



Temple Beth Sholom

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Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

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You Don't Have To Be Perfect

It was the bottom of the 9th at Comerica Park. The Detroit Tigers were up against the Cleveland Indians and pitcher, Armando Galarraga, was still on the mound. He had two outs and was just one out away from a perfect game. Short Stop, Jason Donald, was at bat. Donald grounded to first and first base umpire, Jim Joyce, stood waiting for his foot to hit the bag or for the first base man to tag him out. Donald came in as did the ball and Joyce called Donald in to first base as safe! That was it! Galarraga's teammates were ready to rush the mound and instead they and Galarraga were left stunned at the call! The perfect game in the last moments was denied!

From every camera angle it was clear that Donald should have been called 'out', however, there are no replays in baseball. Galarraga was devastated at losing his perfect game, but umpire Jim Joyce was even more crushed that he cost this young ball player the 21st ever perfect game in baseball history.

Joyce asked if he could see Galarraga right after the game. Tiger's General Manager, Dave Dombrowski, took him to see him and immediately Joyce apologized for his missed call. He felt terrible and as the two hugged, Galarraga said, "I understand."

Galarraga called him a good umpire and said that he realized that life just happens this way – it's not always fair. He recognized that this is not something that usually happens – an umpire coming in to apologize for a bad call. Galarraga left with the following words: "I know nobody's perfect. What are you going to do? I was mad in the moment because I was nervous. I didn't know what to do. I was like celebrating. Then I looked at him."

There is disappointment in life. There are decisions that are made and actions that are taken that don't always seem fair. Some of those decisions are justifiable and some may not be. And the notion that we are to always be perfect or others are to be perfect only leads to a sense of constantly feeling disappointed and guilty. A lot of misery in our lives can stem from this notion of perfection: that we need to be perfect in order for others to love us and that we will forfeit that love if we ever fall short of perfection.

From our earliest memories and actions as children, the feeling that we have to be perfect and if we make a mistake we feel ourselves become small and blame ourselves for our inadequacy overwhelms us. How do we react when someone calls us out for a mistake we made or a missed opportunity? How is it that we blame ourselves for not being perfect and then scold ourselves stronger than anyone else will?

Let's start at the beginning, the Garden of Eden. Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, "How Good Do We Have to Be?" suggests "if we are to realize the fullness of our humanity, if we are to see our mistakes and even our imperfect successes in an overall context, we can do no better than to begin where the Bible begins, with one man, one woman, one God, and one rule in a brave new world."

Rabbi Kushner asks us, how could Adam and Eve have known that eating from the Tree of Knowledge was wrong when they did not have the power of knowledge to begin with? Sure, God said, 'don't eat of the tree' but Adam and Eve had no sense of good and evil before eating from the tree. God was not giving them a prohibition; instead, God was giving them a warning from outgrowing their life in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden.

The warning was, if you eat from the Tree of Knowledge, while you will receive the rewards of knowledge and opportunity, you will also have to bear the responsibilities that accompany it. You will experience the pain along with the joys of life and the world. They will know what it means to truly feel and experience life. With eating the fruit, Adam and Eve will learn what it means to create something and then have to care for it, be frustrated by it, and even struggle with the responsibilities of the new life by eating from the tree. They will learn that while they might have one vision for how they hope something they create will turn out; they will also experience the pain of falling short of their original intentions. As Rabbi Kushner shares with us, there will be

more pain than we can ever imagine in knowing about Good and Evil.

In our lives we experience the exaltation of creation and the pain of realizing that creation is more complicated than we might have thought in the first place.

On this day, we stand before God sharing our entire selves. We bare our full being to God and examine each aspect of our lives. We find our imperfections and through this close examination we might find some moments that we are embarrassed as we recall them. Charles Darwin theorized that humans are the only creatures that are capable of blushing.

During these moments and hours we examine closely our actions and lives and we feel pangs of guilt and shame. But there is a distinction between the two. Guilt is the emotion we experience when we feel bad about what we have done or not done. Shame is feeling bad about who we are, measured against some standard of perfection or acceptability. This is important to hear during these hours of atonement for we can atone for the things that we have done more easily than we can change who we are.

We complicate this today as we stand here defining ourselves by our mistakes only rather than considering our best moments as well. There are times that we might define ourselves as never being able to get it right rather than remembering that we are human and we make mistakes.

Our liturgy today cries out to us to hear this message through the *unetanetokef* – It is not the death of sinners that God seeks, rather that we should repent and turn from our wrong ways so that we might live. Our prayers are teaching us that yes, we need to see our imperfections and then grow from what we see and learn about mistakes. But how do we deal with the guilt?

Our first step today is to stand vulnerable before God and admit our failures and limitations. But still we feel guilty in one way or another. Some might hold the guilt inside and at bay, others might bring it to the surface and allow it to be so consuming – I like to call it *shtooshing*! I'm a master *shtoosher*! But how do we relieve it?

Rabbi Kushner tells a story of a woman who came to a rabbi one day. She was so overcome with guilt that she visited the grave of her husband on a holy day. She realized that she was not supposed to visit the cemetery that day but still went. However, after the visit, she was so overcome by the guilt of breaking a Jewish tradition that she could not shake it. The rabbi tried to reassure her that this truly was not as detrimental as she was making it out to be. However, no words of comfort could persuade her to be relieved of the guilt she was feeling. Finally, the rabbi asked her, "What was the date you went to the cemetery." She replied, "It was the seventeenth." The rabbi said, "I want you to take seventeen dollars and donate it to charity in memory of your husband as a way to seek atonement for your transgression." The woman expressed an immediate sense of relief by the task she was given to make amends for her mistake.

Was this really a fix for the woman's transgression? For her, yes, it was. She needed to take some action to atone for what she felt was a wrong choice and she needed to know that she was not going to be rejected by her rabbi, her religion or God for her mistake.

Today is about not only our needing to say we are sorry and take action for our atonement, but it is also about forgiveness. It is important for us to not only admit our mistakes but also to find out that we will not be rejected for being less than perfect.

When our children, our family members, or those in our community make mistakes we do not reject them or call them bad for it. When our children make poor choices, we try so hard to remind them that while their choice was not a good one, we still love them. We are disappointed by their choice, we are not disappointed in who they are.

Marian Wright Edelman wrote her in book: *The Measure of Our Success* a letter to her son:

"I seek your forgiveness for all the times I talked when I should have listened; got angry when I should have been patient; acted when I should have waited; feared when I should have been delighted; scolded when I should have encouraged; criticized when I should have complimented; said no when I should have said yes and said yes when I should have said no. I did not know a whole lot about parenting or how to ask for help. I often tried too hard and wanted and demanded so much, and mistakenly sometimes tried to mold you into my image of what I wanted you to be rather than discovering and nourishing you as you emerged and grew."

Forgiveness is the truest form of love and it means accepting someone's flaws and imperfections and praying that they accept ours as well. Unfortunately, we are not always willing or are reluctant to forgive. It seems easier to hold a grudge toward someone who has wronged us rather than try to work through the pain of the imperfect act. Holding grudges might make us feel superior and gives a sense of power over the other. But the Talmud teaches us that the normal life span of a quarrel should only be two or three days. If a person hurts or offends us, we are entitled

to be upset with the person for that long in regard to routine arguments or misunderstandings. If the bitter feelings extend to the fourth day, then the Talmud teaches us that we might be choosing to hold on to these feelings, nurse the grievance, and not let it finally go.

Pastoral Counselor, David Norris says: "Forgiveness involves a letting go not only of the negative energy connecting with an injury, but also of the meanings which we learned as a result of that and similar injuries throughout one's life."

We have the power to let go of the pain someone might cause us and to choose happiness. We are able to release someone from the pain of their mistake after they have sought forgiveness. We are capable of bringing happiness back into the relationship rather than resentment and shame.

Finally, on this day, as we admit our wrongdoings, as we seek forgiveness from those whom we have hurt and forgive those who seek our forgiveness, we must also face those moments of envy. Consider those times when we did not feel valued for our actions or contributions. Or those times that we felt underappreciated or underutilized.

Yes, there have been times with my being the younger sister that I have felt like I was being protected from family issues or that I was always the last to know about something. And I am sure that my sister has felt the burden of having to always take care of everything and take on more responsibilities in the family. And while I try to be aware of this with our own children, the reality is, we still say to Dahvi, you're the older one and should be more responsible. It's a very difficult cycle to break and hence leads to the pressure of her or any older child feeling the need to be perfect or more perfect than the other child.

The chain is broken when we mature through our life and take on the responsibilities jointly while also releasing feelings of envy or resentment.

A storyteller in Jerusalem shared a tale of the Jews in a small town in Poland. There the Jews were poor and not all were very learned. They were forced to compete with one another to make a living yet there was one man in town who was admired for his wealth, learning, and piety.

One day, a dozen community leaders were astonished and pleased to receive an invitation to his home: "You are invited to Reb Isaac's home next Tuesday evening at six o'clock for a dinner worthy of Paradise." They could hardly wait for dinner that next Tuesday! A meal worthy of Paradise! They all showed up promptly at six o'clock and were ushered into the dining room, where the table was elegantly set with dishes, glasses, and silver. When they were seated, a servant brought Reb Isaac a roll over which he recited the traditional blessing. The servant then set a bowl of soup before him, but none for the guests. Reb Isaac began to eat his soup, commenting, "Mmm, this is such good soup. I don't remember when I've had such tasty soup." The guests were puzzled; why weren't they being served as well? When Reb Isaac finished his soup, he motioned to his servant, who cleared the dish and returned a moment later with a plate of meat and vegetables for the host, and again nothing for the guests. Reb Isaac continued eating, saying, "Oh, this is so good. You have no idea what you're missing. This is so tasty, I love it." Finally, one of the guests blurted out, "Reb Isaac, I don't understand. Have you brought us here to mock us? We were invited for a dinner worthy of Paradise, but you alone get the meal and we only get to watch you enjoy it. Why are you doing this to us?" Reb Isaac smiled. "A meal worthy of Paradise indeed. What did you think it would be? Is Paradise a famous restaurant? Is Paradise somewhere one wants to go for its fine food and wine? No, Paradise is a place where people love each other enough to take pleasure in another person's happiness. Paradise is any place where you can see your neighbor being successful and not envy him for it. Paradise is a place where people know that the truly important things in life are present in such abundance that there is plenty for everyone; we don't have to snatch them away from our neighbor. And now, if we have all learned that lesson, I'll have your dinner brought to you."

The Jews of this small town had to learn to not be envious of what others had, rather, they needed to know that the most important action was to love one another and take pleasure in each other's success and that this love would not deplete their own success or their own love. It is the realization that love is like a muscle that needs to be exercised so that the stronger it becomes, the more it can be used and shared. We tell our children that we do not love one more child over the other, that we love each child equally and that we are proud of who they are as individuals. We do not expect someone to be just like another. We expect them to bring the gifts of who they are and share those gifts with the world and make it a better place for all of us.

The Hebrew word, *tamim*, might be translated as perfect. However, when we consider the sacrifices that were made on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem, *tamim*, refers to the unblemished offering. The Red Heifer is expected to be without blemish but the person who brings the offering seeking to be forgiven is not without blemish. Our rabbis teach us that the perfect Red Heifer is offered as a burnt offering, being completely consumed by fire on the altar, as a sign that perfection is not something that has a place on this earth but rather in heaven.

Today, we stand before God, we stand before our family and friends, and we stand before ourselves not being perfect and we ask that we be completely accepted – faults and virtues. Today, we listen for the message of our being accepted for who we are. We seek wholeness by knowing that we do not need to pretend to be perfect and that we should not be afraid of being rejected when we are not.

Back to the Garden of Eden: would we rather that Adam and Eve not have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge? Would we have been content just sitting in the Garden eating all the food that grew around us? Would we rather not experience the pain and the joy of raising our children? Would we want to spend our days in complete contentedness – never crying when someone died or laughing when someone gave us great joy? Sure, we might consider it for a moment, but in full reflection we would never give up any of the emotions we share in our world and throughout our lives.

As our lives lay open on this day, may we always remember and embrace that we are not perfect nor are we expected to be. We have made mistakes and we will continue to make them. But may we always know and be blessed by the knowledge that we are human and even through our faults we are still loved, by our family, our friends, ourselves and God.

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