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“We are Shattered Vessels – Embracing Holiness”

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How many of you have a Facebook account, Twitter handle, Instagram? Earlier today, I changed my Facebook profile. Something I have been agonizing over for months: How was I going to announce my divorce online?

As social media websites like Facebook and Instagram have become increasingly popular, many of us have spent a tremendous amount of time cultivating the perfect online images of ourselves. We tend to post the most attractive pictures of ourselves, taken from the most flattering angles. Then we essentially brag about the exciting highlights of our lives. We share fantastic news of educational and professional achievements, pictures of our kids at their most adorable moments, and photos of the delectable gourmet dishes that we enjoy.

But we seldom if ever post about embarrassing blunders that we made at work, or show video clips of our children throwing tantrums at the grocery store, or share pictures of greasy fast food that we bought when we just couldn't find the time or motivation to cook a healthier meal. That is not the self or the life we want others to see. So we bury those images in a pit of shame, smooth over the surface and create the equivalent of photo shopped images of our lives. We do this online, and often in person, too.

Recently, I had a particularly poignant pastoral encounter. A man came to me for some guidance. He had just lost a dear friend and he was struggling in his relationship to his adult child. These losses and disappointments brought up pain from his past. After I spent some time listening with compassion, he looked at me with sincerity and sadness and asked: “Rabbi, why is there so much struggle and suffering in life? Why is there so much brokenness in the world but it only seems to happen to me? Everyone else's life seems perfect!”

Of course, I could not and would not pretend to have *the* answer to one of life's greatest mysteries and existential dilemmas. So, instead, I took a breath. I held his hand. And I shared with him the teaching of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the 16th century mystic on “*Shevirat HaKelim*” – the breaking of the vessels. Rabbi Luria revolutionized *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism, and handed down influential and quite radical teachings, including this interpretation of the traditional Creation story:

While the process of Creation was underway, Rabbi Luria taught, light – that emanated from the Divine – was poured into vessels. These vessels however could not contain the intensity of God's light and ultimately shattered, falling into pieces onto the earth. We may not be able to see these pieces, but according to Luria, they are there, and human beings can, through their actions, lift up those divine sparks and enact healing and repair.

This story may be best known to us through the term “*tikkun olam*,” repair of our (broken) world – an idea that has become part of Jewish life and discourse, particularly in the Reform Movement. While the *tikkun olam* teaching is most often linked to social action and social justice, Luria's original teaching involved two shatterings and two types of repair – *tikkun ha'olam* (repair the larger world) and *tikkun ha'nefesh* (repair of our soul.)

It is the aspect that addresses the brokenness of our souls that I wanted to lift up for this man who came to me in pain and for all of us this evening.

According to Rabbi Luria, at the very heart of Creation – of the origin of all life – is a shattering, a breaking. Brokenness is literally part of the fabric of life, woven into our experience of the world. I find this unflinching acceptance of brokenness – seeing it as intrinsic to creativity and to life – as incredibly comforting. Instead of feeling isolated, we can gather strength from knowing that brokenness is instead just part of the human experience. There is no person that is immune from it; there is no person who has not experienced some kind of fracture in their own lives, some kind of disconnect. This is simply how it is.

Offering this teaching, I turned to the man in my office and said: “The question is not “Why is there struggle, brokenness and suffering in our world,” rather: “**How** are we to deal with or respond to those broken places in our hearts and souls? **How** might we find healing and wholeness?”

These questions are universal – yet they also feel so particular to *this* day. The contemporary poet Merle Feld says that on the High Holydays, we stand before God “naked,” “without disguise, without embellishment.” With the vulnerability that comes from entering into the holiest days of the year, days of self-examination and truth telling, comes a sense of honesty about the places of pain and hurt in our lives. Even those who consider ourselves lucky or blessed, whose days are more happy than frustrating, may come to the synagogue on the High Holydays full of memories of losses and disappointments experienced over the course of our lives. Tonight is a time in which we can more readily tap into our own brokenness.

By “brokenness,” I mean any kind of loss, pain, struggle, or disappointment. They are, as Estelle Frankel, a Jewish therapist and author, says: “times when our lives, as we have known them, are shattered by the intrusion of fate or disappointment.” These shatterings could include the loss of a loved one, whether recent or decades ago; traumatic experiences we have suffered through in our life; strained or lost relationships; loss of possessions or hope; rejection in all its forms; pregnancy loss or struggles with infertility; divorce or separation; ongoing struggle with illness of oneself or a loved one; disappointments at our sense of “success” or “accomplishment” for our lives.

We are also affected by the brokenness that exists in our society, and our world, including homophobia, transphobia, the breakdown of civility in our culture; war, the brokenness in Washington DC.

I want to take a moment of pause here and invite you to think about what is in your heart tonight, what you are bringing with you, what brokenness, what struggle you are holding tonight – perhaps something I mentioned or didn’t mention.

PAUSE

Perhaps one of the reasons we feel safe and acknowledge our brokenness tonight is because Jewish tradition itself gives space and honor to our broken places. There are powerful Jewish teachings that instruct us not to run away from our pain or our lost longing, not to try to hide our brokenness – rather to embrace it and to wrest meaning and blessing out of it. In fact, some teachings even indicate that the way toward healing and transcendence is through bringing our whole selves to God. Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, a rabbi and spiritual teacher of the early 19th century aptly said: “**There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.**”

There is a wonderful midrash, or story on the torah, which illustrates this idea. It is a teaching about the two sets of tablets the Israelites received on Mt. Sinai.

First, we start with the story in our Torah. The Israelites – newly freed from slavery – are wandering in the wilderness for over a month. As you may remember, these former slaves are not the easiest group to please. Moses has gone up to Mount Sinai to commune with God. A bit too much time goes by and the Israelites get restless and decide to take matters into their own hands. They demand that Aaron build an idol for them – a calf made from the jewelry taken out of Egypt. What does Aaron do? He gives in! And debauchery ensues with the dancing, idolatrous Israelites, utterly unprepared for the commandments they are about to receive.

Soon, their merry-making becomes known to God and not surprisingly, God becomes very, very angry. Moses also learns what happened and begins to plead on behalf of the Israelites, begging God for mercy and understanding. God finally gives in to Moses' pleas. And Moses heads down to his people. As soon as he sees the terrible scene – his compassion disappears and his anger is stirred. Seeing the Israelites' behavior, he hurls the two tablets onto the ground, smashing them into pieces.

After some time and reconciliation, God asks Moses to carve out two new stone tablets for the people.

It is noteworthy that the Torah – normally full of great details – does not say anything about what happens to the first set of tablets. We are left to wonder: In the wake of that dramatic moment, what happened to those shards? Did someone clean them up and throw them away? Were they left on the ground? Buried?

The silent spaces in the Torah are of course, fodder for the interpretation of later generations. With incredible insight, the rabbis of the Talmud tell us that the **broken tablets were placed in the ark alongside the two new tablets**. And these two sets of tablets, both broken and whole, traveled with the people into the Promised Land.

What an incredible image! I believe that our ancient rabbis were not trying to simply solve the problem of a textual oversight. Rather, the rabbis were teaching us a profound message about brokenness, about mistakes, about shame, about struggle, saying: **Do not bury your broken places**. Instead, you **should honor them**. Our rabbis tell us the Israelites put the broken pieces (it could have been hundreds of them!) into the *aron hakodesh* – the holy ark – the most sacred place for the wandering nation, the place in which we found connection with the Divine. We cannot give them any more seat of honor than to be right next to the whole tablets, the instruction of the law. It is as if to say: Our broken places are part of us – cherish them and hold them with loving care.

This is a teaching that deeply moves me. I know that when I am confronted with the broken, unseemly parts of myself, parts I am ashamed of – my natural inclination is to try to bury them or put them aside. I am guessing I am not alone. How many times have we pretended to be “ok” when we are not? How many times do we bury our own feelings of pain or hurt, not giving ourselves the permission to accept, acknowledge our feelings? Yet, according to the wisdom of this midrash, this act of burying our pain, burying our hurt does not serve us and does not serve God. Instead we are to treat them with tenderness, to honor them as real, authentic and integral to who we are.

The ark becomes an embodiment of our own hearts – hearts that are whole in their brokenness.

Our tradition is full of examples: another Midrash relates that as Abraham stood ready to sacrifice his son, he began to weep. One tear fell directly onto Isaac's cheek, leaving a scar never to be erased.

Like Isaac, each of us carries scars of our most painful moments. Each of us carries an “*Akedah*” – aching memories etched into our souls.

So it was for Isaac’s son, Jacob. Jacob wrestled with a divine being and prevailed, and was given the name Israel. But he was forever changed. During the encounter, his thigh was wrenched from its socket leaving him permanently disabled. For the rest of his life, Jacob walked with a pronounced limp.

And so it is for us. Our biblical heroes are not perfect beings and neither are we. The trials we endure are etched into us indelibly. Like Isaac, life’s scars are written on our face. Like Jacob, the battles we wage, even those we win, take their toll, emotionally and physically. Like Moses, we carry the fragments of our broken tablets with us, all the days of our lives.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a contemporary theologian who spoke in this very sanctuary earlier this year, adds another dimension to this teaching on wholeness and brokenness. He adds to the Kotzker’s statement, saying: “There is nothing as whole as an OPEN broken heart.” Rabbi Greenberg here addresses a powerful truth: the broken places that we have experienced in our lives can be opportunities for blessings and healing, *if we keep our heart open to them*.

I want to be clear: The notion that the bad things that happen in our lives are given to us in order for us to learn from them or for some greater purpose is not an ideology that I ascribe to or want to promote. I am not suggesting that the disappointments or tragedies in life occur for the purpose of instruction or testing. This does not, in my mind, negate our ability to learn from them, to grow from them, even to wrest from them a blessing.

As Parker Palmer, a contemporary teacher and writer, says, “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness – mine, yours, ours – need not be a utopian dream, **if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.**”

Many people know that I got a divorce this year. Just like with so many of the life-altering events that have happened in the lives of people in this room, there are no words to adequately describe the enormity of what I have been experiencing.

Within the experience of profound change, struggle, and loss, I also experienced incredible moments of blessing. I vividly remember how, on the first day many of you received a letter explaining this challenging event in my life, dozens of emails flooded my inbox offering support and encouragement. It meant so much. Another blessing was being able to ask for help. It is much easier to give than to receive – especially as the rabbi! Another blessing, was understanding how strong I am and that being vulnerable does not make me weak.

Above and beyond the blessings I received from others, this experience has also been a great spiritual opening for me. During this last year, I gave myself over to my grief – I just let it wash over me. I imagined that God was an accompanying presence and I began to talk aloud as if to a friend. Without realizing it or intending it or willing it, I found myself supported by an unseen Source of Support and Comfort. This experience was transformative – and I only think it was possible because I was in such an open, vulnerable space.

I share my story as an invitation to find blessings in the many forms they can come to us, even and perhaps especially in moments of pain or struggle. Often, the blessings are found in the comfort of family or friends or unexpected sources of support. Sometimes the blessing is in finding forgiveness, of self and of others, that helps us heal ourselves or a broken relationship. Sometimes the blessing might be finding a spiritual opening. Perhaps the blessing is finding the inner resources and courage we didn’t know we had to deal with a past or ongoing struggle.

In the paradigm of Rabbi Luria and the shattering he describes, the moments in which we can lift up from darkness, light, finding blessings in our pain or wisdom through hard times, are moments of *tikkun ha'nefesh*, healing of our souls. When we forgive ourselves or others, when we find wisdom and strength even in the midst of struggle, we can lift up those broken shards and make them holy once again. This is a window to healing and to transformation.

The possibility of *tikkun* is present every day, but perhaps especially on these Days of Awe. These High Holidays have real, significant power and promise. They offer us the chance to go deep inside ourselves, reflect, and redirect. It is said that we can **remake ourselves** during the 10 Days of *Teshuvah* – that we can truly begin again or change the course of direction of our lives. These are days that can wake us up from our spiritual slumber and rattle us into awareness and into action. If we take the call of these days seriously, **we might yet be transformed.**

Brokenness is not a curse, or a punishment. It is the cost of being alive. In fact, experiencing brokenness makes us more human. What's more, our brokenness may enable us to reach higher than we ever did before.

Returning to the Talmud's discussion of Moses's broken tablets we learn: "How were the two sets of tablets arranged in the ark? The Talmud explains: The broken tablets were set at the bottom of the ark, and the complete set was arranged right on top, the broken set forming a steady base, a foundation for the new set."

Thus, the brokenness we experience is really the foundation for the rest of our lives. Our task is not to jettison the past, but to build on it.

So, I ask us, all of us with broken hearts or broken souls or struggles that we wrestle with or memories of loss that we hold – I ask us: Can we make our heart into an *aron hakodesh*, a holy ark, which has the capacity to hold darkness and light together, broken and whole together? Can we seek blessing in challenge? Can we imagine, even visualize, what healing might look like for us, in this coming year? Who might we need to forgive, ourselves included, in order to lift up the fallen spark? What pathways might we need to create for ourselves to move forward on a journey of healing?

Facebook is not real life. When you are browsing your friends' posts, remember that they have chosen to expose a thin layer of their existence. In between those smiley photos and enthusiastic check-ins, everyone has times when she or he feels discouraged, embarrassed, insecure, broken. That is real life.

As I asked the man who visited me a few weeks ago: The question is not why is there struggle and brokenness, but rather what are going to do with that struggle and brokenness? **How** are we to deal with or respond to those broken places in our hearts and souls?

I hope and pray that on this eve of the New Year, a time of reconciliation, we can embrace our broken places and seek healing.

May all of us – our whole selves – broken and whole pieces together – be honored.

May our broken hearts become open to wisdom, strength, and blessing.

May our broken tablets come to be a steady foundation on which to build a lifetime of growth.

May we be inscribed for a year – and a lifetime – of broken wholeness, of healing and transformation.