

Empowered Vulnerability  
Sermon for Yom Kippur 5785  
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

A couple of weeks after October 7, a woman showed up to Temple. She was not a member, had never been to Temple Beth El before, and asked as she approached the building whether she could come in for the Shabbat service that was about to begin. “Of course,” the folks from our team told her. “Why would you think otherwise?” “Well,” she said, “I just came from a different synagogue, and they didn’t let me in.” She explained that she was in town visiting her dad as he was rapidly approaching the end of his life. Having spent the last several days at his bedside, she wanted to do something for herself- she wanted to go to temple and say his name for *Mi Shebeirach*, to pray that his final days would bring him comfort and peace. But, the other synagogue told her, since she wasn’t a member, and wasn’t on the list of guests who had contacted them in advance, they would not let her in. Fearful of the threat of our nations’ rising antisemitism, they put up a wall around their congregation. So when she walked up to our building and was welcomed, the relief of her soul was written all over her face. When I heard this story I was proud of who we are as a congregation, but gutted by what it says about who we might be as a people.

As I’m sure those of you who have come to the synagogue recently know, we take security seriously, and we owe a debt of gratitude to our team members who spend their time making sure we are safe. They do all they can to ensure that our synagogue can be a place where bonds of love are generated by exceptional Jewish experiences. What makes their work all the more incredible is that they do it at a time when so many in our community feel the need to wall ourselves off, fearful that their community will be the next one to be victimized by hatred or violence. Synagogues and other Jewish institutions have had to make challenging decisions about where to put walls and fences and armed guards, when to welcome folks and when to turn them away. Undergirding all of those decisions, I want to suggest, there lies a difficult but straightforward question we have to ask: are we vulnerable, or are we victims? Do we see ourselves as a vulnerable group, ready to confront the threats around us while continuing unabated to bring the joy of Torah and tradition into the world, or are we so fearful of being the next group of victims that we would

sacrifice the beauty of Am Yisrael – our sense of peoplehood and all that it stands for – in order to protect it?

Vulnerability or victimhood? Both recognize that in our personal lives and as a people we will at times be threatened. Personally, we might be threatened by a job loss, the breakdown of a relationship, or a devastating diagnosis. Just last week, Sophie Kinsella, author of the bestseller *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, gave an in-depth interview sharing her story of battling brain cancer. She may have felt the twinge of victimhood when she said, “I couldn’t say the word ‘cancer’ for a long time,”<sup>1</sup> she said; the author of 33 novels was lost for words. The temptation to clam up, to turn into the concrete she said the radiation therapy made her feel like, was strong, and she knows that her glioblastoma is terminal. But, she refuses to become “the brain cancer patient in room 3,” casting herself as a victim of her illness. Instead, she has channeled her vulnerability into a new work, *The Burnout*.

Maybe Kinsella had read the work of noted social worker and researcher Brené Brown, who talks about embracing our vulnerability by saying, “If [we] own the story we get to write the ending.”<sup>2</sup> Sophie Kinsella is writing the next chapter of her story, while Brene Brown shows us how to live out the teachings of the psychologist Carl Jung, who wrote, “I am not what has happened to me. I am what I choose to become.”<sup>3</sup>

We live in a world where we as Jews are threatened, and for generations Jews have had good reason to think of ourselves as victims. Over the last two thousand years the Romans exiled us from the Land of Israel, put down the Bar Kochva Revolt, and tortured our rabbinic leaders. As we made our way across Europe and the Mediterranean, Christian kings and queens and Muslim caliphs could on a whim of religious supremacy or enraged by Blood Libels and claims of deicide take their anger out on the defenseless

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/03/books/what-does-it-feel-like-sophie-kinsella.html>

<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, New York: Avery, 2016, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Jews, creating what some scholars have called the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history,” a story that featured above all else, tears. We have had political enemies fighting us for land and resources, been attacked on religious grounds for our beliefs and our practices, and been persecuted for our ethnic identities and cultural expressions. We still are today. In response to those external threats, we, each of us individually, and we, our people collectively, have a choice. Will we see them through the lens of victimhood, that we are powerless to alleviate the pain we are experiencing or the threats that we feel, or can we confront them head on through the lens of our vulnerability, as something we know we have the power, the ability, the desire, and the passionate commitment to ourselves to overcome?

On Easter Sunday, 1903, in what is now Moldova, over 600 Jews were injured and 49 were murdered in the infamous Kishniev pogroms at the hands of the Russian Empire. This was not the first pogrom, nor the last. But it happened at a time when Jewish attitudes were starting to change, and even accelerated that development. In response, Theodore Herzl renewed his calls for a Jewish State [albeit in Uganda]. In the newly resurrected Hebrew language, Haim Nachman Bialiek penned “In the City of Slaughter,”<sup>4</sup> a poem that captured the pogrom in all of its brutality, of children murdered, women defiled, and trees spattered with blood.

And thou wilt come, with those of thine own breed,  
Into the synagogue, and on a day of fasting,  
To hear the cry of their agony,  
Their weeping everlasting.  
Thy skin will grow cold, the hair on thy skin stand up,  
And thou wilt be by fear and trembling tossed;  
Thus groans a people which is lost.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation from <https://www.thejewishstar.com/stories/in-the-city-of-slaughter-1904,22912>

The agony of victimhood is palpable, imagining a community gathering on a fast day like today overwhelmed in tears. But to close the poem, he implored that they turn the page on the Jewish story:

Speak to them, bid them rage!

Let them against me raise the outraged hand,

Let them demand!

Demand the retribution for the shamed

Of all the centuries and every age!

Bialiek, fed up with Jews seeing themselves as victims, challenged the Jewish people to respond differently to the threats we faced. He called up his contemporaries to elevate themselves out of a state of victimhood, telling the Jewish people to harness our agency to confront our threats head-on, and to stand up for ourselves as a people.

Over the past hundred years, inspired by words like Bialiek's our people have found their strength to write our own stories, even when facing mortal danger. We valorize the ghetto uprisings as those who would not go like sheep to the slaughter. We glorify the State of Israel as the symbol of our people's ability to fend for and defend ourselves. We celebrate our social and political influence here in the US as the marshaling of our collective power. In none of those moments were we immunized from peril. But in each moment, rather than cower in shame, we empowered ourselves to strive find a way forward and become who we wanted to be. In those moments, we took our vulnerability and turned it into our power, our strength. That vulnerability, says Brené Brown, is "the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, [and] of love."<sup>5</sup>

And we certainly know what it's like to feel threatened. The steady rise in antisemitism, insecurity for Jews on college campuses, and the continued, multi-front war that Israel is waging are only a few

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)

examples. It was the fear of those threats that led that other congregation last year to turn away someone who needed their spiritual comfort in her time of great need. But the way for us to thrive, during and after these challenging moments, is to lean into our sense of vulnerability and extract from it the creativity, or the community cohesion, or the love that reminds us what we are fighting for.

Like we have done since October 7. That day was a day when Israelis and Jews around the world were victimized by another pogrom, this one on our own soil. But we refused to dwell in that space. The creative way we expressed our pain and our grief, hanging posters in cities around the world of our missing brethren, setting Shabbat tables with empty chairs, y composing music and poetry, by gathering like our community did on October 8 to hold one another's neshamas were our way to write the next chapter of a story we didn't start. It was the beginning of our path out of victimhood and into the power of our vulnerability, a path we are still on 369 days later.

Here on our shores we are facing another threat: a rise in Christian nationalism. Not a rise in Christianity, but a significant increase in those who believe that our country ought to privilege Christians and Christianity.<sup>6</sup> For 235 years, we as American Jews have celebrated the protections and freedoms that the First Amendment guarantees us, and so it should frighten us to know that as many as 45 percent of Americans,<sup>7</sup> and a third of Floridians, believe that their religious beliefs should be expressed in law.<sup>8</sup> We have seen it in laws that persecute the LGBTQ+ community, especially children and teens, that prevent teachers and school children from talking openly about their families and that ban books that normalize and celebrate queer relationships. These policies are public manifestations of individuals' private religious beliefs. Part of the beauty of this country has been how we have been able to make the space for everyone to have their own religion, while not making anyone's religious beliefs all of our realities. In that moment of

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Bradley Onishi on Fresh Air, Feb 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/29/1234843874/tracing-the-rise-of-christian-nationalism-from-trump-to-the-ala-supreme-court>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/45-of-americans-say-u-s-should-be-a-christian-nation/>

<sup>888</sup> <https://www.ppri.org/research/support-for-christian-nationalism-in-all-50-states/>

vulnerability, our synagogue chose to see it as an opportunity to tap into our educational creativity as a *Beit Midrash*, a house of learning, to put those same books prominently on our shelves, to pay special care and attention to our LGBTQ+ teens, and to advocate for changes in the law.

As a small religious minority, we are vulnerable in this moment, even here in the US. That is why it has been so important to this congregation that we advocate for ourselves like we have in support of Amendment 4, which would restore reproductive freedom in Florida. Our tradition's teachings value both fetus and mother, but they prioritize the health and well-being of an expectant mother over the fetus she carries. In the Book of Exodus we read that when two men are quarreling and they accidentally cause a woman to lose her fetus, that woman's husband is entitled to monetary damages. Our tradition does not answer the moral question about abortion only through the lens of when life begins, in part because the rabbis don't agree on when that is. More importantly, the Talmud and the later rabbis each held the value of the life of the fetus in the balance with the livelihood and well-being of the mother, and consistently privilege the mother. Maimonides, in his discussion of the laws of murder and the preservation of life, considered a fetus that was endangering its mother a *rodef*, a pursuer of harm, and it is a mitzvah to prevent the *rodef* from doing its harm, so an abortion would be necessary.<sup>9</sup> In a more contemporary opinion, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, an Orthodox legal scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, permitted abortion in situations where the mother's psychological well-being was at risk,<sup>10</sup> as well as in situations when it was learned that medical abnormalities would lead the fetus to be born into a life of suffering.

Our Jewish moral framework *requires* abortion *access*, for the times when it is appropriate. Our Reform Jewish values amplify this with our commitment to gender equity and the consideration for the myriad ways in which abortion restrictions target women, an act of gender discrimination we ought not tolerate. As a father of three daughters and uncle to four nieces, I was proud when our Temple's Board of

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<sup>9</sup> Mishneh Torah, Laws of Murder and Preservation of Life, 1:9

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg Tzitz Eliezer, 13:102, 1975.

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Trustees' passed a resolution encouraging us to Vote Yes on Amendment 4, a decision they did not take lightly. As a synagogue and a non-profit organization, we do not engage in partisan politics. We don't endorse candidates or parties- not even members of our congregation when they themselves are running! But we can and should advocate for our values and our religious liberties, and right now, the law in Florida infringes on both. The laws passed by the Florida Legislature have usurped our freedom to answer the moral questions surrounding abortion care through the lens of our own religious teachings, and instead subjugates us to the beliefs of others.

In this moment, as our religious liberties are in peril, we cannot throw up our hands and say "well, there's nothing we can do," sealing our fate as victims to religious tyranny. Instead, we must do what we can to protect ourselves, and for our own sakes not stand idly by. If a church is going to put up Vote No on 4 signs around town, and tells us that our beliefs should not be protected, we have to respond with our own signs, and our own town hall events, and our own postcards, and our own news coverage, empowered by the opportunities these moments of vulnerability present. That is how, in a world that presents us with so much challenge, we can find ways to express our values meaningfully and creatively.

We will always live with threats around us. But when we protect ourselves is by tapping into the core of who we are, and remind ourselves and then everyone around us why we matter, we spread the warmth and brightness of the light unto the nations that our tradition inspires us to be. If the core victimhood is giving ourselves over to the threat, the essence of embracing our vulnerability is reminding ourselves of our essential goodness and worth- as individuals and as a people- and the unique gift we present to the world. So, when we are threatened, rather than turn into ourselves, we can empower ourselves by using our resources to share our Torah and tradition with the world.

As this Yom Kippur begins this evening, we know that are vulnerable. Yom Kippur challenges us to contemplate the vulnerability of our mortality. If we learn into the power that affords us, we can use it to ask ourselves What do I want this year to be, what do want this life to be, what do I want my legacy to be?

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We can be inspired by our Torah which on this day will inspire us to Choose Life and Blessing for ourselves and our family, and to elevate us a a people of holiness. Our prayers will challenge us to bring repair and justice into the world, that we may be worthy of inscription and sealing into the book of life and blessing.

G'mar chatima tova, may we all be so inscribed and sealed.