Finding Strength In Our Brokenness
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When I woke up on the morning of the Boston Marathon, I felt confused. It was a beautiful day, a day of celebration, a day that we were all looking forward to. Alma and I had plans to join a friend for an early brunch and get to Newton, to Commonwealth Ave, to see the first runners. I was feeling confused, because on the Israeli calendar that day was Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembrance for the fallen soldiers of Israel and victims of terrorism. A day of profound mourning and sadness. On that day, Israeli citizens gather at cemeteries to remember friends and family members who have been killed. Everybody knows someone. All day, the radio plays beautiful, sad songs, and the names of all victims are read on TV. My newsfeed on Facebook was confusing, too: filled with either pictures of beautiful Boston on a marathon day or by names of people, whom friends were remembering, accompanied by songs of mourning. As I cheered the runners on the street, I couldn't stop thinking about the tension between these two very different experiences as I tried to hold them together in my heart.

Sadly, the end of the day would bring these experiences closer together. I woke up from a short nap to the news of the bombing at the front line of the marathon. Confused, in disbelief. I am familiar with bombs and terrorist attacks-- not only from my experience in Argentina, but also from living in Jerusalem during the second intifada. But in Boston? on Marathon day?

The days that followed were hard for all of us, as individuals, as a community and as a city. On a personal level, many of my own experiences, anxieties, and fears came to surface.
That week brought back for me a forgotten but important experience I had once in Jerusalem. After an explosion, I did what everyone does: I called my family and friends to let them know I was ok. Then I called one of my dear teachers, with whom I had a class later that evening and I said - I assume the class is cancelled. He asked me why would we cancel the class-- and in tears I responded, because there was a bombing. He said to me, because of the bombing it is even more important that we gather to study. I got very angry at him and explained, through my tears, that in my experience after a bombing the world stops, that you simply cannot go on as usual. My teacher would not relent. He told me I had to come to the class, and that he would not allow me to be immobilized by my mourning and fear. So, I went. At class we did not study what was originally planned. Instead, my friends held me while I cried and said again and again, don't you get it- the world just stopped for all the families who lost their loved ones. They asked me to reflect on my life, on what I had achieved in the years since losing my mother to the terrorist attack in Argentina, to look at the strength I have found within me, and to recognize that I had not allowed the tragedy to stop me.

That presumably is the meaning of the Boston Strong slogan which functions as a reminder of human resilience, of our ability to keep walking though challenge, pain, disbelief and destruction.

One of the privileges of the rabbinical role is accompanying people in times of need. This year some of you have allowed me to be present as you went through the most painful moments, through sickness, death, divorce, loneliness and spiritual crises. Through standing there with you I have gained more faith in humanity and in the power of life. I have learned from the struggles and from the brokenness. I listened and cried, often speechless, with no words to say or to add. In one such
meeting, as the person told me the story of her life, she paused, looked at me and said-- Life is so hard. Then she added, but we just keep going. One day at a time.

I used to think about these holidays primarily as a time to remind us how fragile our lives are. On the days of Awe, we face our own mortality and fragility. We come here, as a community, to participate in prayer, in tears of joy and sadness, and among other things we also remind ourselves that we will die.

My spouse and I were blessed to have our teacher and friend, Rabbi Art Green, officiate at our wedding in Israel, seven years ago. At the end of the wedding, as we prepared to break the glass, Rabbi Green spoke about the meaning of this symbol. He said, “glass...it is mere sand, with a few chemicals added. But heat it up enough and it becomes something beautiful, yet fragile. We too are but Afar V’Efer sand and dust, but add some heat of passion and love and we too can become and create something beautiful - still, it is just as fragile as glass”. He explained that we break the glass to remind ourselves of the fragility of human beings and relationships.

Today we focus on the fragility of our lives, the impermanence of our lives, but we are also reminded that the heat, the passion, the love, the creativity and the strength within us can create the most beautiful jewels in the world.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician who has been very influential in helping doctors approach their patients in more integrative and holistic ways. Her curriculum "The Healer's Art" is taught in nearly half of America's medical schools. She offers another layer of thinking about this topic. In her book "Kitchen Table Wisdom" she writes: "Life can change abruptly and end without warning, but life is not fragile. There is a difference between impermanence and fragility" (Page 7). In this book, she shares her own stories and stories of her patients. They are stories of resilience and survival, but most clearly, they are stories of growth. She speaks about
the tenacity of life, the drive to live and the capacity of human beings to learn and grow even from the most painful experiences. One of the lessons of these stories is perhaps that through the acceptance of our own vulnerabilities, our own sufferings, our own reality, we transform ourselves.

I used to get very upset -- and I still do -- when someone would tell me that something good will come from my pain, that there is a reason for everything-- or in Hebrew - Hakol Letova. Not really, I would respond. I would rather not have suffered the loss of my mother at a young age, and not grown, even if it would have meant not becoming the woman I am today. But it doesn't work that way. The question is not if there is a reason for our suffering, but rather what we make from it, and how we live our lives after being broken.

In her book "My grandfather's Blessing" Dr. Remen tells the story of the creation of pearls: "An oyster is soft, tender, and vulnerable. Without the sanctuary of its shell it could not survive. But oysters must open their shells in order to "breathe" water. Sometimes while an oyster is breathing, a grain of sand will enter its shell and become a part of its life from then on. Such grains of sand cause pain, but an oyster does not alter its soft nature because of this. It does not become hard and leathery in order not to feel. It continues to entrust to the ocean, to open and breathe in order to live. But it does respond. Slowly and patiently, the oyster wraps the grain of sand in the translucent layers until, over time, it has created something of great value in the place where it was most vulnerable to its pain. A pearl might be thought of as an oyster's response to its suffering (...). Sand is a way of life for an oyster. If you are soft and tender and must live in the sandy floor of the ocean, making pearls becomes a necessity if you are to live well" (Pages 139, 140). Like the oyster, we have the
capacity to transform our sufferings, our brokenness, into wisdom and growth, into meaning, into pearls.

We are about to recite one of the most beloved, prominent and controversial pieces in our High Holiday Liturgy, the *Unetane Tokef*. A prayer that brings moral challenges, fatalistic theology, the proclamation of God's holiness, a call to human responsibility and a prescription for redemption. The second part of the *Unetane tokef* presents eight images for human life, describing our lives as finite and fragile. They are:

- "shattered pottery" - *Cheres Hanishvar*
- "withered grass" - *Chatzir Yavesh*
- "a faded blossom" – *Novel Tzitz*
- "a passing shadow" - *Tzel Over*
- "a vanishing cloud" - *Anan Kala*
- "blowing wind" - *Ruach Noshabet*
- "sprouting dust" - *Avak Poreach*
- and "a dream that will fly away" - *Chalom Yauf*

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, a past dean of the rabbinical school of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the rabbi of a congregation in White-Plains NY, wrote a beautiful essay about this prayer called "Shattered pottery, Unshattered Hope". In this essay he analyzes these similes, pointing out that the first one, the shattered pottery, stands out from the other seven. The author of the *Unetane Tokef* draws these similes from verses of the *Tanakh*, the Bible, from Isaiah, Psalms and Job, being true to the original biblical context, describing human life. "Withered grass, a faded blossom, a passing shadow, a vanishing cloud, blowing wind, sprouting dust and a dream that will
fly away" are all reminders of the fragility and impermanence of our lives well-rooted in our textual tradition.

But the first one is different. There is only one place in the Torah where these two words, Cheres - pottery and Nishvar shattered are coupled. In Leviticus, there is a concrete prescription for how vessels that are made from earth are to be treated after being use for a sacred purpose - they should be broken. Without going into all the details of this prescription, the point is that earthen vessels could be purified only by breaking them - brokenness is the only possible method of purification.

As Rabbi Tucker puts it: "... the author of our prayer surely knew his Tanakh and his Mishnah. He knew full well that the very first thing we come across in the Torah as made from the earth is the human being, We are, in other words, the primary earthen vessels in God's world. The very first simile in his list, therefore, suggests a theological truth that is as far as anything could be from a declaration of human helplessness before forces beyond our control. The deep truth embedded in the image of the broken earthward is that hope and affirmation grow, paradoxically, out of fracture" (Page 231).

In this context Rabbi Tucker brings a text from an early collection of midrash, Pesikta D'Rav Kahana (in the section of Shabbat Shuva), which offers a commentary on the Biblical prohibition of using any kind of blemished animal or utensil to offer a sacrifice. The midrash begins with a verse from the book of Psalms: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not reject (Psalms 51:19)…In a commentary on this verse, Rabbi Abba bar Yudan said: What is considered ritually impure in an animal, is permitted in a human being. An animal is unfit if it is broken or maimed or with a growth (Lev. 22:22), but in a person a broken and contrite heart is considered fit. Rabbi Aexandri said: an ordinary person fulfilling a task would consider it an embarrassment to have to make use of a broken
implement, a broken tool or vessel. But the Blessed Holy One is not like that; God's work is always done with broken implements. Or as Rabbi Tucker writes: "God's very best work is done with broken tools" (Page 231). The poetry of Unetane Tokef reminds us about our capacity to rebuild ourselves, precisely when we are in the most broken place. Part of the purpose of this season is to acknowledge our impermanence and fragility but it is also a time to remember our strength and resilience. To remember our capacity to rebuild our self and continue living fully, risking brokenness and living meaningfully, knowing that life is impermanent but we ARE strong. These holidays offer an opportunity to think about how to live our lives in the coming year while holding awareness of our brokenness, but not letting that hold us back. As we contemplate our losses and what we leave behind in the past year, we must also consider what we have learned, what we have discovered about ourselves, what new strengths we bring forward with us into the year to come.