

# The Culture of Repair

Kol Nidrei

Rabbi David Kornberg

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In the Beginning, there was nothing... Little by little God began to create the universe and all was good. Until, suddenly, it shattered. In a cosmic catastrophe that literally shook the world apart, God's creation broke. In Jewish mysticism this is called *Shevirat Hakeilim*, the shattering of the vessels, and according to Rabbi Isaac Luria, it was the beginning of everything. From those shattered pieces, from the remnants of God's first attempt at creation, the universe as we know it was formed.

Let us pause for a moment on this Kol Nidre night and think about the fact that the world began broken. What does it mean for a God whom we believe to be perfect to have created a broken world? How is it possible that the very foundations of the universe are built from imperfection?

Philosophers would argue that there are two possible answers. Either God is not perfect and the first attempt at creation was truly an error, or we have to believe that the "accident" was no accident at all, and the brokenness built into this world is somehow intentional. I would argue the second case to be true, and it is the very fragmented and damaged nature of the world around us that brings us together tonight.

You see we, as Jews, believe that we are partners with God in creation. In a very strange way, if the world were perfect there would be nothing for us to do. There would be no reason for our existence. Instead, God created a world that required us to be a part of its perfection. Only then can we grow into the beings we were meant to be. Only then can we realize our potential to build and shape this world that our tradition tells us was given to us as a gift. Perhaps, we can even say that God is learning along with us how to perfect the human being at the same time we are learning how to perfect the world.

Five year old Emma was sitting on her grandfather's lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time, Emma would take her eyes off the book he was reading her and reached up to touch his wrinkled cheek, tracing the deep furrows. On occasion, she would take her hand and place it on her own cheek, feeling the smooth, unbroken skin.

Finally Emma spoke up, "Grandpa, did God make you?"

"Yes, darling," he answered, "God made me a long time ago."

"Oh," she paused, "Grandpa, did God make me too?"

"Yes, indeed, sweetheart," he said, "God made you just a little while ago."

Feeling his wrinkled cheek and then her own again, Emma observed, "God's getting better at it, isn't he?"

Perhaps God is getting better, and perhaps we are getting better as well. This partnership is the basis of our Jewish relationship with God. We come here tonight with one idea firmly in our minds – we, the world, and even our relationship with God are not yet perfect, but we have the ability, should we choose to, to spend our lives perfecting it. That is the true meaning of Tikkun Olam—repairing the world, and we Jews practice a Culture of Repair.

Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal of Prague, taught that the “whole purpose of Torah is to teach us how to repair the world.” It is our guidebook to perfecting ourselves, our community, and the world around us. All three of these aspects are so important to us as Jews, and all too often we focus on only one to the exclusion of the others. How often do we see people who are out fighting to change and save the world, but are blind to the needs within their own family and community? How often do we see people who devote their lives to a quest of self-perfection and in doing so isolate themselves from the world around them?

Tomorrow morning we will be reading the *Avodah* service, the special ceremony for the high priest on Yom Kippur. As we read through the three distinct sections, we see an acknowledgment that the world needs repair. What is interesting about this process is that we recognize that the high priest first begins with fixing his self and his family, then moves on to his community, and finally to the world at large.

Yom Kippur, not coincidentally, is structured to help each of us go through the same process. Kol Nidre focuses our thoughts on our personal growth and development. Tomorrow, we will come together as a community to learn, pray and build. By the end of these 25 hours we will have broadened our horizons and be ready to go back out into the world and make a difference.

We begin this process with the statement "*Ashamnu*," we have sinned. This is too often misunderstood to mean that we are admitting we are bad people, or evil. This is not the Jewish view of what read to here tonight. Instead, it is simply an acknowledgment that we, human beings, are not perfect, and at times we need to fix ourselves. Each and every one of us has moments in our lives of

doubt, uncertainty, confusion, when we lose our way. Saying *ashamnu* is our way of taking the first step towards repair. The path, however, is not always easy to find.

A man went to see his physician because he wasn't feeling well.

"Doctor," he said, "I am suffering from a dark and unshakable depression. Nothing I do gives me any relief. I am overwhelmed with pain and most days, I can't even make it out of bed. Doctor, what should I do?"

The doctor thought for a moment then offered the following treatment plan. "This is what you need to do. Tonight, go to the theatre where the Great Carlini is performing. He is the funniest man in the world and everybody who sees him finds him hysterical. By all means, go see Carlini. He is guaranteed to make you laugh and drive away your depression."

"But doctor," the man said, "I am Carlini."

Sometimes we realize that we, ourselves, stand in our own way. The very gifts that others see in us we are blind to, and, at times, we need a touch, a hug, a smile, or even a stern talking to in order to get us back on our path. Those around can remind us of the divine spark hidden within each one of us. Perhaps, as we look back at the mystical tradition of the broken vessels, teaching that we must search for the hidden light that was scattered by this event, the true task of a Jew is not just to find the light in the world, but first, and foremost, within ourselves.

Being aware, being mindful of that spark within us can lead to its light shining through in even our darkest moments. Mindfulness is a term used often today in describing the intentional focus of one's attention on the thoughts and emotions of the present moment. In Judaism we also strive to cultivate an awareness and intention in the acts that we do. We call it *Kavannah*. This year as we sit together on the holiest night of the year, I encourage us to think, and be mindful, of **these** moments that we spend together. They can be transformative, or they can just pass us by. The choice is ours and nobody else's.

This first level of Tikkun, of mindfulness, we will examine together in a series of discussions coming later this year that Jackie Schwartz and I will lead. We will explore both the spiritual idea of mindfulness and the Jewish concept of *Kavannah* and think about how to better ourselves by living life with intention and awareness. **You are welcome to join us.**

After the *Kohen Gadol* spent time reflecting on self-repair, he then turned to the people around him. He looked to his community of priests and realized that he had the power to affect a broader circle than just himself.

Less than a month ago American self-help author and motivational speaker Wayne Dyer passed away. One of his many gifts was his ability to recognize the interplay between the individual and the world around him or her. While, on the one hand, he argued that who we are and what we are is completely our choice, he also vehemently believed that we have the ability to change the world and the environment around us, and in doing so we better ourselves. He wrote, "When you are able to shift your inner awareness to how you can serve others, and when you make this the central focus of your life, you will then be in a position to know true miracles in your progress toward prosperity."

Dyer recognized that making a difference in the community makes a difference in ourselves, and there are so many ways that we can make a difference. You see, sometimes people can't go and see the performance of the great Carlini. Sometimes Carlini has come to them. Every year, every month, every week there are people with in our Beth Am family who need to know that they are not alone and that there is a community that will be there to support them. The loss of a loved one, an illness, the loss of a job, and even the isolation and loneliness of aging all leave us thirsting for the light of hope and happiness. It leaves us wondering where we can turn, and I'm here to remind everyone tonight that we can turn to the people in this room – the people in our community.

This past year the social action committee, called the 100 Blessings Committee, has formed and recognized needs both within our community as well as the community at large. We have undertaken two projects; the first is focused on our own Beth Am family. One cannot underestimate the power of someone reaching out to say, "Hey, are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?" Certainly Rabbi Earne and I are here to provide rabbinic support and spiritual guidance, but the 100 Blessings Committee also wants to make sure that other needs are met as well. In the next two months we will be training a group of volunteers living throughout our community who will, under the guidance of the rabbis, reach out to the families in our congregation who are coping with the death of a loved one. They will be a friendly voice to let some of our more elderly congregants know they are not alone. When appropriate, they will reach out to families who are struggling with illness, and they will listen.

Tomorrow Rabbi Earne will speak about the importance of truly listening to one another. It is a skill that cannot be underestimated. Even just five or ten minutes can bring such comfort and solace,

but for this to be truly effective, for us to be able to create the caring community that we can become, we need your help.

First, we will need volunteers who are willing to make phone calls and who are able to give a little bit of their time and their heart to reach out to others within our community. If this is something you are interested in, please be in touch with me in the next few weeks and I will make sure that you are part of our training and development of this program. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, we need to know when people in our community need support. Often it is assumed that Rabbi Earne and I will find out about things through the "Jewish grapevine," and many times we do. However, there are quite a few occasions that we don't find out until far afterward. You can make a huge difference in a person's life by just ensuring someone knows.

Jewish communities have been called many things: learning communities, spiritual communities, social communities, but we must also be caring communities. Creating a community that looks out for and supports one another is that second step in building a Culture of Repair.

The third step that we learn about from the *Avodah* service is to look beyond the walls and out into the world, and not just the Jewish world. When we open the Bible we learn that the first Jew, Abraham, first defended not Jews, but the pagan citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah and confronted God: "Shall the judge of all the world not do justice?" Abraham spoke to God in passionate defense of the people of Sodom, none of whom were Jews. Tikkun Olam is founded on the proposition that our obligation to our fellow human being is universal, that to love Judaism is to love humanity. That is basic Jewish theology. The traditional formula for our liturgy reads "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe." *Melekh ha-olam*. We are the custodians of the world and its inhabitants.

And so, the second focus that our 100 Blessings Committee will undertake brings Beth Am out from behind our walls and into the larger San Diego community. No matter what our challenges in life there are always people who struggle even more than we do. This idea is acknowledged in the Jewish value of *tzedakah* when we realize that even those who take *tzedakah* should give as well. While we struggle with the many difficulties facing us in the modern world there are those who are faced with one of the most basic challenges of all – hunger. This year, the 100 Blessings committee has also chosen to focus its efforts on engaging our community and ensuring that as many people as we can touch have enough food to eat.

Throughout the course of this year we will do this in three different ways. First, as we have done in years past, those who wish to will be able to join a Beth Am group to St. Vincent De Paul and with our own hands, our own hearts, and our own smiles serve food to those in need. Second, we will be working with another organization to be able to make food and take it ourselves to people who are unable or unwilling to go to places like St. Vincent De Paul.

Finally, in an effort that will engage the entire congregation, from preschool through adults, before Passover we will have Congregation Beth Am's Freedom From Hunger project. This will be an inclusive project that will begin with education in our schools and end with this community bringing together food to be delivered and handed out to those in need in San Diego.

We have the power not only to shape ourselves and our community, but also the very world around us. It is easy to become discouraged. There is always more to do in this world than we can handle at any given time, ISIS, Syrian refugees, domestic violence, and addiction. It is easy to say that we don't have the time or the energy to make a difference. It is easy to say that the problems are just too big for any of us to face, but tonight we realize that we can, and must make a difference. Tonight, on Kol Nidre, we rededicate ourselves to the idea that we are indeed partners with God and can use our words, our will, and our actions to shape the world around us.

It is not always simple, and sometimes it takes a change of perspective, but to quote Wayne Dyer once again, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." Take this poem called Lost Generation by Jonathan Reed.

I am part of a lost generation  
and I refuse to believe that  
I can change the world  
I realize this may be a shock but  
"Happiness comes from within."  
is a lie, and  
"Money will make me happy."  
So in 30 years I will tell my children  
they are not the most important thing in my life  
My employer will know that  
I have my priorities straight because

work  
is more important than  
family  
I tell you this  
Once upon a time  
Families stayed together  
but this will not be true in my era  
This is a quick fix society  
Experts tell me  
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce  
I do not concede that  
I will live in a country of my own making  
In the future  
Environmental destruction will be the norm  
No longer can it be said that  
My peers and I care about this earth  
It will be evident that  
My generation is apathetic and lethargic  
It is foolish to presume that  
There is hope.

But read this same poem from another perspective, from the bottom up, and it sounds altogether different.

**Read the Poem from the bottom to the top...**