do teshuva for all of it. That is a pretty high standard to attain if you want to fully do teshuva. We come to shul dressed like creatures that represent spiritual perfection, and now we're supposed to attain perfect teshuva. I know I feel that that's a challenge! When I speak to my community on Yom Kippur, I don't want to offer anyone grand ideas of repentance because I don't want anyone to think I have it figured out any more than you have. Striving to reach the level of the angels, to atone for every negative part of us, is really really hard! There is even an article written by a therapist at Yeshiva University that talks about the danger of striving towards perfection on Yom Kippur - because if we don't fully achieve it, we feel like failures. And so I will do what Yoni tells me to do every year when I ask him what I should talk about on Yom Kippur: "Say something that will inspire people to daven musaf."

This year, I found that inspiration in the way that Rav Soloveitchik speaks about the introduction to the *vidui*. Before we strike our chests and say אשמו and enumerate all of the ways in which we have sinned, we ask God to let our prayer come before God:

שׂאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֲזֵי פָּנִים וְקָשִׁי עוֹרֵף לֹמֵר לְפָנֶיךָ צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חַטָּאנוּ אֲבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חַטָּאנוּ
[God, accept our prayers] because we are not arrogant or stubborn enough to say before
You that we are tzadikim, and we haven't sinned. For in truth, we and our fathers have
sinned.

Every time we come before God to confess our sins, we first have to say "I am not going to misrepresent reality to you, God, and say that we are all righteous people who don't sin. Because we and our fathers - we have all sinned!" As the Rav argues, this is a necessary step in order to achieve the Rambam's notion of perfect teshuva. He uses this preamble to the אשמו list to argue that in order to really achieve that level of teshuva that the Rambam demands of us, we first must really confront the negative parts of ourselves. If we try to deny this part of us, or try to deny our guilt for having done something, we can't do a full teshuva for it. In order to fully atone, we have to be willing to say aloud: "I sinned. I have this negative part of me that I am willing to confront head-on."

The Rav touches on something that can speak to all of us. When we've done something wrong, our first inclination is to just move on and pretend it didn't happen. We do this when we've wronged someone and see them a year later - pretend like it never happened. We do this when we have a bad habit that we wish we could stop - we avoid acknowledging that we have a problem. But, as the Rav says, that's only a bandaid. Our guilt



will continue to haunt us until we are forced to confront this problem and say “I am not going to pretend that I am perfect. Because I sinned.” THEN we can work on this and move on.

I love this interpretation, and believe that this process is necessary in order to truly heal. Anyone who’s ever done something wrong knows what it feels like to be haunted by guilt, until the matter is resolved. But I also want to offer a reframing of this idea - that we should understand it not just as a guideline for us on how to accept that we have sinned, but also for an equally difficult process - how to accept what we are, and what we are not.

Because we are a community of perfectionists. People think that New York is the most high energy city to live in, but I disagree - I have never felt so much pressure to do more than I have since I’ve lived in DC. We are surrounded by very smart people who went to very fancy schools and hold very fancy jobs. Everything is fast paced, and everyone is passionate about everything. I don’t know a single person in this city who would describe themselves as apathetic. This motivates us to do so much good, and the people in my community are some of the most socially involved people I know. But it can also be challenging, because we feel like we are constantly surrounded by people who know more than us and are doing more than us. This can get us worked up and we all feel like we have to be doing as much, if not more, than everyone else. It feels like we’re surrounded by impossible standards.

And trying to be an observant Jew adds another layer of stress on top of that. Not only are you trying to do your job and be active in many areas, you’re also trying to make exquisite Shabbos meals and take seven days off in September without compromising your workload. We’ve set very high standards for ourselves! And if we want to scale back, we look around at everyone else who’s doing the same, and feel that we can’t.

But imagine what it would feel like if, instead of participating in this rat-race of perfection, we were brave enough to say - you know what, I can’t do it all. I can’t be everything for everyone. Imagine how it might change our community if we were more willing to be open about the things we can’t do.

Some people argue that a spiritual leader should never show weakness or vulnerability. I totally reject this view. I will stand up on the bima and confess that 80% of the time, the house that I work so hard to present as clean, is actually a mess of dog toys, half eaten pieces of bamba, and dirty socks. This is a trivial example of a much more serious process that I’ve been working on this year - trying not to feel like I have to be everything for everyone, and being willing to acknowledge the areas where I’m going to fall short. The gift I am giving myself this year is trying not to see these as character flaws, but rather as parts of myself that I accept. That doesn’t mean that we stop trying to be better people - we should not seek to glorify the status quo of who we are - but we should also not feel that not attaining perfection is failure. The irony of a day of self-denial is that we should never deny ourselves. So as we come before God today and temper the perfection of our goals with the acknowledgement that, at the end of the day, we are all sinners, what if we can also say: “We cannot pretend that we can do it all, because nobody can.” That might be the greatest gift we can give ourselves, and each other.

Maharat Ruth Friedman is a member of the inaugural class of Maharat. She serves as Maharat at Ohev Sholom - The National Synagogue in Washington DC. Maharat Ruth is deeply committed to working to ensure that Jewish communal structures provide sensitivity and support to individuals and couples struggling with fertility challenges, and she is honored to serve on The Red Stone Advisory Committee. She is a proud member of both the Chicago and Washington Boards of

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