

With What Remains
Rosh Hashanah 5780
Hazzan Jodi M. Sered-Lever

There is a story, and perhaps you've heard it before, about the renowned violinist, Itzhak Perlman:

"Itzhak Perlman came onto the stage at Lincoln Center in New York City to play a violin concerto—presumably something he had done many times before.

But as Perlman sat down to play this time in 1995, one of the strings on his violin broke. The audience assumed that Perlman would have to find another violin or another string for the one he was using—delaying the concert. Instead, Perlman waited a moment, closed his eyes, and signaled the conductor to begin.

He played the entire concerto on just three strings.

Afterwards—following a standing ovation—Perlman spoke.

He said, 'Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what remains.'"

(as told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book To Heal a Fractured World, taken from itzhakperlman.com)

How much music can *you* still make with what remains? If you're feeling like a broken violin or if the configuration of your family is missing a string, how do you play the music?

It's a question that goes beyond the physical act of playing an instrument. In the larger context, the question becomes: How do we continue to live a life of meaning, with experiences that are worthwhile, and relationships that are fulfilling, if life has been altered?

First, we have to recognize that something happened, that something is different. We have to notice that the string broke. It may sound obvious, but sometimes we like to pretend that nothing is different, that nothing has changed, that nothing has been lost. It's understandable because acknowledging the change means admitting it's there — it makes it real. That in and of itself can be a scary prospect. It's hard to make music with what remains, if you cannot see that there are fewer strings than before.

Has something changed in your life? In the life of a loved one? In your family structure?

How about professionally? Are you now retired? Did you *have* to retire? Are you unexpectedly looking for a new job?

It can be humbling. One day, you get up, go to work, interact with colleagues, you feel a sense of camaraderie, a sense of purpose. And then...it's gone. You get up in the morning, but you don't have anywhere you need to be anymore. You no longer have that interaction with associates, and you're not sure what you're supposed to be doing with your time.

If you were still planning on being in the workforce and you're not retiring yet, this all can be shocking and destabilizing. It's important to recognize that you have experienced a loss. You may even need some time to sit Shiva for your job and mourn what was. Definitely do that.

Then let's begin to figure out how to make your music in a different setting. It may not be in Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall, but it will be somewhere. Believe that.

Tampa-Bay-Job-Links is a non-profit organization that provides individuals with career guidance and job-search coaching. And it does something else, too. It provides a structure and schedule where there once was one. When the weekend ends and so many people are going to work on a Monday morning, they have a regularly scheduled Monday Morning LINKS program. It is just one example of how Tampa-Bay-Job-Links helps keep job-seekers connected and focused. There may not be a job to head out to on a Monday morning, but there is an appointment to put on the schedule that needs to be kept and is important. *You have value as a person even if you're not being compensated for your time.* Remember that.

We have to be willing to be self-reflective, if we are to make the most of what remains. We need to engage in *heshbon hanefesh*, to take an accounting of the soul. Are there skills we need to acquire to be able to find a new job? Do we need to expand what we are willing to do, work additional hours, or take a completely different position that we had before? Making music with what remains requires us to think differently and to expand what we see as possible. In this instance, with enough patience, fortitude, and perseverance, you will be able to repair your instrument.

But what if my situation isn't temporary? How do I make music with what remains if I am an instrument that cannot ever be fully repaired? Or if I can't even play the instrument anymore? If I cannot do what I could do before, then what?

Let's remember: Even if you aren't able to perform like you once could, or work like you used to, or think as clearly, or run around like you did for so many years, *you're still you*. "You're still you" — those are the words that the late Dana Morosini Reeve said to her husband, the late Christopher Reeve at the time of his horseback riding accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. She knew that, despite a broken body, he could still make music with what remained. It's crucial to keep in mind that no matter what limitations we face, each one of us still has infinite value. As Max Ehrmann wrote in *Desiderata*: "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars." Believe it. Know that to be true.

If you're having trouble believing in yourself and how you're going to keep moving forward, then get your team together. Friends, family, your Mekor Shalom community, mental health professionals and health care providers: It's "all hands, on deck." Mobilize every means of support. And ... fight every possible urge to isolate yourself. It's not helpful, even if it seems easier in the moment. It's not beneficial because for all the time you spend in isolation, you just end up with a pile of aloneness. And guess what you really have when you have a pile of aloneness? It's just emptiness. Instead, focus on being connected and being accepted. Those aren't just words from Mekor Shalom's tagline. Be in the world. Interact with the world. Remember, the masterful artist is open to every idea. Be open.

Be open to experiencing. Be open to hearing. Be open to listening.

Listen for a moment. Listen to the *kol d'mamah dakah* — the still, small voice inside of you...

What does it sound like? What is it playing? What is it telling you about yourself?

I hope that you can hear it. The sounds of your inner song. The melody of your *neshama* — your soul is playing right now. And it is stunningly beautiful and resonant. It is glorious. Because it is uniquely yours. Because every beat of your heart is adding to the rhythm of the world. It is part of your essence. Years ago, one of my students asked me what a soul is. My response is that it's what makes you *you*. It's through the priceless treasure that is your soul that you will make meaningful music with what remains.

But how will you re-invent yourself? You're the artist. Go! Imagine! Maybe now you'll dance or you'll draw. Maybe now you'll be able to volunteer your time. Maybe now you'll make music by spending more time with family and friends. Maybe you'll become an advocate or an activist. More self-reflection is needed as you chart the course with a new direction. You will figure it out. You'll get out of it what you put into it. Believe that.

Is there a loved one who isn't able to do what they once were able to? It is crucial to remember that they still have infinite value. In frustration, you might cry out, what value? Where did they go?

Yes, it's hard. Yes, it's different. No one here is suggesting to know your experience. But in between wanting to pull your hair out from your own anguish, remember that it's hard for them, too. And just as no one can live your experience, no one else can truly know theirs. But as long as they are here, you are able to hear them and the song from their soul live — even if they no longer recognize you or their own song. Their song is in there, and their soul is making music with what remains. Hear it. Experience it. Try to sing along with it. Make sure they know that your love and support are ever present. Always take every opportunity to connect and to share and to love one another. Make sure they know that you know their song. Be there for them. Be there to hear it.

But what if the person is no longer physically present, then what? Will Reeve, the son of Dana and Christopher Reeve wrote a Note to Self, part of a CBS News series. He wrote to his thirteen-year-old self, sitting in his mother's hospital room, having just been with her as she died of cancer, a year and a half after his father died. In his missive he writes, that with the death of his mother: "Now you're at a new bottom." And then he continues: "But! Here's the good news: this is the low point. There's nowhere to go but up, and that's exactly where you're headed." This young man, now 27 years old, has gone on to graduate from Middlebury College and have a successful career. He exudes confidence and poise, striving to continue to make his parents proud. He works in television, and serves on the board of the foundation that bears his parents' names.

So, if the person is no longer here, all the more so, we must carry their song with us. They may not be here for us to see and feel and touch. But their song is in our heart, and we can continue to share it with others. Make your own music with what remains by continuing their legacy. Love and laughter, *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds), lessons and values. Carry it forward. It matters because they matter and you matter.

When someone around us makes music with what remains, we have a responsibility to hear it and to appreciate it. We need to recognize when they have figured out how to play a new or different song. When they have added to the beauty of the world, they deserve our support and our applause. Itzhak Pearlman received a standing ovation because what he did was exceptional, remarkable, and extraordinary. It was inspiring. Doesn't each one of us deserve that, too?

May we all have the merit in this new year to appreciate and celebrate that which is exceptional, remarkable, extraordinary, and inspiring in ourselves and in those around us.

Shana tova.