

Carrying Brokenness and Doing Teshuvah

This evening I'd like to tell a story about the first Hasidic rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, who lived in the eighteenth century.

As Rosh Hashanah approached, the Baal Shem Tov yearned for the perfect shofar blast, a sound that was deep and pure and pristine, that would shake the very soul of anyone who heard its notes. This was a sound that would emanate from the depths of the earth and travel to the heights of the heavens.

Who of his disciples would he task with this awesome responsibility? Who could produce such a sound? One night the Baal Shem Tov had a dream, and in the dream one lonely note flew out of a shofar with such force that it shook the ground beneath him. Heavy tears flowed from his eyes. He woke up and he knew who had blown the shofar. It was none other than Reb Ze'ev Wolf Kitzes.

Now it's true that Reb Wolf Kitzes was devout. He prayed like the best of the Hasidim. Over and over he would recite his prayers, with passion and sincerity. And he studied Torah, hour after hour, day after day, plumbing the mystical teachings of the tradition. Reb Wolf Kitzes was also kind and thoughtful. He was a good person, someone you could depend on.

It's just that, well, he was a bit ordinary. Not the person you would think would stand before a massive, crowded sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah. Not the person who was a natural to entrust with responsibility for opening the hearts of every Jew in the congregation. Not the person whom the Baal Shem Tov would choose as his shofar blower.

But, the Baal Shem Tov had made his decision and he would teach Reb Wolf Kitzes to make that sacred sound that still floated in the memory of his dream. And so their work began. Every week he would teach him the notes of the shofar blasts. He would work with him until he made a sound that could burst open your heart. And then he would teach him the kavanot - the secret meanings behind each sound. He shared with him the sacred, mystical stories of the shofar, stories from the time of Abraham slaughtering the ram to the great shofar blasts that would announce the arrival of the Messiah.

Reb Wolf Kitzes was a diligent sort of person, so he wrote down all the Baal Shem Tov's teachings, from the mundane to the mystical. What an extraordinary opportunity to study with his teacher, to learn from this great rabbi. When he returned home, he would study his notes and he would meditate on their meanings. The sound of the shofar filled his being with beauty and mystery.

Reb Wolf Kitzes had finally mastered the art of blowing the shofar. He was utterly prepared, proud of his long hours of study and practice.

He woke up the morning of Rosh Hashanah, dressed himself quickly, and packed up his shofar. When he reached for his notes, though, he saw that they were gone. This couldn't be! He had pages and pages of notes, written neatly and laid out carefully with his rabbi's teachings. He looked in every corner, every drawer, on top of his desk, and inside his closet. They were not there. And he could not blow the shofar without them.

Panic began to seep into Reb Wolf Kitzes's belly. He had to go now, he couldn't be late. The whole community would be waiting for him. And then he realized that it was even worse than he had thought. Not only had he lost his notes, but he couldn't remember a thing. Not one teaching, one insight, one story he could hold in his mind as he blew the shofar.

He arrived at the synagogue and slipped into the back row, hoping desperately that something – anything – would come back to him. As he cowered in his seat, he heard the footsteps of the Baal Shem Tov. His teacher stood over him, waiting for him. It was time.

He tried to plead with the Baal Shem Tov. "I can't do it. I can't do this most sacred task you have asked of me."

"It's time." The Baal Shem Tov took his arm and escorted him to the bimah.

Shame hung heavily in Reb Wolf Kitzes's heart. He would fail. After the trust that his rabbi had given him, he would fail.

As he walked up the steps, bitter tears streamed down his face. His hands shook with fear. He gripped his shofar. It was time.

He looked out at all the people who were counting on him, waiting for him to sound the shofar, to produce a sound that was deep and pure and pristine.

With despair he raised the shofar to his lips. He took in a deep breath and blew the shofar.

His shofar blasts were strong and solid. Totally acceptable, but not extraordinary. The sounds did not emanate from the depths of the earth and the heights of the heavens. But they flowed, simply and with integrity, from his broken heart.

Later that day Reb Wolf Kitzes sat next to the Baal Shem Tov. He told him that he had lost his notes and forgotten all the teachings. He described the shame he felt for disappointing his teacher and the community. And most of all for failing God.

A tender smile appeared on the face of his teacher. "You don't understand," my son. "In God's palace, there are many doors, and each door has its own special key. But there is a master key which opens every door. That master key is a broken heart."

Reb Wolf Kitzes looked at him, slightly confused. His teacher continued.

"When you blew the shofar with a broken heart, every door in God's palace burst open. God does not care about perfection. God cares about your sincerity and your honesty. Your broken heart propelled the shofar blasts straight to heaven. They were the most beautiful that I have ever heard."

As we join together this Rosh Hashanah evening, we each carry brokenness in our hearts. We carry brokenness as we reflect on the world around us, from fires and floods to Texas' anti-abortion legislation. We carry brokenness from failed relationships and bitter separations. From deep regret about words spoken and not spoken, actions committed and not taken.

The Kotzker Rebbe once wrote, "There is nothing as whole as a broken heart." Just like Reb Ze'ev Wolf Kitzes, when we are authentic, when we embrace our brokenness, we can live our lives with integrity and find a sense of wholeness. Our brokenness is holy and powerful. We can refuse to be hopeless and decide to embrace our world with all its imperfections.

I wonder, though, if that's enough. We come here on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur not just to admit to our brokenness, or pray from our brokenness, but to reckon with the sacred act of doing teshuvah, of turning back to our best selves. We ask: How can our brokenness compel us to do teshuvah, to repair what *we have broken*, to make amends, to set things right in our relationships?

We can do teshuvah cavalierly, or we can do teshuvah with sincerity. The thing about Reb Wolf Kitzes is that he worked so hard to learn the hidden

meanings of the shofar blasts. He would never have stood up on the bimah without making a real commitment to learning this ancient religious ritual. So too with teshuvah. If it's real, and we are open-hearted, we will have to work just as hard.

I think we often want relationships to just get better on their own and let time heal what is broken. But to do teshuvah we have to sort through the painful moments and examine the ways we have hurt someone else. We have to accept that we have done wrong, and not only apologize to that person but also try to make things right.

Sometimes we recoil from the act of doing teshuvah, because relationships are messy, and we are often ill-equipped to handle other people's hurt feelings or harsh emotions. It's easier to say that we don't have the bandwidth to reach out. But I don't think it's a bandwidth problem. It's a priorities problem. We quietly tell ourselves that someone else's feelings aren't a priority, and we fail them. Our hearts may be broken too, but we have not lived up to Jewish tradition's expectation that we are responsible for making amends when we have hurt someone else.

When our hearts are broken, we have a choice. We can all ourselves to be self-absorbed. We can wallow in our own sorrow and think only of our needs. Or we can decide to be compassionate. We can make a commitment to doing teshuvah and fix what we have broken.

When we hear the shofar's blast, we can feel the pain we hold in our broken hearts. It is holy and powerful. And then, we can consider whom we have hurt, and how we will make things right. We can let our broken hearts awaken us to the needs of other people. We can do the hard work of teshuvah, of making amends, of becoming kinder and more loving. The High Holy Days afford us the chance once a year to stop - reflect - listen - and act. Not only are we capable of making these efforts, but we should not waste this precious opportunity.

L'shanah tovah, may this be a year of growth and change.