

I want to start by admitting a sin. In a vaguely dastardly effort to play on his fears about what I might do once he unleashed me on the bimah, I told R. Latz a few weeks ago that my entire drash was going to be based on the music of Johnny Cash, Battlestar Galactica, and Doctor Who. He took it in stride, much to my disappointment.

I will not, sadly, reference the man in black (though I invite you to consider how love IS a burning thing, and it makes a fiery ring). And while I will not be focusing on BSG or Doctor Who, there will be a couple little easter eggs for those of you in the know. (we need another name for them- Purim hamentaschen- oh, sorry about the food reference)

I am also really gratified and humbled to be before you, for several reasons. When I consider the great intellects, the fierce activists, the inspiring teachers who have graced this bimah on the High Holidays, I feel myself to be a bit of an imposter. For I am none of those things- not nearly as smart as I pretend, or

THINK myself to be, not the activist I should be, not nearly as good a teacher as I hope to be.

There are a few things I AM, however, that are relevant to the lenses I bring with me today:

To many of you, I am “that person who sings Halleluiah (...)”. That might be ALL many of you know about me, because I have not been a great member of this community. I don’t show up enough, I CERTAINLY not been a regular at services maybe even seeming a little stand-offish. That is largely due to my shyness and introversion, something about me that tends to be unseen, because I have always been most comfortable hiding in front of an audience.

I am Isaac’s Ima. That defines me.

I am a social worker- I TEACH social work, to be specific, and it you want to conclude something from that, including that whole “those who cannot do...” thing go ahead. But certainly, that influences how I see the world, it focuses me on the interactions of systems, of the role of “person in

environment”, of not separating a person’s emotional well-being from the systems of privilege and oppression to which they are subject, and from which they benefit.

I am white. I am NOT a European American, but I am white. Maybe my grandparents got to put an asterisks next to that, but I don’t.

I am a trans person, which I presume everyone in the world knows, first, because it is not a secret at ALL, second because I presume you all have nothing more important to talk about than ME, and third because it is an easier way to walk through the world than worrying and wondering who knows and who doesn’t. And of course, it influences how I see and experience the world, because, spoilers, I am going to talk about the intersection of how we see ourselves and are seen by others, and this is something that trans and GNF folks bring a special expertise on.

I am a deeply, resonantly, passionately, spiritual Jew who doesn’t believe in god, and I see this as not

only not contradictory, but utterly uncontroversial. I am not “wrestling with my doubts, I am not “waiting to see the light”. There is no “god-shaped hole” in my soul. I just do not believe in, or MISS believing in, any god that meets any reasonable definition of the word. A few years ago, R. Latz, in preparation for the High Holidays asked congregants to complete a survey, and of his responses (keeping in mind that it was not a random sample), something like 80% of respondents said that they believe in God. The message he took was one of amazement that so many people were in relationship with God. The message I took was amazement that 1 out of 5 respondents, active enough members of this spiritual, Jewish community that they took the time to complete the survey, do NOT. I love and honor you, my comrades, who look to God. But like at least 1 in 5 of you, I do not have god to look to. I only have you. And that is enough for me.

Which, on YK, is actually appropriate. Because the Mishnah supports the idea that our main task today is NOT to talk to God, but to each other

For the real sins, the important ones, the ways I have failed and wronged, and not shown up, and hurt you, my friends, my family, my loved ones, my son- all the physical discomfort and chest beating of this day, while it might help me be mindful of those failures, heals NOTHING, in the same way that my facebook posts about white privilege do nothing to end it.

So, what I AM going to talk about, beside me? I am going to talk a little about yoga, and about mirrors, and about failure. And, yeah, I am going to sing a little bit.

The great sage, Elvis Costello once sang,

“Some Day you’re gonna have to face a deep dark truthful mirror.

And it’s gonna tell you things that I still love you too much to say”

And at its heart, THAT is what we are here for today, the thing that all the fasting and chest-beating is in aid of. Today, we collectively look into the deep dark truthful mirror, and make ourselves see the painful truths that (like the Silence in Doctor Who) we are programmed to forget about the moment we look away.

Mirrors are fraught, to say the least. We depend on them to make sure we look the way we hope the world will see us, to check our hair, to make sure there isn’t a piece of spinach stuck in our teeth (particularly important on Yom Kippur!). But mirrors lie to us all the time. They show us a backwards picture of ourselves, and unlike the side view mirrors in our cars, they show us a picture of

ourselves that is twice as far away from us as is the mirror itself.

I daresay, mirrors tend to be particularly fraught for trans and gender non-conforming folks, in a way that exquisitely highlights their troublesome nature. For many of us, our entire lives are spent trying to make sense of the image we see in the mirror, an image that seems so foreign, so out of synch with the image we hold in our hearts, and sadly, often one that feels repulsive and ugly and wrong. And we sometimes spend our lives, take great risks and sacrifices, to make the image in the mirror come closer to the image in our hearts.

And whether you are trans or cis, if you are honest with yourself, I'll bet that sounds just a little familiar.

For the last 7 years I have been a regular practitioner of Hot Yoga. I want to tell you a bit

about hot yoga. It is a 90 minute class in which one practices a set of 26 poses, holding them for between 20 second and a minute. Each pose is held twice. It is exactly the same set of poses, in the same order, every time. There is a strong sense of KEVAH to hot yoga. The room is heated to 106 degrees, and about 40% humidity.

It's hot. Super-freaky hot, to the point that ½ way through, there is sweat pouring off the ends of your fingers, off the tip of your nose, and you feel like you might faint. It is the most intense physical exertion I have ever experienced. People either go once and come to their senses, or get hooked.

Now, as you can imagine, this is an experience in which you want to be wearing as little clothing as you can get away with, because of the aforementioned super-freaky hotness. And all along the front of the room, and sometimes along the sides as well, is a floor to ceiling mirror.

So, picture it (or not- it's not pretty...)- here I am, in my sport bra and little shorts. Mostly naked. In this very intense environment. And I should say, because this is something I can't help be aware of, I observe that I am pretty much always the oldest person in the room. Sometimes by 20 years. And I stand, again, mostly naked and in public, staring at my blobby, middle-aged, trans-bodied self, the sweat pouring off of me, and for 90 minutes, attempt to hold this difficult series of poses, many of which require one to balance on one foot for long periods of time. Which, even when I WAS 20 years younger, I could not do. So, I fall down. A lot. Because I am trying to do this thing that I CANNOT DO, and that I am not even getting that much BETTER at, even if I do it 3-4 times per week. And my job, in that moment, is to face all that, and to figure out how I can possibly love and accept everything I see, in the face of so many programmed impulses to hate it.

It is Yom Kippur.

It is HARD to look in that mirror, to really see what is there and to find that place of love and acceptance. It is easy to fall into the sin of self-loathing, as it is hard not to fall into the sin of looking away.

And that's what I need you for.

Because we are, today especially, but EVERY day, collectively, standing in front our deep dark truthful mirror.

In fact, we are standing in front of 1000 mirrors, because we are standing in front of each other, and whether we like it or not (and often, we do not), the mirrors which matter most, the ones in which we may have reflected back at us the image that is the most shocking and disconcerting and strange, are the mirrors of each other's eyes.

So, as I mentioned, I teach, and work with a lot of social work students. As a function of that, I am subject to regular written evaluation on my work, work that is existentially important to me, work that defines me. And sure, most of my students have perfectly nice things to say, some of them REALLY nice things. But when I get my student evaluations, you can bet that the one I read most carefully, the only one I really BELIEVE, is the one written by a student who just HATED me.

And every once in a while I get blasted by someone (because, in spite of my efforts, I seem not to be able to make everyone happy all the time), called me out in a really direct, sometimes really brutal manner. And my impulse is to become defensive, to immediately go to why the accuser is wrong, or unfair, or unjust or just a jerk. I get so outraged, it burns so bad, it keeps my lying awake.

(At least I don't get out of bed and send angry tweets at 4AM.)

But my impulse is to rush, in a frenzy, to retreat into the warm glow of my self-affirmation or affirmation of the people who think I'm just great.

But the thing I discover is that I ONLY really feel defensive in the face of an accusation that I know is true. OR at least, partly, uncomfortably true. As an example, I invite those of you who are white to think for a minute about how we respond to being called out for saying or doing something racist (my dear comrades of color, I'll bet you can think of your own example to work with, with apologies). It happens to us, it SHOULD happen to us because, well, damn, of COURSE we are racist. I am racist. Racism, in white folks, in America, is like herpes. We are infected early, and the virus hides down in our nerve endings, only erupting occasionally, and often triggered by stress.

And I think about how much energy we (those of us who are white) expend defending ourselves against the accusation, and protesting what great allies we

are, what righteous intentions we have, sometimes even exploiting those folks we crave allyship with to be the objects of our absolution. Imagine the energy we could use to make change if instead, we just started with the assumption that, yeah, we are racists, it is a bitter, unwanted inheritance, a chronic condition, and start working from there.

The accuser is right. The accusation is a gift, a bitter gift, a call, and I must hear it- without dissembling, without defensiveness, with ears wide open

I must face that deep dark truthful mirror that tells me things that you love me too much to say.

Now, all this sounds pretty harsh. It is. It is a 106 degree room for 90 minutes, and we are nauseous and blacking out around the edges of our vision. We are, all of us, (not just the guilty liberal white folks in the room) nearly naked, and surrounded by people who are seeing our most uncomfortable truth.

And if that were all of it, I honestly think it would be too much for most of us.

Thankfully, it is not. Because I must also face the mirror that tells me things that I don't love myself ENOUGH to say.

Our tradition is dialectic- it places the greatest challenge before us, but it also commands that we accept comfort, and joy and rest. Rabbi Tarphon offers us both of these, when he reminds us that we are not free to abstain from the work, and that it is not our burden to complete it.

And just as our harshest critics, the darkest mirrors, show us something that we must come to recognize as true, it is harder to trust and believe the people who see us in our entirety, and who, really seeing us, go ahead and love us, and think us beautiful.

I was driving somewhere with my son not long ago (probably IKEA- we go there a lot- we want to LIVE at IKEA...), and I was making some self-deprecating, tongue in cheek remark about something relating to

my parenting, and said, “oh, Isaac, I am so sorry, I am such a failure”. And he said “yeah, that’s OK”.

I laughed, and said, “that’s the “B” answer, the “A” answer being “oh no, Ima, you’re not a failure, you’re the greatest parent ever!”

But you know what? In his smart-ass wisdom, he did give me the “A” answer, and not only because he did not fall for my little fishing expedition. Because maybe my man Elvis is wrong, and that the people who love us most are the ones who will hold up whichever mirror we need to see ourselves in at this moment (just as the TARDIS takes the Doctor not where in time and space he WANTS to go, but where he NEEDS to be). Maybe the truest mirror is the one in which we are beautiful, and in which we fail, all at the same time.

Because in a culture that considers failure to be anathema, to say, “you fail, and you are beautiful, and I love you” is a revolutionary act of connection.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa tells us that we must have two pockets- in one, we should keep a note that says "For my sake was the world created.". In the other, "I am but dust and ashes."

Challenge and comfort, the dark mirror and the bright, the thing we must do, the thing we need.

Brene Brown, in her research on connection, uncovered something we all know- that we fear that there is something about us that, if other people see or know it, will make us unworthy of love. And that this fear annihilates connection.

But she goes on to talk about the hard answer to this problem- she calls it "excruciating vulnerability". She defines that vulnerability as the source of a life in which we can be whole-hearted, in which we can bring our best selves, be in real relationship, and engage and challenge a broken world. I think that what she is telling us is that, at the end of the day, we must face the darkness in order to live in the light.

Our tradition demands this of us, today, and every day. We are commanded to attempt that which is beyond us, to fail, to fall down, to get up and try again, knowing that we continue to fail. Yom Kippur is not the Hajj, a commandment we must fulfill once in our lives. We have to do this every year, because every year, we fail. This is what Kol Nidre is about.

And we are commanded to love ourselves as much as we love each other.

At the end of a yoga class, all the yogis say “Namaste” (which is NOT Sanscrit for “thanks for the awesome yoga class”). To put it in vaguely Jewy terms, it means, “the unbroken part of me recognizes and honors the unbroken part of you”. And today, as we stare into the mirror of our brokenness, that is a great mercy.

I want to sing for you again, a part of the Leonard Cohen song that I think is REALLY appropriate to the day, but will sadly never be a fixture of our YK

experience, because it uses as a metaphor the story of St. Bernadette of Lourdes.

We've been around, we fall, we fly

We mostly fall, we mostly run

And every now and then we try

To mend the damage that we've done

Tonight, tonight I just can't rest

I've got this joy here inside my breast

To think that I did not forget

That child, that song of Bernadette

So many hearts, I find

Broke like yours and mine

Torn by what we've done and can't undo

I just want to hold you, won't you let me hold you

Like Bernadette would do.

And maybe, in the end, that is the challenge, and the comfort... To hold, literally and figuratively. To

hold one another, to hold each other's feet to the fire, to hold each other up when we fall under the weight of our failures, to hold each other's gaze to see an image more beautiful than what the world has shown us, to hold each other as we cry when it is all just too much- and to allow ourselves to be held in return, for comfort and for challenge.

You are so beautiful, and so full of light. Namaste.
G'mar chatima tovah. So say we all.