

Becoming Your Whole Self
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Temple Israel – Minneapolis, MN
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Most of you know me as your rabbi. Some of you know that I spend my Wednesday evenings with our Confirmation students. Others of you know that four times a year, I hang out with a hundred or so NFTYites from across Minnesota and Wisconsin. Some of you are aware that when I go out to the movies, I often see them through a Jewish lens and bring the content back to my Reel Theology classes. And some of you might even think that I sleep in the choir loft. But how many of you know that I'm also a baker?

My father has always told me that my peanut butter cookies are the best, but it wasn't until this year that I had any proof. I always figured he had to say that, because he is my father. But it turns out, he's right. I know; I should have believed him. This summer, I decided to put myself out there. I entered my peanut butter cookies into the State Fair. I won a red ribbon. Given that no blue ribbon was awarded, I had the best peanut butter cookies in the State of Minnesota this year. There's more to me than being a rabbi. And I'm here to say that there's more to all of us. On the High Holy Days especially, but in fact all year, all that God demands of us is to be our whole selves. But I didn't just learn this from baking peanut butter cookies. I also learned it from a self-absorbed soloist, a cheerleader, and an outsider, all characters on *Glee*.

If you aren't familiar with *Glee*, let me tell you a little bit about the show. I only know about it because of the gentle nudging of my good friend Anna and of our Confirmation students last year. *Glee* is the story of a high school glee club, a show choir, that is off to a rocky start. Their former director has left, they have too few members to compete, and they are the underdogs of their high school. Along comes a new director, Mr. Schuester, the Spanish teacher,

who was member of the glee club himself when he was a student at their high school. He renames the club New Directions and so begins their quest for accolades at the national level.

Let's begin with the self-absorbed soloist, Rachel Berry. When we meet Rachel, she declares to us, "You might laugh because every time I sign my name I put a gold star after it, but it's a metaphor, and metaphors are important. My gold star's a metaphor for me being a star." As a sophomore, Rachel is concerned that high school is already slipping away from her and if she doesn't achieve stardom soon, she'll have nothing to show for it. When Mr. Schuester, the choir director, puts Artie – a student in a wheelchair – in the lead for "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat," Artie gets that Mr. Schuester is using irony to enhance their performance. But Rachel just declares, "There's nothing ironic about show choir." When she tells us that she won her first dance competition at three months of age, we realize that Rachel only sees herself as a success if she is in the limelight.

A few episodes later, Mr. Schuester tries to shake things up a bit by getting the students into different roles. He casts Tina, our outsider whom we'll explore later, in a solo, instead of Rachel. Rachel won't even consider the possibility that any other student could ever have a solo. She reminds Mr. Schuester and the rest of the glee club, "I thought I made it very clear that anything from *West Side Story* goes to me." In Rachel's world, there's only room for Rachel. Mr. Schuester doesn't give in though. He keeps Tina on the solo and explains to Rachel that everyone needs to think they're a star in order for the choir to succeed. Rachel gives up on the glee club and instead gets herself cast in the lead role of the school musical.

Ultimately, Rachel finds her way back to New Directions, but when they are preparing for their competition at Sectionals, Rachel seems to be back to her old self. She insists upon singing the ballad at sectionals, but Mercedes, another student in the glee club, says she is just as qualified. When Mercedes sings a commanding performance of "And I Am Telling You I'm

Not Going”, Rachel comes forward and says, “You're amazing, Mercedes, and you deserve it. I'm gonna hug you now.” Rachel finally demonstrates that she gets what it is to be part of a community. The glee club then discovers that their set list has been leaked to their opponents who have proceeded to sing all of their songs as Sectionals. Initially, Rachel insists that they will find another ballad for Mercedes, but the club agrees that Rachel should pinch hit and take the ballad. It's only when Rachel realizes there's more to her than being a self-absorbed soloist, when she makes room for others, that they finally respect her.

Now, let's move on to the cheerleader, Quinn Fabray. Quinn is the head cheerleader and when her boyfriend, football quarterback Finn, joins the glee club, Quinn fears that her status in the school will be compromised. She tells him, “We are aligned to be the most popular kids in this school in the next couple of years – prom king and queen, homecoming court royalty. I am not giving up those shiny crowns just so that you can express yourself.” Soon, Quinn joins the glee club as well, but not to showcase her talents. Instead, she's there to spy on her boyfriend. She suspects that Rachel is after her Finn. Coach Sylvester, the cheerleading coach and Mr. Schuester's arch rival, enlists Quinn and the other cheerleaders to be her spies in the glee club, a role Quinn is more than willing to take on.

The more that Quinn and the other cheerleaders in glee try to take down the club, the stronger it seems to get. When they convince Rachel to express concerns over Mr. Schuester's choreography skills only leading to a stronger glee club, Coach Sylvester calls Quinn a failure. But instead of becoming upset, Quinn thanks Coach Sylvester for teaching her a valuable life lesson: “When you really believe in yourself, you don't have to bring other people down.”

When Quinn gets pregnant, though, Coach Sylvester kicks her off the cheerleading team. As the school year progresses, Quinn misses being a cheerleader more and more. Initially, it seems as though the lesson she learned was only valuable as long as she was still in the popular

crowd. When it comes time for school photographs, Quinn realizes how much she misses her cheerleading uniform and how much it made her feel like she belonged. She says, "I might not look like the head cheerleader anymore, but I'm still her on the inside." Initially, Coach Sylvester will neither let Quinn be in the picture, nor hear of having her back on the team. But Quinn blackmails Coach Sylvester and not only gets herself a place on the team and in the cheerleading photographs in the yearbook, but also gets Coach Sylvester to give up one of the cheerleaders' six yearbook pages for glee club.

Ultimately, Quinn tells Coach Sylvester that she'd rather not be on the cheerleading team, after all. She would rather be a part of a team that is glad to have her, like the glee club, not one where she just appears to belong. Quinn understands that there is more to her than being the head cheerleader, that she really has to believe in herself and be involved with people who appreciate her for who she is, not for who she pretends to be.

Remember Tina, our outsider? Let's take a look at her story now. Tina Cohen-Chang is typically dressed in black clothing, often found in the back row of the choir, speaks with a stutter, and is highly critical of herself. When Mr. Schuester gives Tina a solo over Rachel, Tina criticizes herself and insists she's not perfect enough for a solo. Mr. Schuester points out that the more confident she is, the less Tina stutters. He tells her that she has to believe in herself. Still, Tina tries to give the solo back to Rachel, but Mr. Schuester won't let her.

Later in the season, Mr. Schuester requires the students to spend a few hours each day for a week in a wheelchair so they can better understand what Artie goes through. When Artie and Tina are racing in their wheelchairs, Tina points out that Artie is so much better at maneuvering his wheelchair because of his eight years of experience with it. Artie says that's his only advantage, but that his use of a wheelchair really isn't so different from Tina and her stutter. Tina kisses Artie and then confesses that she doesn't really have a stutter. Unlike Artie,

Tina has been faking her stutter since she was in 6th grade and didn't want to give a speech. She tells Artie she was really shy and having a stutter made other people think she was weird, so they left her alone. Tina tells Artie that once she joined glee club, she realized what she was missing by pushing people away. Tina comes to learn that she doesn't need to relegate herself to outsider status. If she has confidence in herself, she can be who she really is.

It's only when they realize that they are not only the self-absorbed soloist, only the cheerleader, only the outsider – that they are not only the stereotypes by which they've identified themselves and by which others identify them, that they become whole people.

Glee teaches us to be whole. This means putting our whole selves out there. To paraphrase Will Rogers, sometimes you have to go out on a limb because that's where the fruit is. It's okay to be the talented singer as long as we realize that there's no show unless we make room for others. We can be the head cheerleader *and* a member of the glee club, we just have to believe in ourselves. When we feel the need to put ourselves on the sidelines, we have to know that what we need first and foremost is confidence in ourselves. All God expects of us all year long, but especially on the High Holy Days, is to be our whole selves. God doesn't expect us to be something we are not. Neither should we.

Our tradition tells the story of a rabbi named Zusya who loved God with all his heart and soul, and who treated all God's creatures with respect and kindness. Rabbi Zusya studied Torah, kept Shabbat, visited the sick, and praised God for all the goodness in the world. Though he was not a rich man, Zusya gave generously to those in need. Students came from far and near, hoping to learn from this gentle and wise rabbi. Zusya often told his students, "Listen to the still, small voice inside you. It will tell you how you must live and what you must do."

Each day Rabbi Zusya's students came to the House of Study eager to learn what they could from him. One day, Zusya did not show up at the usual hour. His students waited all

morning and through the afternoon, but Zusya did not come. By evening his students realized that something terrible must have happened. So they all rushed to Zusya's house. The students knocked on the door. No one answered. They knocked more loudly and peered through the frost-covered windows. Finally, they heard Rabbi Zusya's weak voice welcome them in. The students entered Rabbi Zusya's house. In the far corner of the room they saw the old rabbi lying huddled in bed, too ill to get up and greet them.

"Rabbi Zusya!" his students cried. "What happened? How can we help you?"

"There is nothing you can do," answered Zusya. "I'm dying and I am very frightened."

"Why are you afraid?" the youngest student asked. "Didn't you teach us that all living things die?"

"Of course, every living thing must die some day," said the Rabbi.

The young student tried to comfort Rabbi Zusya saying, "Then why are you afraid? You have led such a good life. You have believed in God with a faith as strong as Abraham's. And you have followed the commandments as carefully as Moses."

"Thank you. But this is not why I am afraid," explained the rabbi. "If God should ask me why I did not act like Abraham, I can say that I was not Abraham. And if God asks me why I did not act like Moses, I can also say that I was not Moses." Then the rabbi said, "But if God should ask me to account for the times when I did not act like Zusya, what shall I say then?"

The students were silent, for they understood Zusya's final lesson: God expects us to be our whole selves.¹

In the trophy case at the *Glee* students' high school, there is a plaque depicting former glee club director Lillian Adler which reads, "By its very definition, Glee is about opening yourself up to joy." God only expects us to be ourselves, but God does expect us to be our

¹ Adapted from Partners with God by Gila Gevirtz, Behrman House.

whole selves. At one point, Mercedes tells Kurt that the whole point of the glee club is expressing what's really inside you. So go ahead, express what's really inside you. *Shanah tovah.*