

Rosh Hashanah I 5782/2021

“Kintsugi”

Rabbi Ed Elkin, First Narayever Congregation

I want to start my remarks today by sharing a fun fact about your rabbi: I’m guessing very few of you are aware that I studied Japanese in university. Here’s the story: I had developed a great interest in Japanese history and culture in high school, so when I started my freshman year of college, I decided to enrol in a Japanese language course. I ended up spending five semesters studying Japanese, and even though, as you all know, my life took a very different turn academically and professionally, a turn back to exploring my own familial roots rather than a culture so remote from my own, and even though I’ve forgotten almost all the Japanese I learned all those decades ago, I have retained an interest in things Japanese, and that’s why I perked up when I read recently about a Japanese art form that I hadn’t been familiar with¹. The art form is called *kintsugi* (maybe some of you have heard of it). It is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. The key to *kintsugi* is what it is not: it is *not* a repair in which the goal is to restore the object as much as possible to how it looked prior to the damage, in other words, to make it “good as new”. Rather, in *kintsugi* the repair doesn’t try to hide the fact that the object had been broken. Instead, the very crack or break which the object had sustained is used by a skilled craftsman to fashion a new version of the original object. The history of damage is not obscured by the artist -- but is instead actually highlighted -- by means of the gold or silver powder.

As with so many other art forms, *kintsugi* has implications far beyond art -- and that’s of course why I’m raising it with you today. *Kintsugi* is also a philosophy for living. That philosophy acknowledges that bad things happen in life. That in life, things inevitably break. And when they break, when we break, we need to remember that just because something is broken, that does not mean it has no value, we actually don’t have to hide the breakage or the wounds. Our goal is not to pretend that the damage never happened, we shouldn’t aspire to bury the memory in an effort to “move on.” Rather, we can embrace the breaks, the cracks, the damage, and use them all to fashion something new that we can still use, and that is, perhaps, better in various ways than what we had before.

We have all been through an overwhelming, life-altering experience during Covid-19, although we haven’t all suffered equally. Perhaps we can say that we’ve all been in the same storm, but not all in the same boat. Many of us as individuals feel broken because of people we’ve lost during this time, illness we’ve suffered, or major disruptions in schooling or at work. Others of us may have managed pretty well during the pandemic individually, but we are aware of the tremendous toll that this period of time has taken on people we know, on society as a whole, and on millions of people around the world. Regardless of how each of us fared as individuals during the pandemic, the question at this time, as we look forward, is how do we deal with the brokenness both caused by the pandemic, or exposed by it? Even at this fraught time in the

¹ Emily Esfahani Smith, NYT, 27 June 2021; Barbara Ramsay Orr, Globe and Mail, 13 July 2021

pandemic with cases sadly rising again, when people are naturally feeling discouraged, I am thinking about a post-pandemic future, and I am inspired by and challenged by *kintsugi* to not try and paper over the damage we have suffered in an effort to go back to what was before, but rather to craft something new that incorporates this experience, even illuminates it, emphasizes it, and all the things we've learned from it. I don't believe that, even if we could, recreating things exactly as they were before is what the spiritual task of this moment actually is. So what is that task? It's a great Rosh Hashanah question. It's a new year. 5782. What now?

My sense of what our task is at this time has of course been shaped by my own experience of the pandemic, and I'd like to tell you just a little bit about that.

Looking back, I can say that in many ways, Covid has been among the most meaningful periods of the more than 30 years since my ordination as rabbi, in a few different ways.

For one thing, the opportunities for connection with shul members that this pandemic experience afforded me in my work have been tremendous. Many of our members looked to the shul community, and to me personally, for support and guidance during a very difficult and confusing time. If the pandemic taught anything it is how desperately we human beings need community, and we as a shul and I as a rabbi are in the very business of creating and fostering community. That happens to be exactly what a synagogue is for, so it felt very gratifying to be part of the solution to the epidemic of loneliness and isolation that has been so central to the Covid story.

As well, early on it became clear that many people were, because of the pandemic, thinking a lot about very deep and fundamental existential, religious, ethical issues – about mortality, about vulnerability, about collective responsibility, about individual rights, about faith and its limitations, about science and its limitations, about fear, and about hope. People were asking: How did this disaster come about? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? How am I of value? Is there a God, or something bigger than all of us, making all this happen, or weeping along with us as we mourn everything we've lost? Even though I don't have all the answers, talking about stuff like that is exactly why I wanted to be a rabbi; these Covid-prompted conversations touched me deeply.

So a meaningful period. At the same time, however, I must tell you that Covid has also in many ways been among the most challenging and anxiety-provoking periods in my rabbinate. After 20 years at the Narayever, I had gotten used to doing things a particular way, I had a certain way of functioning as a rabbi, and you know what? I actually really liked it that way. Of course, the shul is dynamic, I get that and embrace it. In just one example, March 2020 was designated as the month when we were going to move out of our beloved building on Brunswick to begin a much-needed major renovation. Very exciting, big upheaval, major change as we prepared to move into our temporary rented space here at the Leo Baeck Day School and totally upgrade the heritage building that has been our communal home since the 1940s. The shul renovation – that would have been enough big change for me in one year, to tell you the truth.

But we all know what else happened in March 2020. And the major decisions which I (along with the other Narayever staff and lay leadership) had to make very quickly about how we were

going to respond to this emergency really stretched me. I was anxious. Aside from my concern for my own loved ones, would people in the Narayever community be okay? What do we do about Shabbat services if we can't meet as we've always done, Shabbat services being the core activity of our busy and vibrant shul? How do I conduct a wedding in these circumstances? A funeral? How to help support our bar/bat mitzvah families? Which risks are appropriate to take, and which are not, knowing that there's no such thing as zero-risk but also believing deeply in the Jewish and ethical imperative to safeguard health as much as possible? How would we help support members who are completely isolated? Will people renew their membership? How do we handle the halachic challenges of using technology? What must change in the name of this public health emergency, and what must be preserved no matter what is thrown at us? Risks seemed everywhere.

It was comforting to know that Jews have faced crises before and survived. But looking back at Jewish history with the benefit of hindsight I found the lessons mixed: Sometimes Jews have deployed the strategy of flexible adaptation, meaning that we change communal norms and practices in response to crisis, because we're pragmatic and grounded and creative and we do what we have to do. That Jewish capacity to change and be flexible has been much discussed and lauded during the pandemic. But flexible adaptation wasn't the strategy in every circumstance: Jews have also in times of crisis sometimes maintained steadfast adherence to tradition, meaning not changing no matter what -- because our faith and our covenant with God is eternal. That response too has been part of the Jewish story for centuries. And so I as a rabbi agonized, and in many ways continue to do so, about the question -- what does this particular pandemic moment call for? Flexibility was certainly required, but how far to go? And what would be the implications of the decisions we make in the context of the emergency, once the emergency is over? Would we be able to go back? Is it desirable to go back?

All these things kept me up at night during the pandemic. I think *kintsugi* would say "Ed, too bad, there is no going back. The thing broke, we do have to put it back together again, but it's not going to be the same, and that's okay." In just one example, I always thought that while technology of course had its uses, in its essence Judaism presented a very useful counter-cultural message about technology. Shabbat as a tech-free day has long felt to me like such a gift, given all the dangers and pitfalls associated with our gadgets and gizmos. I still feel that way, but I also have to acknowledge that without technology we as a shul community, and I as a rabbi, would have been dead in the water during this pandemic. And I know that part of the *kintsugi* work we do going forward as a shul will involve using tech in congregational life more than we did before the pandemic. How, when, what the limits will be -- I don't yet know.

In another example, Narayever during the pandemic has offered, thanks to technology, much more programming than we ever did before. For several months at the beginning of the pandemic we had an on-line learning program every weekday at noon. We also instituted daily services, also on-line. Daily services is something that I long thought we as a shul should offer. Now on zoom we had people who were willing to come, who wanted to come, daven with us daily and found a wonderful community doing so. Again, I ask, what now? What should be our direction going forward? Each individual *kintsugi* artist will use the cracks differently, refashion the object in their own way, and when you're in community, and thank heavens we are, it's of

course not just your own individual vision that counts. We all have to take part in the conversation and figure out our direction together. And that's never simple.

But whatever we decide, I felt a renewal and strengthening of my conviction that Jewish community can play a crucial and positive role in our lives, and that we would lose much in its absence. I know that shuls in general, and our shul in particular, have had and will continue to have an important role to play in the post-Covid repair job, because we've got, in abundance, the gold and the silver powder necessary to address the damage, and craft something new, perhaps something more beautiful than the original -- in the form of an even tighter, even more committed and even more mutually supportive community. I of course know that not everybody looks to us to play this role in their lives, they find their community elsewhere and have only limited and specific expectations of their shul. But I do hope that a Covid-inspired affirmation of the importance of community will help more people to see their shul in this light, more people who will want to take part in, contribute to, and also benefit from our shul community.

So my pandemic experience has been a combination of "meaningful and gratifying" on the one hand, and "stressful and anxiety-provoking" on the other. Perhaps yours has had both elements as well. Rosh Hashanah is a great time to reflect on what aspects of your experience over the last year and a half you would put in each of these columns, and what your "Covid-keepers" would be. If the *kintsugi* metaphor resonates for you, how might it help you to think about your spiritual tasks going forward into 5782 and beyond?

I hope that we can all come to accept the wisdom of celebrating the wear-and-tear of life, of engaging in the work of turning the breaks and scars that we have endured into something beautiful and strong. Each one of us has such cracks, and we did long before Covid. Some of these cracks are obvious to others; other cracks we manage to successfully hide from others most of the time. As individuals, we have sustained damage from our families or origin, from difficult relationships we've been in, from physical or mental hardships we've suffered, from losses and loneliness that we've endured.

Our society has long been cracked as well – that's the power of the metaphor of Tikkun Olam, which has entered the lexicon of many modern social justice movements. The environment and race are two fundamental areas where we know things are broken in a big way, and there are more. Afghanistan. Haiti. Ethiopia. The Uighurs. So many cracks in our world. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many of these cracks in both individuals and society. We can't make the cracks disappear. But maybe, using our God-granted consciousness, our capacity for empathy, and our unique ability to think long-term even as short-termism constantly tempts us, just maybe we can create something better for our lives as individuals, for our Jewish community, and for the world.

The Talmud says that when it comes to garments that were torn due to mourning (k'riah), one may hem, gather, or fix them with loose and imprecise stitches but it is prohibited to mend them fully, restoring them to how they were before.²

On Erev Yom Kippur, a famous liturgical poem, a piyut, is chanted, called כי הנה כחומר. "As clay in the hands of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hands, Guardian of Love". If the *kintsugi* metaphor imagines us as the artisan of our own lives, with the capacity to refashion ourselves, in this piyut God is the artisan, fashioning something from the raw materials of our lives which is new and better, using the quality of *hesed*, divine love. Our Jewish faith teaches that while we ourselves have a lot of repair work to do, on ourselves and on the world, there's only so far we can go -- and when we reach our limit we rely on Avinu Malkenu to help us go the rest of the way. Both pieces, acknowledging the necessity of our own work, which we call teshuvah, and appealing to God for hesed and rahamim to help us, together form the core agenda of these holy days.

I'm glad I studied Japanese, even though I didn't end up building my life or career around it as I once thought I might. We can learn so much from other cultures, even as we hopefully feel appreciation for the wisdom and richness present in our own. Kintsugi has challenged me to reflect on the spiritual and practical tasks ahead, both short-term and, even more important, long-term. How can we be sure we don't let a good catastrophe go to waste? With faith in God's love, with faith in our community, with faith in ourselves, let's get to work on first imagining and then fashioning our new object, our new post-Covid lives. I know it may feel premature because of Delta, but I do believe that with God's help and our own vigilance, תעצר המגפה this plague will end.. When it does, we will have been forever shaped by what we have been through. I can't wait to see how it turns out.

Ake-mashite omed'toh gozaimas. Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year.

² Moed Katan 26a. See Sara Labaton, "Collective Tragedy and the Jewish Politics of Mourning" in Torah in a Time of Plague, pp.129-30.