

5th Year Sermon

Caring for our Bodies

4 October 2018

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My therapist said to me: “(show with hands in circle) Take a piece of string and make a circle of how big you think your wrist is,” I did that. “Now take another piece of string and put it around your wrist. Take it off and compare the two.”

(Show with hands in circle) “Take a piece of string and make it the size you think your belly is.” I did that. “Now take another piece of string and wrap it around your belly. Compare the two.”

I was stunned. The difference between the two strings in both experiments was almost double the size. I thought my waist looked like this (show with hands), but it actually looked like this (shrink hands). The

distortions I knew were at work in my head refracted through this simple experiment. I knew I had a problem.

Like too many of us, when I look in the mirror, I don't actually see what my body looks like. I see a distortion. Many of us don't see our bodies as the vessels of holiness that our tradition teaches us to value. Instead, we criticize. How often do we say: I'm too fat? Or: I need to get rid of my belly. "I wish I were taller, thinner, shorter, more blonde, had curlier hair, had more hair. My nose is too big...Don't we all wish something about us was different?"

We're all too aware that women and men receive different messages from society about their bodies from the time they are very young. Girls and women see the image of a stick thin Barbie, with a perfectly disproportionate 00 sized waist. And that image becomes internalized, translated to not eating dessert and constant concern over calories.

Boys on the other hand, learn that they must be tall, strong, and well endowed. Men get teased for their soft belly, weak muscles, or penis size and are taught that because of that, they don't represent the ideal man. Internalizing that message, many come to believe that they can't be satisfying partners or successful men.

The result, in a word, is - shame. It leads to distortion and misrepresentation of self. Our society feeds a message of shame, constantly demonstrating to each of us how we should feel ashamed of our bodies and ourselves for how we live within those bodies. The media capitalizes on that shame and uses it to hold us captive in our bodies.

Yet, our reading of Bereshit this week¹ depicts a time when we as a people had no shame, when shame didn't exist: ,וַיְהִיוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים, ולא, יִתְבַּשְׁשׁוּ הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; The two of them were naked, the *adam* and the helpmate, yet they felt no shame. Whether they loved their bod-

¹ Genesis 2:25

ies, we can't tell. But we know from the text that they felt no shame.

These first humans were created to exist in their bodies as part of God's creation.² Only after eating the forbidden fruit do they feel shame over their bodies.³ They suddenly realized they were naked, and moved to cover their naked bodies. Our first collective Jewish experience of shame.

Fortunately, Jewish tradition offers ways to help us build up and restore the original sense of self, of which we are not ashamed.

The Bible itself teaches us to delight in our bodies. Re-read Shir HaShirim and see the confident descriptions of the beauty of body, the celebration of bodies that does not meet the standards of today's media. But we, as individuals and as a collective western society, have interfered with

² Gen 2:7

³ Gen 3:7

our feelings towards our bodies.

In fact, Halacha commands that we care for our bodies, not treat them with shame: we must consider what we eat and the way we do it. We must consider how we care for our bodies when we interact with others, and we must shower our bodies with blessings. Although we as Reform Jews may not necessarily make those blessings or keep these Kashrut standards, Judaism provides us a way to think about our bodies as holy, free of shame, intricately tied up to our soul and inner beauty. Judaism trains us to notice the precious value of our body in all of its functions, not simply to exist mechanically.

Where else to start, than in the bathroom. **אשר יצר**, that bathroom blessing, offers us a way to praise our bodies for the miracle of actually allowing it to do our business. The fact that we are able to use the bathroom at all, that the right holes open and close when they're supposed to, is a miracle every time. Yet how often do we leave the bathroom and just

continue about our day? What if, each time we leave the lavatory, we remind ourselves that our body worked appropriately? Might that increase our appreciation of our body?

And wouldn't it be wonderful if we could embrace the flaws we perceive in our bodies, those imperfections, and instead allow them to encourage us to move towards wholeness? Dan Nichols saw this need for pride, and crafted a song based on the words of the prayer (I often hear the words dancing through my head when I'm down on my body). He sings: "I thank you for my life, body and soul/ Help me realize I am beautiful and whole/I'm perfect the way I am, and a little broken too..."⁴ The song reminds us to celebrate our bodies, to see them as unique and powerful, as places that are unshameful. Dan Nichols encourages us to see that even seeming perfection includes some brokenness. Indeed, we all carry around brokenness and imperfections. That brokenness, one part of which may be shame about our bodies, is what makes us human, giving

⁴ (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/50550cd6c4aad0824d1ea95f/t/5551ec38e4b094c827fdd5ed/1431432248128/ASHER+YATZAR+CHORDSHEET.pdf>)

us the capacity to love, to cry, to jump for joy and to hug another, and to say every morning, modeh or modah ani for who/what we are. It brings us back to ourselves and our bodies.

Blessings are a powerful way to celebrate the fact that we are embodied. They encourage us to wake up with gratitude for the gifts our bodies provide us. They remind us that our bodies are sacred vessels and beautiful. ([breathe](#)) That my body is sacred and beautiful.

While our liturgy provides opportunities to praise our body, our Torah provides a basis for understanding **why** the body is important. Take Leviticus: many get the impression that the body plays traitor to daily communal living as a constant source of pollution. But Mary Douglas, in her book Leviticus as Literature, points out how and why pollution endangers bodies and communities. It is because, like the Mishkan, the body is holy and a place through which we live out the holiness of God's presence. Leviticus demonstrates the care our authors took when think-

ing about the body. For Leviticus, the body is a sanctuary, all parts of which are sacred.

In that way, Douglas, and our different traditions, hold us, (pause) body and soul. They embrace us with the practice of noticing the body, recognizing its limitations, and also appreciating them. They hold us in our daily lives and remind us of the power these bodies manifest. Judaism can offer a salve for the onslaught of abusive images and ideas about self we are exposed to from advertising, movies, and magazines. Judaism encourages us to hold and love our bodies.

Even those in our tradition who differentiate between body and soul insist that we cherish our bodies. Take Leviticus Rabbah, where we read that the soul is a guest in our body. Our body, it says, must be considered with the utmost care. In fact, according to the midrash, as attributed to Hillel, care for our body is the most important commandment.⁵ There-

⁵ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/body-soul>

fore, we must care for our bodies, if our bodies are to remain that powerful vessel for our soul, rather than vehicles of shame.

In fact, Kabbalah teaches of the idea of **חיות**, this life force inside us. It teaches that our bodies are the clothing for our **חיות**, the sacred outer garments protecting our inner life-force. Without this life force, we cannot live.⁶ As **חיות** is the source of our holiness, our bodies become the holding vessel for that holiness. These two elements cannot be extricated from each other. Both are vital. We are our bodies and our souls intermingled.

None of these teachings issues definitive measurements for what our bodies must look like or weigh. We are not like luggage, for which airlines specify standard measurements and weights. When measuring our bodies by society's standards, we lose sight of who we really are. We

⁶ (<http://shma.com/2012/03/eating-as-a-spiritual-ecosystem/>; Menahem Nahum ben Zvi Hirsh Twerski, Sefer Me'or Einayim (Slovita, 1798), 92a)

diminish the precious intermingling of our soul and our bodies. Yet when we see our bodies as sacred, beautiful and full of blessing, we add to the power our bodies and souls have as a combined entity.

We were born as humans without shame, with a holistic perception of ourselves. We now have the tools to reimagine our connection to our bodies without distorting reality. We can experience our bodies in so many ways: as sanctuary, as holy vessels for living in community, as beautiful the way we are, and a little broken too.

We are reminded of that broken, yet enlivened self every morning, praying the words of Modah Ani, Asher Yatzar, and Elohai Nishamah. Like all of Birkot HaShachar, they bring us back to our bodies every single morning.

As we begin to tell our Jewish story again from the beginning of Bereshit, may we look in the mirror: tonight, tomorrow, every day, and

remember to acknowledge the distortions, honor the brokenness, and celebrate the beauty. Because as Dan Nichols sings, we're perfect the way we are, and a little broken too.