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A story adapted from a tale of the eighteenth century Hasidic teacher, the Maggid of Dubno:

There was once a king who owned a beautiful diamond. It was splendid, brilliant, and clear, without any blemishes or marks. Each day he would carefully take it out of its box and admire it in the light, reveling in its beauty and perfection. If he held it just right, the diamond would cast a perfect rainbow of colors on the wall.

One day, as the king held up his diamond in the light, he noticed that it had a long, hairline crack in it. A pit formed in his stomach. How could this be? His beloved diamond was no longer flawless.

The king was inconsolable. This diamond was so precious to him, more precious than just about anything else. He decided that he had to find someone who could fix it. And so he issued a royal decree throughout his kingdom: "Whoever can fix the king's diamond will be greatly rewarded."

When they heard of the reward, master jewelers came from all over the kingdom to try to fix the diamond. One by one they inspected the diamond, gazing at it closely to try to figure out how to repair it. But each one sadly shook his head. The diamond simply could not be restored to its original perfection. The king became very depressed. Months passed.

And then, one morning, an old jeweler arrived at the palace. "I have learned that your diamond has a crack in it. Show it to me. Let me see what I can do." The jeweler gazed at it intently, turning it over and over. The king held his breath.

Finally, the jeweler spoke. "I can make your diamond beautiful once again. Give me some time and I will return it to you better than ever. I ask only that you do not visit me while I work or check on my progress. I promise to return it when I am finished."

The king smiled for the first time in months. Soon he would have his diamond back and he would bask in its perfection. He resisted his desire to check up on the jeweler and watch him work.

Finally, the jeweler returned with the king's diamond. With great anticipation, the king opened the box and took off the cloth. He picked up the diamond and held it to the light.

The king gasped. He turned red with fury. He couldn't believe what he saw. The crack was still there! How could this old man dare return the diamond to him with the big ugly flaw running through it? "You have not fixed my diamond..." the king screamed. "How dare you show your face in this palace!"

“But your highness,” began the jeweler. “I never said that I could repair the crack. That is impossible.”

“So what have you been doing with my diamond?” the king asked angrily.

“I told you that I would make your diamond beautiful again, and I did. Look at the diamond again, this time more carefully.”

The king held up the diamond and now saw what the jeweler meant. The crack was still there. But the jeweler had turned it into an elegant rose. The crack was now a graceful stem, and the jeweler had carved exquisite petals and leaves emanating from it.

“There is nothing wrong with your diamond,” continued the jeweler. “It’s true that it has a flaw in it. But that flaw was transformed into something beautiful once you changed your perspective.”

The king now knew that his diamond was the most unique jewel in the entire kingdom.

It’s good to come together for these holidays. It’s good to come together to look at our own flaws and blemishes. To look at ourselves closely in the light just as the king looked at his diamond. We come here to do what’s called *cheshbon ha-nefesh* – to take an accounting of our soul, to see who we really are, to reflect on how we actually acted in the year that has passed. We come together so that we can commit ourselves to doing *teshuvah*, to turning back to our best selves, to fix what is broken.

For some of us this is hard work. We’re not accustomed to examining our flaws or reflecting on our character. It’s not comfortable to see ourselves as we really are. And so this space is important. It provides an opportunity to do something very counter-cultural, to challenge ourselves to do better.

Some of us though, are pretty used to examining our flaws. We see them all the time. We can’t escape them. We’re not smart enough, successful enough, or beautiful enough. We nag ourselves relentlessly to do better. We might tell ourselves we’re just striving to be the best we can be, but really we’re obsessing about our flaws and demanding perfection when perfection just doesn’t exist.

So we drive ourselves crazy, which is bad enough, but we also drive other people crazy. If we’re so unforgiving of ourselves, imagine how unforgiving we can be of other people. We become rigid, uncompromising, and unwilling to understand that we all have limitations. If we can’t accept *our* flaws, how can we accept *other people’s* flaws?

So we judge. We start with ourselves: we judge our work, our skills, our appearances, and our accomplishments. We judge our losses and our failures. But we don’t stop there: we judge our children, our parents, our partners, our friends, our colleagues, and our community members. We judge their work, their skills, their appearances, and their accomplishments. We judge their losses and their failures. And as we know, this judgment can be toxic, ruining our relationships and generating disappointment over and over again.

Sometimes I wonder why – if we’re trying to do or be our best on these High Holy Days – that the Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah focus on the terribly problematic stories of our ancestors, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, people who are at their very worst, people who are harsh and resentful and unkind. People, who if they were our neighbors, we would try to avoid.

Let’s take Sarah, who manipulates and abuses her maidservant, Hagar, and expels Hagar and her son, Yishmael, so she can secure the birthright of her biological son, Isaac. Or Abraham, who’s prepared to slaughter his son, Isaac, just because God told him to, and banish his other son, Yishmael, to the desert without enough food or water. And then there’s Isaac, who is so passive he allows himself to be led to the slaughter and never even objects when his mother sends Hagar and Ishmael, his half-brother, away.

Maybe, though, we’re given these complex and deeply disturbing stories of our ancestors so we can understand just how imperfect they – and we – really are. I’ve come to realize that these stories teach us that the point of these holidays is *not* to be perfect but to struggle to do better.

Our ancestors had to deal with awful pressures and challenges. Abraham and Sarah left their familiar home in Haran and set off to begin a new nation, coping with infertility, jealousy, abandonment, and a great deal of danger along the way. Isaac was born into a dysfunctional family and had to wrestle with fear, deception, and despair his entire life. These stories invite us to imagine what we would have done if we were faced with similar obstacles and to consider how we might act when confronted with painful choices.

But there’s more than just struggling to do better, because sometimes we can’t do better. Like the diamond with a crack running through it, we have imperfections that can’t be polished away. The story of the king and his diamond is an invitation not only to accept our imperfections but to change our perspective so that we can transform our imperfections into something beautiful, or at least worthwhile. It’s an invitation to open our eyes to new ways of seeing and thinking about ourselves and others.

When we change our perspective, and measure ourselves not by some outside standard, but just try to be our best selves, cracks and flaws and all, we can be true to who we are, unique and full of possibility.

There’s a Hasidic story about Rabbi Zusya, who said a short while before his death: “In the world to come I shall not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I shall be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

That’s our challenge. Not to be someone else, but to be ourselves, and to be our true selves. To find and embrace what makes us each extraordinary.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let’s examine our flaws and struggle to do better. But let’s also accept our imperfections and look at ourselves with new eyes. May it be a year of less expectation and more transformation. May it be a year of *teshuvah*, of forgiveness, and of new possibilities.

L’shanah tovah – may it be a good year.