

Repairing the world begins with repairing oneself
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Yom Kippur Morning 2019

The last year was a little rough for me. It started out great. The High Holidays went well, I was feeling like I was in decent shape, and I was happy at home and at work. I wasn't experiencing a mid-life crises, and turning 50 felt a lot better than I thought it would.

And then 6 days after my birthday, I woke up thinking I was dying. No, actually, I woke up praying for death as a relief from what I was feeling. Luckily, it turned out just to be appendicitis, and 24 hours later I was on the road to recovery.

But with the surgery coming right on the heels of the High Holidays and days after a milestone birthday, it hit me hard emotionally. I was reminded, in a most unpleasant way, of my own mortality. And it caused me to really examine my life, and ask myself if I was doing, and behaving, and living, the way I *should* be.

It felt as though the Creator had said I hadn't done enough self-reflection during the High Holidays and I was going to get to have a do-over, whether I wanted it or not.

And it made me realize that Yom Kippur is a gift. Yes, a gift. Like most of you I'm not a fan of fasting, and even clergy are not necessarily thrilled at the idea of services that go on all day long. But Yom Kippur really is a gift. 24 hours to simply reflect on who we are, and who we would *like* to be. A chance to hit a reset button on our lives, allowing ourselves to forgive not only others, but ourselves as well.

The word "to pray" in Hebrew is "*l'hit'pa'lel*". The root of the word means more than prayer, it also means to think. "*L'hit'pa'lel*" is also reflexive, which means praying is not necessarily something we are doing to God, but it is something we are doing to *ourselves*. What I mean by this is that the act of praying is also the act of being in deep self-reflection. It's not that we are praying *to* ourselves, but rather we are *judging* ourselves, we are *evaluating* our actions and the direction our life is taking.

The prayers in our *siddur*, in our prayer books, are a guide to help direct our thoughts in a such a way as to gently, or sometimes not so gently, make us think about our place in the world and to remind us to take responsibility for who we are and what we are doing.

There is one prayer in particular that is part of the morning liturgy that I have to come to love. It's a prayer that when I was much younger and felt invincible and immortal, that I didn't really

understand. It's called the "Asher Yatzar." It's a prayer that is supposed to be said shortly after we awake in the morning, and it is a prayer that thanks God that our bodies are working properly.

But a few summers ago, at Camp Newman, I learned a new interpretation of this prayer, a version that I wished that I heard when I was a teenager. And it is *this* version of the prayer that resonates more with me as I experience the physical indignities of getting older. It's written by the Jewish singer-songwriter Dan Nichols, and it goes like this:

I thank You for for my life, body and soul
Help me realize I am beautiful and whole (oh so beautiful, oh so holy)
I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too
I will live each day as a gift I give to you (my God, my God)
Baruch Atah, Adonai
Rofei chol basar umafla la-asot.

[\(Click here to listen to the song online.\)](#)

We speak a lot at B'nai Israel about *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. But in Musar, the 19th century spiritual and ethical movement, we learn that there are actually four levels of *tikkun* – or repair, three additional important levels that can not be overlooked if we truly want to make the world a better place.

First there is *Tikkun Atzmi*, healing oneself, then there is *Tikkun Bayit*, strengthening one's family, then *Tikkun Kahal*, repairing one's community, and then *finally* there is *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world.

This corresponds with the teaching of the Beshider Rebbe who taught that one must first "work for *shalom* within your family, then in your street, then within the community." We all have circles of responsibility, but at the center of all of these circles, is *ourselves*.

While the Beshider Rebbe uses the word "shalom" rather than "tikkun – or repair" that is really what he means. Because "shalom" means much more than the cessation of fighting. The root of the word *shalom* is the same as the word *shleimut* – wholeness. This means that peace comes when a sense of wholeness, or repair, or *tikkun*, has been achieved.

In other words we cannot focus on *Tikkun Olam*, without also focusing on *Tikkun Kahal*, ensuring that each of our communities are taken care of. And in order for the community to be healthy, we have to pay attention first to *Tikkun Bayit*, making sure our family is doing ok. And how can our families be ok if we are ignoring any of the people in it? Which means each of us

an obligation to engage in *Tikkun Atzmi*, and attend to that which feels broken or in need of repair within ourselves.

At the High Holidays we are given the opportunity to refocus our actions in relation to all four levels at once. We focus on our own sins, but we do so in the context of a community, a reminder that each of our lives affects the lives of those around us.

According to the medieval Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Tzfat,¹ also known as the Ari, at the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, in order to make room for creation, God first drew in God's breath, contracting the Divine self. And from that contraction, darkness was created. And when God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels, came forth, each filled with the Divine Light.

Then God sent forth those holy vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. And had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect from the time of Creation. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, Divine light. So they broke open, split apart, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. And those sparks fell everywhere, throughout the world.

And according to the Ari, that is why we were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. He taught that God gave the Jewish people, a special task, to look for and find and raise up all of the holy sparks that were hiding all around the world.

And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, will finally be complete.

But this is not an easy task. Because these sparks of Divine light, we are taught are found in the places, like the vessels that contained them, that are broken, and in people who might at first glance, seem shattered. In order to repair the world, we must look for the light in every place, and in every one.

And it is the responsibility of EVERY one of us to gather up these broken fragments, wherever they are, and restore them to their proper place, in order to make the world *sha'lem* – complete, or whole. When we engage in *mitzvot* and in *g'millut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, when we help people so that their spark of Divine light can shine, we restore some of that broken pieces to its intended place and we help bring back a sense of harmony to the universe.

¹ 1534-1572

It's an interesting thing in Judaism, that we are taught that from creation itself the world was broken, and that it was that very act of breaking, of shattering, or of exploding, that creation was made possible. Out of the brokenness came our beautiful world. It helps us understand that there is beauty to be found in everything and everywhere, even the broken pieces of ourselves.

And even though we know that the world is in need of repair, we are still commanded to take time each day to give thanks, to give thanks for the world we live in, to give thanks for our families and our communities, to give thanks for our very bodies and souls, regardless of what state any of them are in. To say a blessing of thanksgiving is to invite ourselves to *find* the beauty in the very things we know to be imperfect.

Throughout the last year it has felt as though my life has been filled with broken pieces. I have had plenty of stress about not only my health and well being, but also that of my family. I've worried about the increase in anti-Semitism and attacks on Jewish individuals and institutions, and what it might mean for B'nai Israel and our members. I've lost sleep about the environment and the world we're leaving for the next generation.

But amidst those broken pieces, I have also seen sparks of holiness.

I've seen my family come together to help each other. I've experienced the love and support of the larger faith community stand by our side in solidarity as we grieved Jews who were attacked or killed. I have been inspired by the young adults and youth who are stepping forward to save the world from our own destructive behavior.

Being broken doesn't mean something is worthless. It doesn't mean it's not beautiful or without value. What it means is that it needs our attention and our care. It means we need to seek out, and lift it up and put it in its proper place, not only so *that* piece finds its home, but that the place from where it was taken can be whole again as well.

But in order to repair the world, we must first begin with repairing ourselves. Then our families. Then our communities. And finally, we will find, that if each of us *really* pays attention to and takes care of that which is around us, we *will* have also begun to make the world more complete as well.

Part of the beauty of Judaism, is that we don't have to do this by ourselves. Even as we sit here, each individual taking account of our deed in the year that has just passed, we find strength in each other's presence, and in knowing that we are not alone, we are part of this family, of this community, *and* this world.

Each of us broken, each of us beautiful, each of us an entire world in and of ourselves that is worth repairing. It is as Leonard Cohen wrote: “There is a crack in everything...That's how the light gets in.”

I thank You for for my life, body and soul
Help me realize I am beautiful and whole.
I am perfect the way I am and a little broken too (and)
I will live each day as a gift I give to you.
Baruch Atah, Adonai rofei chol basar umafla la-asot.

Blessed are You, Adonai, for wondrous acts of creation and healing.