

God Loves You Anyway<sup>1</sup>  
Yom Kippur 5770  
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Temple Israel – Minneapolis, MN  
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In a photo album from my mother's childhood, there is a series of four pictures. Each was taken by one of the members of her family, depicting the other three. When the pictures were taken, my mom was about six years old and my Aunt Liz was about nine. My Grandpa Jerry took the first picture. In it, my grandmother, my aunt and my mom are the focus of the picture, perfectly centered, with little background. The second, taken by my Grandma Gert, predominantly features my grandfather and his daughters, but the three of them are a little off center. My Aunt Liz's attempt clearly showcases the other three members of her family, but was taken from a noticeably lower height. Finally, the photograph taken by my mother highlights the background, placing my grandparents and my aunt in the lower corner of the picture.

Chances are, if these photographs had been taken with today's technology, they wouldn't exist. How many times have you taken a picture of someone only to have them look at the screen of your digital camera followed by a shout of, "Delete that!" We are quick to get rid of pictures that we deem imperfect. All too easily, digital technology allows us to scrap our mistakes without second thought: the lighting isn't quite right, people are out of focus, grandma isn't smiling, mom's eyes are half closed, our little brother's smile isn't 'real.' Today's digital technology allows us to dispose immediately of the photos that we decide aren't exactly what we would have wanted. We delete pictures that, at first glance, are mishaps, but on rare

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Kushner, How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996, bumper sticker quoted on p. 53.

occasions “we appreciate only later as accidental masterpieces,”<sup>2</sup> like the series of four pictures of my mother’s family that capture each of them quite perfectly at that moment in time.

After sixty years of being a part of the photography world, Polaroid stopped making film for its instant cameras this year. In losing Polaroid, we have not lost the instant gratification of seeing our pictures moments after the shutter clicks. Digital cameras still provide that pleasure. We’ve retained the miracle of photography – capturing a moment – while delivering it instantly. But we have lost some of the magic of conventional photography. We’ve lost the ability to look back on something years later that we once thought was imperfect and find the hidden beauty in it. Now, don’t get me wrong. Polaroid itself wasn’t perfect. Their developers leaked. You couldn’t make copies of the pictures since you didn’t have negatives. And they curled and faded over time. Through their imperfectability though, Polaroids reminded us of our humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Comedian Steven Wright says, “In school they told me, ‘Practice makes perfect,’ and then they told me ‘Nobody’s perfect.’ So then I stopped practicing.”<sup>4</sup> All too often we strive for perfection. We are afraid of being judged and seen as imperfect. We lead ourselves to think that imperfection means unacceptable and think less of ourselves when we do something wrong. We need to remind ourselves that we are enough. We are human and “being human is such a complicated challenge that all of us will make mistakes in the process of learning how to do it right.”<sup>5</sup> The mistakes we make are not a measure of our worth, but rather experiences from which we can learn. We could all afford to repeat to ourselves what Scott Fried teaches our teens: I value my life. And I value my mistakes. Even though I make mistakes, I am enough.

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<sup>2</sup> Kimmelman, Michael, “The Polaroid: Imperfect, Yet Magical,” The New York Times, December 28, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Kimmelman.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Wright, I Still Have a Pony. Comedy Central Records, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Kushner, p. 7.

Unfortunately, our teens know all too well the pressure to try to be perfect. Adolescence is the only period in our lives when we are expected to do *everything* well.<sup>6</sup> During my junior year of high school one of my favorite classes was Physics, so much so that I decided I wanted to be a physicist. During the summer between my junior and senior years, I went on a family trip to look at colleges and eliminated schools based upon the quality of their physics programs. And when summer was over, I began Physics II. I was so excited. Then, reality set in. You don't have to guess... I didn't become a physicist. Over the course of the year, I was in my physics teacher, Fred Mina's room many days after school. I was begging for extra credit and failing tests left and right. And I mean *failing*. By the end of the year, taking into account my coursework, tests and quizzes, I had earned a 24. Mr. Mina knew that I just wasn't cut out for physics. But he also knew that I had tried my hardest; I just wasn't ever going to be a physicist. Mr. Mina gave me a 74, a solid C, for the year.

I could have felt guilty for not doing better; however, Mr. Mina helped me understand that it wasn't that I had done something wrong. I just wasn't adept at physics. We often make ourselves feel guilty for things over which we have no control. Guilt is really about feeling bad for things that we have or have not done. It has nothing to do with aspects of who we are that are beyond our limitations. Those imperfections are just what make each of us unique.

We lead ourselves to believe that Yom Kippur is about feeling bad, that fasting is supposed to be uncomfortable, punishing us for the mistakes we have made over the past year. That's not the idea. Yom Kippur is about evaluating our actions and inactions over the past year and pledging to do better. Our fasting is supposed to inspire us to focus on reflection and self-

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy Mogel, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children. New York: Penguin compass, 2001.

evaluation. Hopefully, we've made up for wrongs committed against others and today we are here to take care of the work of repentance with God.

But we are "in serious denial about the nature of the Deity with whom we are in relationship."<sup>7</sup> We often gloss over difficult Torah texts painting a picture of a God who is perfect. But there are plenty of Torah passages that depict a different image of God, an imperfect image of God. If we are created in the image of God, what does that say about us? We often talk about ourselves being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and think that that is only speaking of God's good qualities. But God is imperfect. "Being modeled after God reflects both what is positive and negative about us."<sup>8</sup> We often retain a child's relationship with God, the way that a child believes that his parents know everything. As we mature from childhood, we see the imperfections in our parents, teachers, and those whom we admire. These imperfections don't make us think less of them. Rather, seeing these imperfections makes those people human and makes us feel better about our imperfections. We often don't allow ourselves this growth in our relationship with God.

By recognizing God's imperfections, we begin to redefine our relationship with God. God, now, can learn from us, too. This is part of what it means to be in a covenantal relationship with God. We succeed in getting God to change by changing ourselves. When we accept our imperfections, God will come to accept them, as well. This is our task on Yom Kippur.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy speaks of our shortcomings, how collectively and individually we have failed. But we don't need to be reminded of that. We know that we have failed and we come to services on Yom Kippur seeking a fresh start.<sup>9</sup> We are not seeking perfection, just the chance to do better this time around. We don't have to be *the* best. We just have to do our own

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<sup>7</sup> Mogel, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Mogel, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kushner, p. 6.

best. We are only here to overcome our own personal challenges, to outperform ourselves, no one else. Even on Yom Kippur it is acceptable to be imperfect.

We often criticize ourselves for not being able to do something that is beyond our limitations. “A problem can be fixed, but a true limitation requires adjustment of expectations and acceptance of an imperfect self.”<sup>10</sup> We don’t live in Lake Wobegon, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” When we set unreasonable expectations for ourselves, we set ourselves up for failure. “The illusion that we can control events if we do everything right, that we can make people love us if we do things right, and that we can guarantee happy endings by deserving them is an illusion, and a very destructive one.”<sup>11</sup> We are not and will never be perfect. Accepting this is not giving in. Instead, it is an accomplishment. We are human and that means that we won’t always get it right. People will think more of us, not less of us, when they see that we are imperfect.<sup>12</sup> And God will think more of us, too.

“God does not stop loving us every time we do something wrong, and neither should we stop loving ourselves and each other for being less than perfect.”<sup>13</sup> God does not come to us with excessive demands. God doesn’t expect us to do more than we are capable of doing. In Pirke Avot, Rabbi Tarfon reminds us that it is not our responsibility to do all of the work, but at the same time we do not have the luxury of not taking part in it. We have to do something, but only as much as we can. What God does expect is that we will make mistakes and we will learn from them. In the beginning of our narrative, God stayed close, just like a parent closely watches over a newborn. In the Garden of Eden we were almost never alone. Throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> Mogel, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Kushner, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Kushner, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Kushner, p. 4.

Bible, God kept interceding. As time went on, God withdrew and left us more room, just as parents of teenagers begin to step back and give more freedom. In that space, we made mistakes. All that God expects is that in making those mistakes, we learn from them and do better the next time.<sup>14</sup> That is the essence of true repentance. When we are faced with a similar situation, not making the same mistake again. We are struggling with good and evil and God knows this.

Local author Jodi Hills offers this prayer:

I wish for you an imperfect life—  
and all the wonder that life can bring...  
the wealth that comes from knowing loss,  
the tears that find their way to laughter,  
the joy that grows after the rain,  
and the love, felt deepest,  
by those who have been carved by pain.  
I hope that you can value this imperfection,  
hold on to it,  
so it gives you such comfort  
that you will dare embrace the beauty  
of all the imperfect lives that surround you,  
and then you will be perfectly free  
to step to the beat of your own imperfect heart,  
and you will have truly lived.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mogel, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Jodi Hills, *An Imperfect Life*. Minneapolis: Tristan Publishing, Inc., 2008.

Our tradition teaches us that Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our deaths. We began Kol Nidre standing before the empty Ark, the *Aron Kodesh*, with the *kodesh*, the holy Torah scrolls removed, leaving us just an *aron*, a casket. But when we hear the shofar blast at the end of Ne'ilah, we know that today was just a dress rehearsal, that we still have the chance to get life right. And getting it right isn't getting it perfect.

Help us God, as we look through the photographs in our memories of the past year, to see the opportunities for change and growth, but to acknowledge that some of those imperfections will mature into things of beauty in the future. Help us to know the difference between them. Help us God to know that even though nobody's perfect, we do still have to keep practicing. Help us God to see our imperfections and know that they, too, are a reflection of Your image in us. May you be sealed in the Book of Life for blessing and peace. *Shanah Tovah*.