

We are Broken but We are Valued

Erev Rosh Hashana 5772

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There is an old anecdote that has been going around the internet for years. You know it's true: because it's on the Internet. You might have received it in your own inbox at some point. You probably deleted it. I did. But this year, I looked back at it and it resonates with me. Perhaps it will with you.

The story goes that a lecturer, probably a motivational speaker, started off his seminar by holding up a crisp new \$20 bill. "Who wants this?" he asked. Just about every hand in the room shot up. "I'm going to give this \$20 to one of you," he said. "But first, I'm going to do this." And, he proceeded to crumple up the bill in his hand. "Who wants it now?" he asked. The hands stayed up. "Really?" he said. "Well what if I do this?" and he dropped the bill on the floor and began to grind it up. He paused. Picked up the bill and held it up, crumpled and dirty. "Who wants it now?" he demanded. All the hands went back up.

"My friends," he said "you've learned a valuable lesson. When I started the bill was worth \$20. And no matter what I did to it, you still wanted it. Because no matter what happened to that bill, it did not decrease in value."

"Many times," he went on, "we are that bill. We are crushed, we are crumbled. We are dropped and ground into the dirt as if we are worthless. Bad decisions or simply hapless circumstances we cannot control make us feel as if we have no value. But never forget, no matter what has happened to you or will happen to you, you always have value in the eyes of those who love you."

Now, truth be told, I am usually not fond of these kinds of "inspirational." But for several reasons this one really speaks to me at this particular moment. The story

was sent to me about a decade ago by my oldest niece. She was 13 then, about the age of my daughters now, when she sent it. And I recall smiling at the sweetness of a young person. Then I deleted it. But not before printing it out and putting it in a file for some future use. Maybe, one day, it will be relevant.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of reflection. On the year that has passed. On the years that have passed. On the year that is yet to come. This past year bears some reflection.

I have seen a lot of brokenness this year. More than I can recall in many years. I have seen people crumpled and ground down. Economic hardships, devastating illnesses, shocking revelations, marital struggles. I have seen a sadness and cynicism at our political process, a helplessness as a system grinds on in sound bites and posturing, unable to rouse itself even in the face of human suffering. I have seen people struggling to get by in an economy stuck in neutral. I have seen people, we all have, lose their jobs and lose their hope. The promise that hard work and dedication will lead to success seems now hopelessly naive. And this brokenness affects how we behave in the world. I have seen people carry a burden of shame for circumstances beyond their control. I have seen people lash out at those who have done them no harm. I have seen people attempting to keep their humor while really being dazed and confused. It is not every one of us, but every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Tempers are tight. Patience is thin. Perceived insults and slights come easily, for many feel unjustifiably judged. Like you, I have seen difficult times before. And I am always the most optimistic of realists. But somehow, as we enter this New Year, there is a weight, a heaviness that can oppress even the most upbeat spirit. We are like a flower struggling to bloom in a sudden desert; no water, no water. It wouldn't take much to open our hearts, really. But we are parched. And fear we always will be.

Restless souls yearn for some relief, some sense of validation. But sometimes I think we are looking in the wrong place. Sometimes I think the old personal systems we have relied on are not sufficient for today's need. Sometimes I think there is something older and more eternal which can nourish us and allow our souls to blossom, even as we struggle. We're just not used to asking.

There are many different versions of the crumpled dollar story out there. Actually, the story is the same, but the moral changes. And I think they've got it wrong. Each version I've read is some variation of the idea that you are valuable so long as someone loves you. And while I've got nothing against love – really! – I am worried that this message perpetuates our sense of dependence. It is important, crucial, to be loved. But it also focuses on our need, not our value. If we feel rejected by another, if we feel insulted or unheard, our sense of self-worth diminishes.

But if we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in G-d's image, as I believe we are – then a simple truth emerges: we are valued, we are valuable, no matter what. It is not the love of another which validates us. We, each of us, each human being, is already deserving. We may be crumpled but we never lose our intrinsic worth.

That I recently found this story sent by my niece many years ago is quite remarkable to me now. It is her father, my brother, who lies today crumpled in body, yet undiminished in spirit.

As many of you know, a few months ago, in the weeks leading up to Tisha B'av – the lowest, darkest point on our Jewish calendar – a time when we recall the devastating destruction of Jewish sovereignty; my brother lost the sovereignty over his own body. That destruction, that shattering and sudden blow, fell on my brother Ronnie in the form of a stroke in his brain stem. A too tiny blood vessel, something he had unknowingly lived with all his life, burst. He was left with a severing of the connection between his mind and his body. "Incomplete Locked-in syndrome" it is called – or in a literal translation from the French, "walled-in-alive" disease.

My brother is the rabbi of a large Conservative synagogue in Montreal. He is well-known not only in his home community but in every place he has touched, for his brilliant mind and poetic insight. In many ways his career was just beginning. He is only 57 and has recently been writing and speaking in ways that are new to him. He has been the host of a local talk radio show on religion. Never one to engage in "small talk" he believes that every conversation, no matter how seemingly casual, is an opportunity for holiness. He has an incredibly upbeat and positive spirit. The

miracle is that, following this stroke, his mind and spirit are both completely intact. He continues mentally and spiritually to soar. But he cannot move his body or speak with his voice. He is a quadriplegic and breathes on a respirator. Slowly, slowly some movement is returning, first to his face and in some places resistance and intentional motion are starting to be glimpsed. Recently, he stood up, with help, miraculously demonstrating that the nerves are learning, reconnecting. Something within him is remembering what it means for the body to be under the brain's control. There is hope.

In the beginning, the only movement Ronnie had was in his eyes. He could blink with purpose. Using this sole form of intentionality, my brother methodically blinked out messages to the outside world. With the patient help of his wife and five children, Ronnie would wait until his interpreter would call out the letter he wanted spelled and he would blink his eyes. I saw this process when I was at his bedside shortly after the stroke. And through this slow medium, he has been writing beautiful sermons for his congregation, words of inspiration and hopefulness to his family.

His eldest daughter, Kitra, who many years ago sent me the \$20 dollar bill story, describes it this way:

Communication is slow and gentle (taking hours to write a few paragraphs) and requires a level of mental endurance and tenacity reserved for the yogi or mystic. But perhaps that is in each of our powers, when we sever body from mind. My father speaks much about the division of body and mind, and how special he is to have the outer limits of human experience sparking through his fingers. Most people in this compromised physical condition ask for death, sometimes using all their life force fighting for it. My father has only said let me show you how to live, from the very first instance of occlusion.¹

¹ ["I Am in a Broken Place but There is Holy Work to Do"](#), Jewlicious.com, posed 9/14/2011 by ck

We are all broken. Not always in the most dramatic ways. Not always in ways that others even know. But we know. We have all experienced brokenness, loss and pain. Sometimes we are overwhelmed and feel crumpled and worthless. Even alone. But human value is innate in us – it is a G-d-given gift. We have only to remind ourselves, to rediscover our task. As my brother says: “I Am In A Broken Place But There Is Holy Work To Do.”

None of us know how we would respond in a tragic circumstance. I certainly don't. And my brother is not a saint. Ronnie is flesh and blood, mind and spirit. He lives today in a disconnect between the two, but yesterday he was the same whole person who, on some level, took his body for granted. I would not know how he would respond to an unimaginable circumstance such as this. But I do know that this calling to G-d from “out of the depths” is not his first encounter with divinity. To Ronnie, G-d was ever-present, inspiring and demanding the finest humanity from him. So when he called out silently in desperate need, he knew where to go. He addressed his very first “blinked out” sermon

To the Compassionate One, the Most High Constant and Pure, who breathes meaning and truth into life. You have allowed me another verse of one more song, one more kiss to a loving life.²

When we are lost and alone, when we are certain that no one knows us or loves us; when – crumpled and torn we doubt our own value: there is a path. The Psalmist, who knows well the pain of life, tells us about the Holy One, the G-d we have always known, and who always knows us:

קְרוּפֵא לְשִׁבוּרֵי לֵב וּמַחֲבֵשׁ לְעֵצְבוֹתָם:

He heals the broken hearted, and binds up their wounds.

מוֹנֵה מִסְפָּר לְכוֹכְבֵי שָׁמַיִם לְכֹלֵם שְׁמוֹת יְקָרָא:

He counts the number of the stars; he calls them all by their names.³

² D'var Torah [Massei, rabbicahana.com](http://Massei_rabbicahana.com), Rosh Chodesh Av 5771

³ Psalm 147:3-4

Yes, the Psalmist tells us: We are known, even when we are alone. The innumerable stars are known by the one who our tradition calls “The Holy One Blessed be He” and “Makor haChaiyim” the Source of Life. If infinite stars in an infinite universe can be known, can be valued and counted, why can’t we?

We have our many images of G-d, many metaphors to explain what we cannot directly perceive. But though we think about G-d in many ways, I don’t think we think about G-d enough.

A few months ago, our congregation was host to Patrick Aleph of an organization called “The G-d Project.”⁴ Patrick is traveling the country collecting videos of Jewish people talking about G-d. In our Temple’s Pollin chapel, Patrick set up his camera. People from all over the Portland area came to be interviewed. Some from our congregation, some from others. Many, from no synagogue at all. One by one he asked a series of questions about the ways that Jews think about G-d. Some feel strongly G-d’s presence, some feel atheism strongly. Some feel a strong sense of ambivalence. There are not easy answers. In my interview, I spoke about how hard it is to understand what we even mean by G-d, much less trying to understand the nature of G-d. I have enough trouble understanding other people! And I’ve pretty much given up trying to understand myself. But I do know that I don’t need to understand G-d in order to be embraced by G-d. I do know that engaging in the struggle with the divine encourages the holiness within me. What if G-d knows me? Values me? Demands more of me? Can my brokenness, my pain be the whole story? Perhaps, by reaching back to the values of our people, I can find something that is greater, more meaningful, truly holy.

We can start with gratitude.

Recently during Friday night services we had a discussion about prayer. Quoting from Psalm 27 which we read in the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah:

אֶחָת | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ

One thing do I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek (Ps. 27:4)

⁴ <http://theg-dproject.org/>

I asked if we each had only one prayer before G-d, what would it be? I was somewhat surprised to find how quickly the conversation turned to gratitude. The morning prayer became the focus of our discussion:

Blessed is our Eternal G-d, Creator of the universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries, and vital organs in a finely balanced system. Wondrous Fashioner and Sustainer of life, source of our health and our strength, we give You thanks and praise.

I cannot read this prayer without thinking of my brother, and all those who are broken or crushed. Life is precious and we are finely balanced. Sometimes that balance is shattered and we tumble and feel lost in the void. But no matter our circumstances, no matter how crumpled and crushed we are, so long as the breath of life is within us, we can give thanks for life. And from that place of gratitude, we can feel the Divine Presence supporting us. Sometimes, even in our pain, our spirits can soar with the breath of life. G-d gives us life, the most precious gift, and we have value.

As we begin a new year, we reflect on the brokenness of the year that has passed. May G-d grant us the patience to still the voice of our own despair. May we have the courage to reach out to Holiness and begin to feel whole again. May G-d's embrace remind us that no matter how we are crumpled, we are still valued. And may the New Year of 5772 bring us Healing, Joy and Peace. Amen.