

# UNPOLISHED

HOW CAN EXPOSING OUR ROUGH EDGES HELP US BUILD SACRED COMMUNITY?

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Kolin’s sermon draws its inspiration from the text of Deuteronomy 27, which contains instructions from Moses to the Israelites as they are about to cross over into the Promised Land. The text reads:

<p><sup>5</sup> You shall build an altar to Adonai your God, an altar of stones. Do not wield an iron tool over them;</p>	<p>ה וּבְנִיתָ שֵׁם מִזְבֵּחַ, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: מִזֵּבֶחַ אֲבָנִים, לֹא-תִגְיֹף עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרִזָּל.</p>
<p><sup>6</sup> you must build the altar of Adonai your God of unhewn/whole stones. You shall offer on it burnt offerings to Adonai your God,</p>	<p>ו אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה, אֶת-מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ; וְהֶעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלֹת, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.</p>
<p><sup>7</sup> and you shall sacrifice there offerings of well-being and eat them, rejoicing before Adonai your God.</p>	<p>ז וְזָבַחַת שְׁלָמִים, וְאָכַלְתָּ שֵׁם; וְשִׂמַּחְתָּ, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.</p>
<p><sup>8</sup> And on these stones you shall inscribe every word of this Torah/Teaching most distinctly.</p>	<p>ח וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל-הָאֲבָנִים, אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת--בְּאֵר הַיֵּטֵב.</p>

Rabbi Kolin writes: “We might expect to be instructed to ornament [the altar] with shiny, colorful stones. But the text says: “*Avanim shleimot tivneh et mizbach Adonai Eloheicha*<sup>1</sup>—You shall build an altar out of **unhewn** stones for Adonai your God.” Unhewn, unpolished, unshaped stones.<sup>2</sup> Not smoothed down or made “better,” but just use stones as they naturally are. Why? Because it is the unhewn and rough stones—not the polished and perfected ones—that are **strong** enough to build holy places.

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The Hebrew for “unhewn stones” is not broken or weak or pitiful stones. It’s “*avanim shleimot*—whole stones.” Sharing our unfinished edges makes us whole, not fragile. This is not about

airing our every problem or walking around weeping. It's about pausing before airbrushing—not editing out the hard stuff because we think we will be judged for it. Offering up our joys and our struggles, our victories and our defeats. Because when we allow ourselves to be a little messy, a little more human, we discover—as I did on that bumpy Denver flight—that we are not hurtling through the sky alone. That others step up for us, step in towards us, relate to us in ways we might never have expected.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What is your reaction to Rabbi Kolin's reading of this text? What do you think about the connection between "lack of polish" and wholeness?
- (b) In what situations do you tend to present a more polished version of yourself? When is it necessary to do so? When do you find it easier to offer a more unedited version?

Earlier in the sermon, Rabbi Kolin writes:

I'm sure we all know someone—or have been that person ourselves—unexpectedly in a job search that we keep secret, quietly worrying about a sick parent or child, part of the silent sisterhood of miscarriage, or masking our anxiety about a mortgage or a rocky time in our marriage. Maybe we are the one longing to be in a relationship, hiding our loneliness because everyone else seems to have found their soulmate. Or the mother or father of a child with debilitating anxiety, who keeps hearing from fellow parents about how taxing their kid's busy sports schedule will be this year. So we don't talk about it.

Instead, we more often present the polished picture that we think is expected of us, that cloaks us, a safer picture.

And that pretense might be business-as-usual outside these walls—where it is just September 22/23, and where being in real relationship with one another is not the standard measure of success. But in here, it's Yom Kippur, and we are a Jewish community during the days of greatest self-reflection. In here, real connections and whether we are a community that can tell truths are very much our measures of success. And you transformed today into a day of great meaning and power by choosing to be in here and not out there. So in here, we ask ourselves: when we edit our truths down to the shiny polish of "everything is just fine"—what is at stake? For our souls, for our family, for our community, for the world—what is at stake?

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) Rabbi Kolin implies that this congregational community should be a place where one can feel freer to show one's rough edges. Is that your experience? Do you feel the need to offer a "polished" version of yourself in this community? Or is this a place where you feel comfortable acknowledging your "imperfections"?

- (b) Rabbi Kolin suggests that the measure of our success as a community is whether we are able to be in “real relationship with one another.” Do you feel able to be in real relationship with other congregants in this community? In this CORE Group? If so, when? If not, what do you think is hindering that connection?
- (c) What would need to be true for you to feel at ease in sharing your “unhewn” self in the context of this community?

#### **VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:**

*Consider this text from Vayikra Rabbah, an early collection of oral tradition dating from around the 5th century:*

'Rabbi Alexandri said, “If an ordinary person uses broken vessels, it is a disgrace for him, but the vessels used by the Holy one Blessed be He are all broken, as it is said... *the true sacrifices to God are a broken spirit, a broken and crushed heart.*”’ (quoting Psalms 51:19).

— Vayikra Rabbah 7:2

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#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) This text seems to suggest that an ordinary person should both seek perfection (by avoiding the use of broken vessels) and acknowledge his or her brokenness.<sup>1</sup> What do you make of this tension?
- (b) Why would a broken heart be more of a “true sacrifice” than an unbroken one?
- (c) Have you experienced a time when your own broken-heartedness allowed you to become closer to others, or to the Divine?

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<sup>1</sup> This insight was drawn from a lesson by Rabbi Benji Stanley, which can be found here: <http://limud.org/publications/tasteoflimud/5771/Tzav/> .