

Yom Kippur Evening 5774
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

OUR SACRED TRASH

On Rosh Hashanah a new year started – a new chance, with a clean slate. At least we are said to merit a clean slate if we've used the past nine days constructively and intentionally, and approach the liturgy and work of this tenth day, the Day of Atonement, with the full attention of our hearts, minds and souls. Yet, even then, I'm not sure our talk of wiping the slate of our lives clean is a wholly accurate – or even desirable – notion. It seems we'd be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn't retain at least some evidence of our errors and mistakes... There's just too much to learn from them.

Consider the Post-It Note – the official sponsor of this evening's service. It's true – I don't know what I would do without Post-It Notes. My prayer book is filled with them – listing cues and participants, introductions and choreography. If I appear before you tonight with any semblance of calm, it's only because of my Post-It notes, which enable me to relax into the service without worrying about what comes next. Much like my GPS, I trust that if I follow their cues, my Post-It notes will get me where I need to go.

And to think, the invention of these little gems was a mistake, a failure really.

In 1968, Spencer Silver was trying to develop a super-strong adhesive for 3M Laboratories – something that would affix two objects together permanently. Instead, what he actually invented was practically the opposite: an adhesive that stuck to objects, but could easily be removed, lifted off almost effortlessly. What a disappointment, a failure! But six years later, another colleague, Art Fry, saw potential where no one else had. As a member of his church's choir, Fry was continually frustrated by bookmarks falling out of his hymnal. This sort-of-weak glue, he thought, could keep them in place. And when Silver's mild adhesive was added to Fry's paper bookmarks, the first rudimentary Post-It Note was born.¹

From Plastics to Penicillin to the Pacemaker, even the first chemotherapy – so many of the world's great discoveries were only made after a series of accidents or even failures. Where would we be as a society without our errors and mistakes – or, as I like to call them, our "Sacred Trash"?

"Sacred Trash" – that's the name of a book that came out a couple of years ago recounting the incredible discovery of the Cairo Geniza. In 1903, Solomon Schechter entered this now-famous and remarkable treasure trove found in the ancient Cairo synagogue. Others had encountered the documentary garbage dump before, but it was Schechter who brought the hundreds of thousands of documents to England, permitting generations of scholars – and all of us – to learn from what was once cast away. As author Cynthia Ozick described: "With the discovery of the Cairo

¹ "9 Brilliant Inventions Made by Mistake", Tim Donnelly, August 15, 2012.

Geniza, medieval Jewish life in all its sacred and mundane efflorescence came tumbling out in thousands of manuscript fragments, each one a distinct and living voice of an ancestral civilization." The materials preserved and found have since "occupied scores of scholars for more than a hundred years, transforming in the most fundamental way how we understand Jewish history, leadership, literature, economics, marriage, charity, prayer, family, sex, and almost every other subject imaginable – from the nature of the silk trade to astrology, religious dissent, Hebrew grammar, glassmaking, and medieval attitudes toward death. There is, in point of fact, no other premodern period of the Jewish past about which we have so many and varied details."²

Geniza is a Hebrew term that is difficult to translate. It comes from a root that seems to mean "hidden" or "stored up", and has come to indicate a repository for worn-out texts or hidden treasures. What do we put in a Geniza? Any texts that are erroneous or in disrepair. Books and even Torah scrolls that are worn out and unable to be used for their sacred purpose. Documents that have mistakes. Others that are deemed dangerous or otherwise worthy of censorship. Or all of those old books, papers, texts we stumble across in rusty drawers and on dusty shelves that are outdated, redundant or just otherwise unwanted. A Geniza is a trash bin, but everything inside of it has one thing in common – it bears God's holy name (or in some cases just Hebrew, the holy language) so it can't simply be thrown away or discarded. There's a kernel or seed of holiness there that trumps everything else.

And so it is with all of our own mistakes and clutter of past experiences – we may be inclined to just dump them and move on, but there's a kernel or seed of holiness in each and every one. And that seed can sprout and flourish.

The truth is success – the biggest and brightest kind – often only comes after a series of failures. Just a week and a half ago, stories abounded about the success of Diana Nyad, who had finally achieved her dream of swimming the 110-mile passage from Cuba to Florida. As *The New York Times* reported, "Ms. Nyad's success was built on her failures – the first in 1978, when she was 28, and the most recent last year at age 62. After each attempt, she improvised, learning what to adjust, whom to consult and which new protective protocol to consider." She added a pulmonologist to her team after an asthma attack stopped her once. She devised a special suit, gel, and mask after being stung so badly in a cluster of box jellyfish that another attempt was derailed. Through trial and error, "she learned which wet suits were more forgiving on her skin in saltwater and which special drinks and nutrition gels best fueled her."

There were many Nyad relied upon and counted as her team – those who prepared her for the challenge, guided her through the journey, and embraced her at the finish line. Judging by the t-shirts they were wearing in news photos, they all shared one thing in common, their motto: An "XTREME DREAM". Trial and error, learning from our mistakes – that's the only way dreams, especially the extreme and audacious ones, will ever come to be.

² *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*, Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, p. 17.

Dean Kamen invented the Segway – you know, those cool motorized scooters police and others stand on to zip around airports and city streets. He also founded FIRST Robotics, a competitive program which challenges students to conceive, build, program, and complete tasks with a robot of their own design. He's done this because he worries that fear of failure is keeping us from dreaming big dreams.

"I think teachers should encourage [students] to work on really big, really hard, really tough problems" he says, "the consequence of which, compared to giving them the safe road, [means] they will probably unfortunately fail, and fail again, and fail again. [But we] need to give kids enough self-confidence so that they realize it's the project that failed, and not the student.

"I [fear] we've created a society that is so risk-averse that kids are taught – 'Whatever you do, don't fail.' A consequence of being unwilling to fail is that you'll never try really big, bold things.

"Students [like all of us] need to learn enough from their failures so that they can be re-energized [and] refocused. And with their new knowledge and new experience and new scars on their backs, they can go out and succeed.”

Consider baseball. As most of you know, I love baseball, and it seems to come up at least once every High Holy Days. I love its rhythm and rituals. I love its history and tradition – both apart from, and as part of, American history. But what I might love about baseball most of all is its inherent emphasis on resilience. As Al Hrabosky said during a recent broadcast: "[The game of baseball] is really about adjusting to failure. [The fact of the matter is], you're going to make seven outs for every ten plate appearances. [So] how are you going to deal with that?"

Willie Stargell, a Hall-of-Fame baseball player for the Pittsburgh Pirates (yes, I said the Pittsburgh Pirates), said this of his career:

“Baseball taught me what I need to survive in the world. The game has given me the patience to learn and succeed. As much as I was known for my homers, I also was known for my strikeouts... – the ultimate failure. I struck out 1, 936 times. But I'm proud of my strikeouts, for I feel that to succeed, one must first fail; the more you fail, the more you learn about succeeding. ... Each time I walked away from the plate after a strikeout, I learned something, whether it was about my swing, not seeing the ball, the pitcher, or the weather conditions. I learned something. My success is the product of the knowledge extracted from my failures.³

And baseball understands that an out itself isn't even necessarily a failure. It was one of the great lessons I learned when I first began to pay attention to the game:

"Dad, why are they giving that player high fives in the dugout? Wasn't he just thrown out at first base?"

³ *Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope and Optimism in Your Child*, Robert Brooks, Ph.D. and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., p. 170.

"Yes, he's out – but he got the ball in play and it advanced the runner. Now the player ahead of him is on second base, in scoring position. So if the next batter gets a hit, there's a good chance they'll score a run." Productive outs, they're called, and it's a recorded statistic in baseball.

A productive out. Sacred trash.

When the ancient Israelites were ready to move forward after the great moments of revelation at Sinai, they had to pack up camp. One would think they would want to travel as lightly as possible. And now, in addition to all they had brought with them from Egypt, they also had two heavy stone tablets to carry with them on their travels. Yet, legend has it that the Ark they carried with them was doubly heavy. Not only did the Israelites carry the whole tablets with them – the second set of stones Moses received after smashing the first; they carried all of the broken pieces of the first set, as well. Why?

Every life contains tablets, both broken and whole. That of which we are proud; that of which we are ashamed. That which gives us strength, and that which brings us pain. Some of us suffer from a broken heart; perhaps we trusted someone who betrayed us. Some of us have loved another but found our love unrequited. Some of us have loved and lost those who were most precious to us. Many of us live with unrealized dreams, with unfulfilled hopes. Why save them? Why carry them in our Arks? Why store them in a Geniza? Because while life breaks all of us at one time or another, we can heal. And as medicine has shown, often when we heal we're even stronger than before in the places that were broken.

If we preserve the memory and feeling of what it meant to be broken, then we are much better able to feel another person's pain and anguish. We develop greater empathy and understanding for all who suffer. It is a patient with cancer who can best help another patient with cancer. It's a support group of other caregivers who can best help a person who's caring for a loved one with a debilitating disease. It's someone who has grieved who can best help another who has suffered a loss. Perhaps this is what the Rabbi of Kotzsk meant when he said: "Nothing is as whole as a broken heart." We can learn from and be strengthened by our mistakes, our failures, our heartbreaks. The Psalmist said that in his affliction he learned the law of God.⁴

We preserve both the shattered and the whole together in the ark of our lives – that which is clean and pure, *and* the "sacred trash" – so that the journey of our lives is as full and rich and impactful as possible.

Not that there's spiritual baggage we wouldn't do well to unload. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman writes:

"The problem [with] memory [is that it] can also enslave one in the past. The ability to change is often conditional on a leap of faith, a faith in oneself that one can begin anew, that who one was need not determine who one will be. In a deep sense, one needs to free

⁴ I am indebted to Rabbi Charles Sherman for developing many of these ideas regarding the broken tablets in our lives.

oneself from one's past, to delete it, so that a new story, a new journey and a new person can emerge. To learn from the past often entails getting stuck there. ...

"There must be a moment when one lets go, when one knows that one has failed and stops berating oneself for that. When one looks to the future and is motivated by the unlimited potential which it promises."

Rabbi Hartman is right. So, when all is said and done – when we finish our liturgy as the sun sets tomorrow evening and we declare the gates closed – here's what I ultimately wish for each of you: Not a clean slate, per se, but a renewed one. Wipe away the negativity associated with past errors and mistakes. Release the guilt, cleanse the regret, scour away anger and fear. But hold on to the mistakes themselves – they're sacred trash, productive outs, the seeds of dreams to be realized, the stuff of life that points to a better future and helps us reach out with love and support to others.

The ancient Israelites carried their broken tablets in an Ark, so they could learn from their past mistakes. The Cairo Geniza preserved all the "junk" of a bygone civilization, enabling our own society to benefit from it. What I wish for us is clean, clear storage containers so that our own past might be as accessible and useful to us as possible, pointing the way to success and wholeness today and throughout all of our tomorrows. Amen.