

Rosh Hashanah Family Service Sermon 5784
Redefining Strength
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Every morning on our way to school at 7:30am, my family engages in one of the most important conversations we will have throughout the day—what music should we listen to during our morning commute? In our car, the daily debate typically takes us from any number of Disney princess soundtracks to *Hamilton*, before returning to a crowd favorite, the *Encanto* soundtrack.

And, as I listened to Lin Manuel Miranda’s genius for the hundredth something time, the words of “Surface Pressure,” a song from Mirabel’s eldest sister, Luisa, felt like an appropriate anthem for these Days of Awe.

For many of us, our circumstances seem eerily similar to that of Luisa, who, as the “strong” sister begins her song by confidently expressing that, “I’m the strong one, I’m not nervous, I’m as tough as the crust of the earth is.” However, soon enough, Luisa reveals the truth of her experience:

“It’s pressure like a drip drip drip, that will never stop, whoa... Who am I if I don’t have what it takes? No cracks, no breaks, no mistakes, no pressure.”

How many of us as parents feel the mounting pressure of ensuring that our kids are doing all the “right” activities...or the pressure of schlepping every day all day, to sports and family events – even ones we enjoy – all while making sure our families are fed and our houses are in order? The pressure of succeeding at work while also trying to be there for our partners, our aging parents, and our children?

How many of our students feel the pressure of expectations—of getting into the “right” school...or getting into the “right” friend group...or proving yourselves – at sports, in class, with friends, maybe even at home?

I’m not suggesting that we shouldn’t work hard. Putting our minds toward a goal and pursuing it, especially something challenging, stretches us and builds our muscles of resilience and determination.

I’ve heard over and over the feeling of accomplishment and sense of pride our students experience upon becoming B’nai Mitzvah – after learning for nearly a year. Or the feeling of getting to the top of the mountain after an arduous hike or making it to the championship game after a season of practice. But in this New Year we can – and for so many of us, must – redefine strength and success in a way that enables us to free ourselves from the devastating pressure of expectations...to be open and honest about who we are and what we need...to be vulnerable.

Researcher and author Brene Brown famously teaches that “vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage.” And at its core, that’s what courage is – the bravery to share what’s inside our *couer*, the Latin for ‘heart,’ and to tell the story of who we really are with our whole heart.¹

¹ Brené Brown, “[The Power of Vulnerability](#),” *TED*, June 2010.

There is a story I shared a few years ago about the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of a movement in Judaism called Hasidism.

He would hold a competition each year to select the very best shofar blower to assist him on Rosh Hashanah. Picture a sort of Ashkenazi Jewish version of American Idol (I am assuming that was a millennial reference here). Now, if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar with gusto, dazzling the likes of anyone who came to pray, but you also had to learn an array of prayers that are said before you blow the shofar. All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these prayers for months...some for years! They were quite difficult and complex.

When one such man came to audition before the Ba'al Shem Tov, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him enough for this moment—to stand before one of the great rabbis and perform this important ritual act. And...he choked. His mind froze, he couldn't remember the prayers he had been practicing for years. He just stood before the Ba'al Shem Tov in utter silence, and then, when he realized how clearly he had failed this great test, his heart broke, his body heaved, and he just wept. PAUSE

“All right...you're hired,” the Ba'al Shem Tov said.²

You see, by rewarding the shofar blower's expression of vulnerability, the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches that we achieve our greatest successes not by being strong enough to silently endure the mounting pressure of responsibilities and expectations, but by being strong enough to look inside and recognize when we've reached our limits.

In Pirkei Avot, the chapters of our ancestors, the sages ask, “*Eizehu gibor?* Who is strong?” Their answer, “*Hakoveish yitzro,*” often translated as “The one who conquers their inclination.”³ However, the word *koveish*, which refers to conquering, can also mean “to engage,” while the word *yetzer*, which refers to inclination, also refers to the act of creation. Thus, we may also translate this teaching as, “**Who is strong? The one who engages in self-creation.**”

This suggests that our strength doesn't lie in our physical prowess, or in what we accomplish for others or how we measure up to our peers. Our strength lies in our ability to tune in to what's happening inside us and to be willing to share the real, honest, messy parts of ourselves with those we love and trust the most. Because only then we can become the ones who engage in self-creation by sharing our whole selves, not just the curated version, with the world.

In fact, *this* is the essential work of this holiday season, the act of *t'shuvah*, of re-creating ourselves by returning to the people we were always meant to be. It's not easy. It requires soul-searching. It requires work. And, as our sages teach, it requires strength.

But, as we find in *Encanto*, Luisa only achieves true strength once she finally allows herself to look beneath the surface... to look past the donkeys she carries or the buildings she straightens to discover the very real human being who lies within, and to ask for the help she needs to nurture and grow her humanity. And in so doing, she returns not only to herself, but to her family as well.

² Lew, Alan, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 98-99.

³ Pirkei Avot 4:1.

May this be the blessing we give ourselves and our families in this New Year, one that frees us to be our whole selves, both under the surface and above it. Shanah Tovah.