

The Broken and the Whole – Yom Kippur 5775
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In the summer of 2005, Steve Jobs, the founder and CEO of Apple Computers, delivered the graduation address at Stanford University. You may have seen the [video](#), which went viral on the internet in the wake of Jobs's passing in 2011. It was a speech about failure. Jobs dropped out of college in his freshman year. He sat in on a calligraphy and typography course just for the fun of it, and it turned out that the things he picked up came in handy when he designed the Macintosh with his friend Steve Wozniak some years later. Shortly after his 30th birthday, Jobs was fired from Apple. "What had been the focus of my entire adult life," Jobs said of the experience, "was gone. And it was devastating. I was a very public failure."

Over time, though, it became clear that "the experience of such a dramatic failure allowed him to reinvent himself and his work in a way that led to his greatest successes: buying and transforming Pixar, getting married, returning to Apple rejuvenated."¹ The experience that could have and should have broken him became for Steve Jobs the ticket to a lifetime of new inventions and success that have changed our world.

You may remember a [Nike commercial](#) with a similar message. Michael Jordan recited the following script while footage of basketball failure flashed on the screen: "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Yom Kippur is the holiday of failure. *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu* – we have sinned, we have been unfaithful, we have stolen. Our liturgy invites reflection on all the times when we failed to live up to our potential. Soon we will recite Yizkor and recall the wonderful moments and many good memories of people who have touched our lives. But, as we do so, we bend in humility, cognizant of the brokenness within us. Yom Kippur is a solemn day, a day of serious reflection, but Yom Kippur is not a sad day. Tisha B'Av, known as the black fast, is a day of mourning and sadness. Yom Kippur is the white fast. Our tradition teaches that we should be joyful, because we recognize alongside the failure and brokenness that we have an opportunity to begin again and to be strengthened.

This morning, I want to speak about the art of finding strength in the broken places.

The journalist Po Bronson tells the story of a magnificent elm tree on a farm in Beulah Michigan. Its owners chained their cattle bull to the tree, and the bull paced round and round. Over time, the iron chain scraped a trench in the bark about three feet off the ground, which deepened over the years.

Eventually the family sold the farm and took their bull. They cut the chain, but left the loop embedded in the trunk. It appeared as though the tree would soon die. But the elm continued to grow and bark slowly covered the rusting chain. The deep gash around the trunk became an ugly scar.

Then one year, Dutch Elm disease struck in Michigan. Again, it seemed obvious that the stately elm tree with the ugly scar would die as nearly all of the elm trees in the vicinity had died. But somehow it survived. Plant pathologists from Michigan State University came out to study the tree. They hypothesized that the chain and the gash had actually saved the elm's life. The tree had absorbed so

¹ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed*, p. 180.

much iron from the rusting chain that it became immune to the fungus. The incessant scraping and gashing actually made the tree stronger and more resilient.²

It was as if the tree had read Ernest Hemingway, “The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

For the past number of weeks on Shabbat, we have been reading in the Torah of Moses’s last discourse to the Jewish people, as he was about to die and the people were preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses tells them, “לא אוכל עוד לצאת ולבוא, I am no longer able to go out and come back.” He is getting older, and soon they will have a new leader. The 18th-century Hasidic Rabbi Menahem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl comments on the language. What does it mean “to go out and come back”? Jewish mystical tradition posits that there are 49 rungs of wisdom. God lives on the 50th rung, where no human being could possibly enter, and we are all somewhere on the ladder below. Only Moses attained all 49 rungs, but even he could not climb straight up the ladder. He went up a few rungs, and then slipped back. Because of his resilience and determination, he was able to gather himself from the lower rungs and rise even higher than he had before.

In order to rise, even Moses, must fall. In order to come in, we sometimes have to go out. In order to succeed we must be willing to fail.³

The same Hasidic master comments on one of Moses’ and our people’s greatest failures. When Moses was on Mount Sinai, the people feared that he would never return, and so they built a Golden Calf and began worshiping it. Moses came down and saw the Calf, smashed the tablets in anger. Most people understand the smashed tablets to be akin to tearing up a contract and rendering it null and void. But the Hasidic Master sees it differently. He teaches that the two tablets were symbolic of the beating heart of the Jewish people. The tablets/heart connected the people directly to God, but when they built the Calf, that connection was lost. The people wanted to do Teshuvah, but it could not begin in earnest until Moses smashed the tablets, because true return requires a broken heart. The broken tablets made prayer possible because, in the words of the Psalmist, “לב נשבר ונדכה, אלהים לא תבזה, God does not reject a broken heart” (Psalm 51:19).⁴

That’s resilience. The king’s horses and men may not have been able to reassemble Humpty Dumpty, but brokenness leads to new possibilities.

It reminds me of a story of a certain Jewish guy, Bernie, who decided he wanted to build airplanes. He studied hard in the best schools, got his degree, and earned an outstanding reputation. He decided to start his own company to build jets. The President of Israel commissioned Bernie to build an advanced jet fighter, and Bernie got right to work.

Everything looked terrific on paper, but when they held the first test flight of the new jet, disaster struck. The wings couldn't take the strain--they broke clean off of the fuselage! Bernie was devastated; his company redesigned the jet fighter, but it happened again – the wings broke off. Very worried, Bernie went to his rabbi and he received the following advice: "Listen," he said, "All you have to do is drill a row of holes directly above and below where the wing meets the fuselage, and I guarantee

² Po Bronson, *Why Do I Love these People?* Cf. stevegoodier.blogspot.com.

³ Arthur Green, et. al., *Speaking Torah, Vol. 2: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*, Kindle Location 2430.

⁴ Arthur Green, et. al., *Speaking Torah, Vol. 2: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*, Kindle Location 1655.

the wings won't fall off." Bernie smiled and thanked the rabbi for his advice ... and the more he thought about it, he realized he had nothing to lose. He drilled the holes as the rabbi suggested; and, what do you know, it worked! Bernie didn't understand why, but he went back to the rabbi to express his gratitude and the rabbi explained: "I'm an old man. I've lived for many, many years and I've celebrated Passover many, many times. And in all those years, not once--NOT ONCE--has the *matzah* broken on the perforation!"

Sometimes brokenness helps to make things whole.

In two weeks from today, our Torah reading will return to the beginning of Bereishit. If we read Genesis closely, we see that there are actually 2 creation stories. In chapter one, God creates the world in six days with a series of commands, "Let there be light." In chapter 2, God forms Adam out of the earth with His hands and breathes into his nostrils. In chapter one, human beings are created last, after the dry land and the birds and animals; in chapter 2, Adam is created first, before the garden is planted and before the animals and before Eve.

The Midrash interprets these differences as proof that this world is not the first that God created. God created multiple worlds and destroyed them because of various imperfections before settling on this world⁵ – and not because it was perfect. The Torah describes human history as a series of missteps – from Adam and Eve in the Garden, to Cain and Abel, to the Generation of the Flood, when things got so bad that God tried to start over. After the Flood, God resolves never again to destroy the world even though it continues to be imperfect – from the missteps of the Patriarchs to the rebellious generation in the Wilderness that tested God over and over again. God gets angry, but God never gives up. God is forced to choose between perfection and a world; even God can't have both. And God chooses the world. God chooses life amidst the brokenness and failure, and invites us to do the same.

The 16th century mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria developed the idea of brokenness even further with his doctrine of the Breaking of the Vessels, שבירת הכלים. When God wanted to create the universe, Luria taught, God had to contract. God's presence had filled every space and there was no room for the world. From that contraction, known as *tzimtzum*, darkness was created. God said "Let there be light", and divine light filled ten holy vessels. But the vessels were too fragile to contain the highly concentrated divine light, and so they broke and the sparks fell everywhere. Human beings were tasked with collecting them from the ends of the earth. The process of collecting sparks by performing deeds of kindness and ritual *mitzvot* is called *tikkun* or *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

We might mourn the breaking of the vessels; had they never been broken, the world would have been perfect. But modern commentators liken the event to birth pangs; they were necessary in order for us to be created and history to begin. Perfection is impossible. Instead we have a progression from failure to brokenness to *tikkun*. The broken and the whole live together.

I read a book by this summer by Paul Tough, which was recommended through JDS where my children go to school. It is called *How Children Succeed*. Tough visited many schools and interviewed numerous successful educators and concluded that the most important thing we can give our children – more important than rushing to get them ahead in reading and mathematics at an early age – is

⁵ Breishit Rabbah 3:7 and 9:2.

character, traits like determination, grit, and resilience. Our natural inclination is to protect our children, to push them ahead and shield them from failure. But Tough concludes that they need something else. “What [they need] more than anything,” he writes, “[is] some child-size adversity, a chance to fall down and get up on [their] own, without help.” If we really want children to succeed, he writes, “We need to first let [them] fail. Or more precisely, we need to help [them] learn to *manage* failure”, to deal with and learn from their mistakes.⁶

Yom Kippur is the holiday of failure ... and determining to begin again in pursuit of better results.

In February, my colleague Rabbi Charles Sherman will be visiting from Syracuse New York to speak in our LIFE Lecture Series. Rabbi Sherman had not been long in his pulpit and his wife was 6 months pregnant with their fourth child, when their third son Eyal suffered a debilitating stroke after complicated surgery to try to remove a tumor that had been discovered on his brain stem only a couple of days before. It happened so quickly. Eyal was left a quadriplegic, attached to a feeding tube and ventilator, and told that he would probably die within a year. Life was broken in an instant. But that was more than 30 years ago. Eyal eventually went home from the hospital and he learned to communicate from his wheelchair and paint with a brush that he holds between his teeth. He still faces significant hurdles and he makes frequent returns to the hospital. But Rabbi Sherman writes about how he, his wife, and all five of their children have managed to build a life and to celebrate *b’nai mitzvah* and weddings and many other special occasions along the way. He called his book *The Broken and the Whole*. The brokenness is real, but the family is whole. No person can escape hardship, but brokenness need not preclude us from enjoying the happy moments to their fullest.

Life is a series of progressions from failure to brokenness to *tikkun*.

I visited a longtime member of our congregation and Shabbat regular last week. She is currently under hospice care. The details are less important, but there is no treatment available that could improve her health in any appreciable way. Her caregivers are focusing on managing her pain and ensuring that she is as comfortable as possible; but the broken organs are never going to be repaired. You might think that this predicament would be cause for depression. She is literally waiting to die, and she knows exactly what is happening. And yet when I went to visit, all I could hear was gratitude. “Thank you so much for coming to see me; I know how busy you are.” And concern for others: “Look at these beautiful pictures that my great grandchildren drew for me. They are so grown up and I am so proud of them. And how are your wife and your children? How old are they now? I love being able to see them.”

In this moment of brokenness, this woman worried about other people. There are good days and worse ones, but she strives to create wholeness and quality in the direst of circumstances. And that is a real blessing.

We can expand the principle beyond the individual. Those of us who are involved know about the cracks in the structure of the Jewish community. Our brother and sisters in Israel live regular, joyous lives amidst the brokenness of the Middle East. The forces of chaos penetrate the world: There are diseases to be conquered, evils to be uprooted; we have seen failures of leadership and there is cause for concern.

⁶ Paul Tough, p. 183.

The Yizkor service that we are about to recite is intertwined with the mitzvah of *tzedakkah*, with the message that in spite of the brokenness, or perhaps because of it, we will become stronger through our acts of kindness and our efforts at *tikkun/repair*.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner describes the brokenness this way:

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

For some there are more pieces.

For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.

Some seem to be born with nearly a completed puzzle.

And so it goes.

Souls going this way and that,

Trying to assemble the myriad parts.

But know this. No one has within themselves

All the pieces to their puzzle.

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably

Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.

Sometimes they know it.

Sometimes they don't.

And when you present your piece,

Which is worthless to you,

To another, whether you know it or not,

Whether they know it or not,

You are a messenger from the Most High.

The hills of failure and brokenness are all around us. They cannot be eradicated, but they can be overcome. On this day of cleansing and beginning again, let us resolve to move forward and ascend the path of *tikkun*. We will rise and we will fall, but we can piece together moments of happiness and success, to lift our eyes over the hills and experience God's blessings along with all people in need. Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Hatimah Tovah.