

Living Authentic Lives

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It is High Holiday time and for even the most secular of Jews the Jewish gene kicks in and we look for ways to come together. This urge is very human and for Jews it is a more than 3,000 year old tradition. We did not always do the same things when we came together and still don't, but coming together has survived the millennia and so have we. Thus, when someone asks me what has contributed to the endurance of the Jewish people, I typically answer, "our adaptability!"

My approach to the topic today is based on that understanding, that Jewish continuity relies on Judaism changing to fit the needs of the Jews in their time. Humanistic Judaism is well positioned to be an important and significant influence in Judaism today and tomorrow. Let me tell you how.

As Humanistic Jews we value and appreciate Jewish culture and identity and believe that we live our lives independent of a personal intervening supernatural presence and we insist on saying what we believe and believing what we say. These two ideas form the core of Humanistic Jewish philosophy. There are other reasons to be a Humanistic Jew, but for me being able to live authentically – a life of integrity was and is the most compelling reason. And the notion of authenticity encompasses honesty, truth, intellectual consistency, self-responsibility and a vibrant connection to one's Jewish identity.

Humanistic Judaism certainly provides a framework for an authentic life, but for me it only hints at what I think is one of the most difficult of human quests that is answering the question: "What brings meaning to our lives?" If we all stop for a moment, take a deep breath and allow ourselves to be fully present now in this moment; if we free ourselves of all the noise in our heads and open ourselves up to what we truly want in life, "What would we say?"

As Humanistic Jews we know that the answer is found in the human condition, in this world and that we are responsible for creating meaning and providing purpose. We do so through our human relationships and connections – authentic connections with our families, friends, and community.

Why have I chosen to speak about authenticity on Yom Kippur? What does it have to do with Judaism? And here's the answer: If Judaism is going to survive, then it must be relevant. Humanistic Judaism with its secular outlook, welcoming inclusivity, and interest in Jewish culture may be in the best position to provide that relevancy. However, if we are going to truly and deeply touch the hearts (as well as the minds) of Jews today, Humanistic Judaism needs to be authentic and vulnerable. It is the vulnerability that creates the emotional honesty and intensity that inspires and moves us and allows us to create these significant connections.

Something very powerful happened to me on my way to Chicago the day before Mother's Day. As I was driving, I was listening to NPR and all of a sudden I am listening to Ted Talks on NPR and a woman named Brené Brown is speaking and I am captivated, albeit still driving. I reach frantically into my purse and pull out a pen, grab the closest piece of paper I can find (my Mother's Day card from my husband) and I start writing. Even as I write, I realize this woman is speaking to ME, she is saying out loud everything I believe to be true, psychologically and emotionally. It was like listening to Sherwin Wine for the first time, when I found in a brief moment of explanation my Jewish and intellectual home of more than four decades. In listening to Brown speak I began to formulate the question I address today. How does or can Humanistic Judaism help us to create authentically meaningful lives?

Rabbi Sherwin Wine, for those of you who never met him, founded Humanistic Judaism in 1963, in Detroit. Yes, Detroit is known for something more than cars. It is the birth place and home of Humanistic Judaism. Toward the latter part of his career, Wine began speaking more and more about living a "Life of Courage."

For Wine, there were a very specific set of ideas that accompanied that descriptor. The Life of Courage includes these concepts: 1) facing the reality of living in an uncaring universe, 2) creating a purposeful life of connection and accepting responsibility in this world, 3) discovering truth by using the power of reason and scientific inquiry, 4) relying on empirical methodology, and 5) considering the consequences of your actions as the path to ethical behavior. Sherwin spoke about integrity between belief, words and behavior. One of the most significant life lessons I learned from him was that "We are our behavior." This consistency of thought, belief and behavior is a central notion of the "Life of Courage." According to Wine, the reward for following this path is "dignity."

Humanistic Judaism is powerful in two very significant ways: 1) It enables modern Jews to connect, identify and practice Judaism and 2) It enables modern Jews to embrace the philosophy of Humanism to which most Jews identify. Rabbi Wine always mentioned passion and the emotional life as being part of the "Life of Courage," yet I do not believe that Humanistic Judaism has effectively integrated that aspect of human experience into its philosophy and practice.

The question this raises is, "How do we move from intellectual integrity to emotional authenticity and connection?" This is the missing link in our approach. It was definitely the missing link, for me, until I heard Brené Brown speak. She addressed the notion of vulnerability and shame and how grappling with those two concepts leads the way to creativity, innovation and change, thus connection. Brené Brown's "Ted Talk" received more than 10 million hits – yes, 10 million. Apparently she is speaking to more than me. After introducing her ideas through her Ted Talk, she was flooded with speaking invitations. Everyone wanted to hear her thoughts on creativity, innovation, change and connection, yet she was repeatedly asked to do so without speaking about vulnerability and shame. You may have already surmised that they are inextricably linked.

In my role with the Society for Humanistic Judaism and as faculty for the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism Rabbinic Seminary, I have learned some very interesting notions

about individuals and groups and the relationship between them. The relationship is mirrored in biology. Organisms in nature are part of an overall system. Organisms naturally seek the freedom to be self-determined and unique, while at the same time they seek out others for connection.

This is also true for humans. The interplay between individual needs and the desire for connection contain an inherent paradox that ultimately leads to moments of conflict where the needs of the individual and the needs of the group do not coincide. Understanding that we are always a part of a system where our individual needs inevitably conflict with the often different needs of the groups to which we belong, helps us to bridge the gap between intellectual integrity and emotional authenticity and connection. And that gap leads to disconnection.

That brings us back to Brené Brown. Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame and written a number of books on the topic, including the one that I am referencing in this presentation, entitled “Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love and Lead.” Even without the credentials, I would see value in her work. However, I feel less vulnerable knowing that I can tell you how well qualified she is.

Brown asserts, “Connection is why we’re here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering.” Connection requires vulnerability. I will give some of us a moment right now to listen to our inner voice tell us why what I just said about vulnerability is not right, no way, no how. Lay out your arguments for how you can be connected or innovative and not be vulnerable.

Now that you have done that I will reaffirm Brown’s claim that “there is no ‘get out of vulnerability free’ card.” There is no way to avoid uncertainty, risk, emotional exposure and the fear and anxiety that accompany them. And once we can internalize that reality we face the next difficult lesson – that achieving vulnerability is not an easy task and it is consistently hijacked by shame.

Brown’s definition of shame is the belief that we are not enough, that we are not worthy of love and belonging. Shame is the “fear of disconnection,” she says. More specifically, “shame is the intensely painful feeling of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” This is her conclusion after six years of researching shame. Now this is not the same as the thought that “what I did was stupid.” It is the thought that “not only am I stupid,” but that “my stupidity renders me unworthy.”

She tells us a few more things about shame just in case we feel that shame has nothing to do with us: 1) Shame is universal. The only people who do not experience shame lack the capacity for empathy and human connection. So our choice is to embrace our shame or admit that we are sociopaths. 2) No one likes to talk about shame and the less we talk about shame the more control it has over our lives. There is simply no way out of this IF what we really want out of life is meaningful and authentic human connection. I will remind you that I am maintaining that this is one of the most significant factors holding back the growth of Humanistic Judaism.

So what do we do? We develop shame resilience. Shame resilience is the ability to be authentic when we are experiencing shame without sacrificing our values and to emerge from the shame experience with more courage, compassion and connection to empathy, which is the real antidote to shame. Brown suggests four elements of shame resilience that lead to empathy. They are: 1) Recognizing shame and understanding its triggers, 2) Practicing critical awareness, 3) Reaching out or Becoming vulnerable and 4) Speaking shame.

The up-side to all of Brown's research and talk about shame and vulnerability is that during her research she discovered some people who were more resilient to shame than others. In further exploration with them, she discovered that these people have a stronger belief in their worthiness. Brown called these individuals "wholehearted."

She has developed 10 guideposts for "wholehearted" living and this is it in a nut shell. We only have to achieve these 10 things. They are:

1. Cultivating Authenticity: Letting Go of What People Think
2. Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism
3. Cultivating a Resilient Spirit: Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness
4. Cultivating Gratitude and Joy: Letting Go of Scarcity and Fear
5. Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting Go of the Need for Certainty
6. Cultivating Creativity: Letting Go of Comparison
7. Cultivating Play and Rest: Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self-Worth
8. Cultivating Calm and Stillness: Letting Go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle
9. Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting Go of Self-Doubt and "Supposed To."
10. Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance: Letting Go of Being Cool and "Always in Control."

When I look at this list I see that I have made some progress on some and less progress on most. Brown herself admitted that when she finished the research, she was about two for ten. In spite of my honestly assessed progress, I am inspired, not depressed. These guideposts are real and will improve my life. I am convinced of this!

I am also convinced that this can transform aspects of Humanistic Judaism that are significantly lacking, in spite of the human-centered and human-focused approach that is fundamental to Humanism. If Sherwin Wine's "Life of Courage" is expanded to include "Wholehearted Living," I feel strongly that we will attract individuals who have not been drawn to us or retain individuals who have not been compelled to stay with us. I cannot think of a more profoundly meaningful and purposeful way to live out my life. And it will be that much more meaningful to have others join me in this very human quest of the spirit. Shana Tova!