

Living with a Broken Heart
Pesach
Shabbat Morning, April 8, 2023
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Rumi, a 13th-century poet, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic wrote:

The wound is the place where the Light enters you.

Meaning, when we hurt, when our hearts ache, we are at our most vulnerable. It is from that space of vulnerability that is truly an opportunity, perhaps counter-intuitively, an opportunity to be open to the wonder and miracle of living.

We are mortals, hearts that feel hurt and love, joy, and suffering. We know this to be true, and yet, our minds play tricks on us. Our minds would have us think that it is the most important part of our being. Our minds want us to believe that it controls the show. Western culture encourages us to push aside our emotions in favor of our intellect. And we buy this hook, line, and sinker, belittling the emotions that play such a pivotal role in our lives.

As Jews of the Western milieu, we are perhaps even worse. As a people, we tend to think of ourselves as very head oriented. We are, after all, The People of the Book. We believe in education for all. In Jewish custom, a town is not a town until a school has been established. Not a hospital but a school!

This is not a terrible thing. Other cultures look towards us as models of education. It is good that we want our children to learn, to achieve, to be successful. It is just not the only thing.

Fortunately, our tradition knows better. Judaism is constantly reminding us that we are indeed of flesh, of emotion. We are more than just our intellect; we are sentient beings. Our *tefillot* are rich with expressions of emotion, trying to arouse within the reader, within us feelings of yearning, awe, love, and devotion. The trouble is that this avenue is still through the mind, the intellect. It is using words to try get the brain to illicit emotions. Sometimes it works. Often it does not.

But that's ok. Our religion has many modalities and avenues to achieving similar goals.

Another implement we have in our toolkit are symbols. Our culture is filled with symbols. We love symbols. Why are symbols so important? Symbols help us to hold onto intangible concepts. Symbols speak to the visceral, physical parts of our being. Some symbols are simple, while others are more complex. As time goes on, each of these symbols is layered with additional meaning. Just look around our sanctuary. The *mezuzot* on our doors remind us that we are protected by our love *for* and faith *in* God. The *tzitzit* on our *tallitot* remind us of our obligations to fulfill the mitzvot as commanded by God. The *Ner Tamid* is an expression of our ever-lasting love for God and God's enduring love for us.

One of the reasons that Pesach is the most celebrated of all the holidays of the Jewish calendar is because it is laden with so many symbols. Each item on our *seder* table holds volumes of meaning. In recent years, many families have added even more elements to the table, contributing additional layers of relevant and contemporary significance. Some items on our table have a clear meaning and connection to our *seder*. *Matzoh*, *marror*, and *zroah*, the shank bone representing the *Pesach* sacrifice are explicit, reminding us of the suffering and plight of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt and our narrow escape and hasty departure. These three components are so essential that our Haggadah says that the holiday meal is not complete unless you have declared each of these.

Other items are a bit more ambiguous. The *karpas* (spring vegetable), *hazeret* (lettuce) and *betzah* (egg) are all ostensibly symbolic of the same thing, spring. As someone who was raised in a Jewish home, the seder plate and what was on it was a given, something I took for granted. I like parsley, even better when dipped into salt water. Hard boiled eggs are delicious! But what are these things doing on our seder plate if our story is about us leaving Egypt?

Sometimes it takes stepping out of our bubble to see things in a new perspective.

"Rabbits don't lay eggs." Yes, that is a real sentence that I have said not once, but twice in the last few weeks, first to my daughter who is trying to understand the confusing messages of another's culture, and then again to someone who is trying to immerse himself in our culture. The egg, a universal symbol of rebirth appears on the seder plate but never has its moment in the spotlight. It is never mentioned as part of the meal and ritual. When exactly do we get to eat the egg? No one ever seems to know.

Karpas, on the other hand, does get an honorable mention. We know exactly what to do with it and when to eat it. We hold it up, we say a blessing and we dip it into salt water. Yum!

I led a model seder a few weeks ago, unsurprisingly with a large emphasis on symbols and the *seder* as a pedogeological tool. One of the participants asked “What happens when you mix symbols, when you take symbol number one and add symbol number two? What are we trying to say when we dip the symbol of spring, *karpas* into the symbol of suffering, salt water?”

I had never stopped to ask this question before. The student becomes the teacher. Every moment of our seder is highly choreographed. If so, this move, therefore, must be intentional. I began to mull this question over.

In Judaism we temper our emotions, balancing joy with grief and recognizing that life is a balance. A Jewish wedding is not complete until the glass is broken, recalling that even in our happiest moments, we are not complete. We still grieve the loss of our beloved *Beit HaMikdash*, our Holy Temple. However, the opposite is also true. In our darkest hours of grief, we have rituals to awaken us to the joy that life can bring. After sitting shiva for seven days, those who are in mourning are instructed to take a walk outside, in their community, see nature, and begin again to be present in the world.

At our seder when we recount the plagues, we take out ten drops of our wine. Wine is a tool through which we can elevate our joy. One would think that we would add more wine to our glass with each plague. We are celebrating our victory. But that is not our tradition, not our way. By reducing our wine by just a fraction, thus reducing our joy, we acknowledge that others endured hardships. For us to be free, the Egyptians sustained blow after blow, ultimately the loss of their children.

Our joy is tempered by knowing that life involves suffering.

Crossing through the Sea of Reeds is seen as the culminating act of liberation, the moment that defines us as a nation, a moment in history that we celebrate not just annually as part of our Passover holiday, but daily as part of our *tefillot*. As we watched our enemies drown by the engulfing waters, Miriam picked up her timbral and rejoiced. We joined in and sang with relief and wept with joy. We had been freed from slavery and our oppressors had been punished. Our

instincts would be to dance in jubilation. The *midrash*, however, recounts how God rebuked Miriam. Even at this, the height of redemption, we are instructed to remember the suffering of others, even those who are our enemies, those who killed our children and oppressed us. They too are God's children.

Our jubilation is tempered by knowing that others ache.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik said:

[When] we sing the psalm "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. God causes me to lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside the still waters" (Ps. 23), etc., etc., [sic], we believe with our entire hearts in the words of the psalmist. However, this psalm only describes the ultimate destination of [the religious person] *homo religiosus*, not the path leading to that destination. For the path that eventually will lead to the "green pastures" and to the "still waters" is not the royal road, but a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at the traveler's feet.

The path of life is sure to lead us up steep mountains and near, if not in, deep chasms. As part of life's journey, we are likely to experience crushing pain, a heart that is broken. The loss of a home, grief over a loved one, these moments can be so tremendously heavy that we feel as if we cannot stand, we cannot rise out of the darkness that surrounds us. Yet, in these precise moments is when we are at our most vulnerable. It is here that we have the opportunity to feel our closest connection to the Divine.

In Tehillim/Psalms 34:19, King David wrote:

קָרוֹב ה' לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב וְאֶת־דִּבְאֵי־רוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ:

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
those crushed in spirit God delivers.

When our heart is fragmented into pieces is precisely when God is the closest to us. The moment when we are broken, and our heart is aching, we are raw, vulnerable. Like skin that is scraped and loses its top layer, suddenly everything is felt with great intensity. Even air that blows lightly across exposed nerves is acute.

Our pain is tempered by knowing that life involves hope.

There are spiritual traditions that seek to mitigate suffering. We, the Jewish Nation, know what it means to live with persecution, take a different route. To live life fully is to live with both pain and joy. It is only by experiencing both can we be truly whole.

When we emerge from those dark times and continue with our lives, it is easy to get caught back up in our routines and again let the mind take control, pushing the heart and its wisdom aside. But Judaism has a solution, the language of symbols. Our symbols which speak to our emotional selves, help us to remember the feelings of vulnerability, the space of rawness and the glimpses of the Divine that can be found when in those spaces. Our symbols help us to hold onto the insights that we learn from such trials when the moment passes.

The symbols which surround us in our ritual life help us to reconnect with those experiences and their accompanying emotions. They are triggers for us, helping us to remember truths that we know, but sometimes find hard to recall.

Our seder is crafted to help us recollect that life is joy as well as suffering. We dip the parsley into salt water. We mix the verdant, fragrant sprig with the tears of our ancestors. We remember that the world is filled with both hope and anguish. And what about that egg, that universal symbol of rebirth and renewal? What is it doing on our seder plate? It is the constant reminder that to exist is itself a miracle. Life is fragile, yes, and beautiful. To live fully is to live a little bit broken, to be open and vulnerable.

My wish for each of us is that we live with our broken hearts. Not that we should live in brokenness, but rather, that we live in the space of vulnerability, a space of sensitivity, of recognition that life is precious. May we all see, or at least glimpse the Divine which surrounds us in every moment.