

Yom Kippur – It's about failing – and our fear of failure. It's about our sense that we could have been better – but we were not; could have done more – but didn't. Yom Kippur is about making vows and promises – to God, to others, to ourselves – vows and promises from which we seek release because we cannot keep them all. No wonder this morning is so difficult for us – it's the morning we must come to terms with our own fallibility and that is not an easy thing to do.

Still, it is essential for us all. I know I am not alone in this terrible fear of failure. In truth, I see it everywhere around me. I see it in the serious-minded child who cannot eat, cannot sleep, cannot smile, or laugh or play. He feels under so much pressure to excel at school. I see it in the young husband and father who spend first thing in the morning till last thing at night at the office; he must make a name for himself, nothing can get in his way. I see it in the working wife and mother who runs to the office in the morning, speeds home to clean and cook dinner, and help the kids with their homework, then dashes off to evening meetings and appointments, all in a desperate race to be, to have, to do it all. And I see it in the young high school student who tries to take her life – suddenly through pills or razor blades or slowly through anorexic starvation – because she fears she would not be accepted into the right college, because she fears she will let her parents down, because she is terrified that, where it really matters, she just would not be able to “cut it.”

It's true. We are a success-oriented, success-worshipping society. Look at what we do, how we idolize the successful ones, how we love to hear about their rise to fame and glory. It is as if by ritually retelling the story of those who made it, we partake, in some small measure, of their remarkable success. We pray it will “rub off on us.” But, on the other side, we also love to hear about those who have stumbled and fallen along the way.

Look how we treat the failures. “Failures” – the ones who lost their jobs, gone bankrupt, missed that most important promotion, lost out to the competition. We treat them as pariahs. We shun them like the plague – because the truth is we fear them and their failures like a kind of disease that can be passed to us by too close contact. We don't associate with “Losers,” lest we be thought of as losers. We pride ourselves on our competence and try to pretend it could never happen to us.

In the meantime, we find that there are just not enough hours in the day to get everything done. We begin to go without food or sleep. When we finally lay

down in bed at night, we find ourselves agonizing over every possible contingency. Plagued by fears we would not be able to keep up, we find trivial things that go wrong intolerable. We lose our temper at the imperfections of spouse, children, friends, ourselves. We cannot concentrate enough to read the morning paper. We don't seem really to enjoy anything we do. Struggling to be "boy scouts," to be perfection itself, we collect ulcers, spastic colons, and muscle cramps. We may try to escape the pressure in drinking, downers, compulsive gambling, or affairs, but sooner or later we come to realize there is no escape; that we are on a treadmill going nowhere – and the only thing that terrifies us more than not being able to keep up the pace, is falling off. And so, we race on, becoming ever wearier and wearier.

Then something happens. During all this frantic running, as we wonder more and more what all our crazy racing is about, as the pressures of the fall season mount daily, comes this sacred day. If we look carefully at the words of this new prayer book "*Mishkan Hanefesh*" what do we see? What do these words say? They tell us that we can fail and still not collapse, that we can miss the mark and not be afraid to show our face in public, that we can be imperfect and still look ourselves in the mirror each morning. This is what Yom Kippur is all about – and that is why it is so especially important to us.

Do we hear this? Do we hear what our tradition is saying, we who drive ourselves so relentlessly toward perfection, we can never touch? Our tradition is telling us: "Okay. You have made mistakes. You have let yourself down and let others down – that only proves you are human. Now, get on with making your vows and promises; get on with the business of living."

Our tradition is telling us something profound: that we are fallible, but that something good can come out of our failures. Does this sound crazy? I don't think it is. Something good can come from our failures. Let me show you what I mean.

First of all, accepting our own fallibility brings one immediate gain – that is, blessed relief from all pressure. There is nothing more relentless, nothing more anxiety-provoking than continued, unending success. Do you know, the most driven, most joyless, least forgiving people I know, the ones who seem to labor under a heavy burden, are the ones who have never known anything but success. Life has come too easy to them. They somehow never seem at rest, never appear terribly happy with their lives. And it is true as well for all of us.

We all fear our good fortune cannot last forever that eventually we will be brought low. The longer we go without a failure, the greater our sense of impending doom. It's like the young professional woman I know who early each

fall goes through the same ritual incantation: “This year,” she says to herself, “they will find me out. This year, they will discover I am no good. Maybe I managed to fool them up to now, but this year, I just know they are going to catch up with me.” Does this sound familiar? It should – because most of us drive ourselves precisely in this way. We feel terrible, insecure in our successes, terrified that our good fortune will run out.

And so, we become – so many of us – “success junkies.” Our successes bring us no great feeling of satisfaction. We need greater and greater triumphs – and even these don’t seem to give us the high. The more we succeed, the more fearful we become that we would not be able to keep it up. We talk about our triumphs and victories, but we punctuate them with expressions like “knock on wood”: (which, incidentally, refers to the wood of the cross) or the Yiddish “kayn hora”, which expresses our anxiety that the evil eye will destroy our precarious happiness.

Here, strangely enough, is where failure can help us. Occasional failure can give us blessed relief from this “success junkie syndrome,” can make our lives more livable. The pressures of 100% achievement are just too great for most of us to bear. A balanced sense of our own fallibility is kinder to our minds and bodies than the obsession to stay at the top of the heap all the time.

A wise man once said; “In the game of life, it’s good to have a few losses early in the season; they relieve us of the pressures of trying to maintain an undefeated season.” Yom Kippur comes to remind us precisely of this: that we can fail and still manage to go on; that God accepts us for all our imperfections; that we can escape from this self-imposed pressure if we are willing to allow ourselves an occasional failure.

Failure also helps us to be a stronger, more competent individual. Continue success can make us complacent, unprepared for life’s inevitable challenges. When we go for long stretches without experiencing some failures or disappointment, we become softened, unable to deal with the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” In this way, we set ourselves up for even greater calamity when failure finally does come. It all reminds me of nothing so much as those young people we all remember from high school. You know the ones I mean – the ones who had it all – the grades, the looks, the popularity, the special attention of the teachers. Everything just seemed to go their way. Their future stretched before them like a golden promise. But today, these are exactly the ones who very often cannot cope. So many of those voted “most likely to succeed,” seem unable to compete and survive. They expected life to continue

as smooth and easy as it always had. When it didn't, they were shattered. They floundered and often never managed to recover.

And who has gone on to real growth and achievement? Very often, it is the misfits, the outcasts, the ones who had to struggle for self-respect, the ones who learned to use their failures as stepping-stones. Success can make us smug and flabby. Failure on the other hand, can arouse resourcefulness and creativity and can make us stronger and more resilient.

We have first-hand knowledge of this from the great heroes of the Bible. They were all men who rose to triumph – through hardship. Jacob had first to know exile from his home and the humiliation of servitude to his father-in-law before he could assume the mantle of leadership. Joseph had first to experience the bitterness of slavery and the brutality of prison life before he could rise to become Pharaoh's right-hand man. Moses had first to bear the malicious slander of his people and the privation of desert life before he could ascend Sinai to receive God's word. Again, and again, it is the same. Sometimes we must fall before we can fly. We suffer failure in order truly to succeed. Yom Kippur comes to remind us of this; that failure can strengthen us and teach us better to cope with the roller coaster of life.

Failure can also do something else for us. It can teach us to change direction in life, to perceive new opportunities we may never have grasped before. Failure can become an occasion for self-examination, a real "accounting of the soul." Failure can make us look once again at what our real priorities are. How often have I seen men and women emerging from the failure of a marriage, use that occasion to ask of themselves what they did wrong, how they might be better and more loving spouses, and what they really seek in marriage so that they can go on [sometimes with new partners; some-times with the old ones] to forge a better, more lasting relationship. How often have I seen men and women wounded, crushed by the loss of their jobs [and along with that their income and self-esteem] take advantage of their misfortune to seek out new career possibilities they might never have discovered before. and how often have I seen shattered young men and women denied acceptance into professional school go on to reframe new life goals and so end up in a much better place in life.

We can learn much, open greater horizons in life, when we learn to live and grow with failure. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that failure can sometimes be liberating if we use it to rethink, reevaluate and expand our horizons in life.

Finally, failure can make us especially sensitive to those less fortunate than we. It can give us the proper sense of humility – a commodity in short supply these days. It's true. Success can make us haughty and arrogant. When we have never known failure, we often have little compassion for those who have fallen on tough times. Children who have never missed a meal are less likely to march for world hunger. Adults who have always been blessed with good fortune are often unable to understand the centrality of tzedakah.

But those who have been there, those who have lived through defeat and failure, are readier to reach out to those in need. When we have been hungry, suffered cold, felt lonely, we have a new understanding for those who themselves are hungry, cold, and lonely. It is as our tradition says, "Remember the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the slave, because you yourself were a slave in the land of Egypt." This is what keeps us alive and aware. This is what makes us *menschen*. We were there: we know what it feels like. So, we, of all people, must hear the cries of the wounded, the agony of the aching heart.

Yom Kippur comes to remind us of this: the need to be a *mensch*, to have a proper sense of humility, a feeling of compassion for the suffering, the wounded, and the defeated. Yom Kippur teaches us to forge bonds of sympathy with fellow sufferers and so enable us to do God's compassionate work in the world.

A story is told of the great rabbi Zuzia. He was a kind, generous man who rigorously followed God's laws. And many students came to study from him and learn from his ways. Often the rabbi repeated the same lessons: "Listen to your own heart," he told his students. "And try to live as the still, small voice tells you." One day the rabbi was sick, too ill to move. He lay on the bed, trembling, with the blankets pulled up over his shoulders. "I am dying," said Rabbi Zuzia. "and I am terrified of what is to come." His students were amazed. "How can you be afraid, Great Teacher?" they asked. "Surely you cannot be worried that God will find fault with you. All your life you prayed as steadily as Abraham. Why then, should you fear to face God?" "That is not what frightens me," replied the rabbi. "For if God asks me why I did not act like Moses, I can tell Him I was not Moses. And if He asks me why I was not like Abraham, I can tell Him I was not Abraham. But when the Lord says, 'Zuzia, how can you account for those times when you did not act like Zuzia' – what can I tell Him, then?"

This is our greatest challenge and our greatest comfort. God does not ask of us, and we must not ask of ourselves, that we be great heroes without flaw or failure. We cannot expect ourselves to be wholly perfect in anything we do.

Still, we must learn to make our own imperfect way in the world, remaining true to our own hearts, our own nature.

I pray on this Yom Kippur morning that we feel a real sense of release for all the vows and promises we cannot keep. May God forgive us our faults and errors. May we learn to accept and love ourselves even as God accepts and loves us!

Amen.