

# The Broken and the Whole

## Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

The Rabbis of the Talmud, the ancient repository of Jewish Tradition ask, an interesting question about the Holy Days.

Passover has the exodus from Egypt, Chanukah, the Macabian revolt. What about the Yamim Noraim, The Days of Awe, The Holy Days– what historical events correspond to them?

Not a bad question considering how ancient and steeped in history we are. Well, according to their reasoning the Days of Awe commemorate the second giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Let me remind you of the story: Moses comes down the mountain with the Ten Commandments in his arms, sees the Golden Calf and in a rage, smashes the tablets on the ground. He then goes back up the mountain and gets the second set.

The Rabbis of Talmud reason that Moses went up Mt. Sinai for the second time on the new moon of Ellul – the time these holy days are really suppose to begin, received the second tablets on Rosh Hashannah, and descended down the mountain with them in his arms some 3,500 years ago this evening.

Pretty wild story, but that is not all. There is a problem: What happened to the first set of commandments that Moses smashed?

The Sages couldn't believe that the sacred fragments of the first set of tablets were just left on the ground. After all, the Torah reports that they were created by God alone. So what do the Sages say? According to the Talmud, the broken pieces of the first tablets were placed side-by-side with the whole second set in the aron hakodesh. The broken and the whole, side-by-side.

The broken and the whole, side-by-side; so many lessons can be learned from this short teaching from the Talmud.

Earlier this year I saw a movie with my kids: "Because of Winn Dixie".

It's a sweet film (great book) about a broken family in a broken southern town and a girl who manages with the help of her dog – Winn Dixie – to bring some comfort and some wholeness to everyone she touches.

How does she do it? She brings together both aspects of her life – the broken and the whole, for herself and those she meets in the town.

Her mom walked out on her and her dad, the town preacher, when she was a baby. Her dad won't talk about it. She persistently nudges him until he starts to speak of his brokenness. As he opens up to her and tells her the story they both heal.

She brings the broken and the whole together for them; he lost his wife, she lost her mom, but they have each other. It hurts but there is healing.

In the movie there is one thing that symbolizes this healing process and that is a candy called “The Litmus Lozenge.” It was a best-selling candy and the sole industry of the town until it closed down. When the plant closed the town began to fail.

What is the secret of the Litmus Lozenge? It tastes both sweet and sad. In other words, it brings the broken and the whole together for every person who eats it.

The broken and the whole is a profound metaphor for our lives and at the heart of our Holy Day experience. Imagine what it would be like right now to taste the magically sweet and sad flavors of a Litmus Lozenge. What feelings would it bring up for us? What pain? What joy? What longing? What sweet memory?

Returning to our story from the Talmud, we are all like those two sets of tablets.

We are all in some ways broken, we all experience loss, pain, real suffering. For most of us sweetness, wholeness, is also there – both, the broken and the whole make up who we are, *b'nai adam b'tzelem elohim*, and we bring that mix of broken and wholeness with us to these *yamim noraim*, these Days of Awe, these Holy Days.

This is my 10th year standing before you on Kol Nidre. I am honored to know and serve many of you. We've been through a lot together. We've had many celebrations, and we've seen sad and hard times as well. Even if we were meeting for the first time tonight, I'd know that some folks here are in mourning, others are struggling with a relationship, with physical pain, with mental anguish, some rightfully wonder if this will be their last Holy Days of their life, others are here for the first time without the love of their life.

Standing here, it is almost overwhelming to think about...

The broken and the whole – we are the broken and the whole, and the Holy Days, especially Kol Nidre, bring all this to the front of our being. Hard to hide when you are standing naked before God!

True for you and it is true for me as well. One example: the first Holy Day sermon I delivered here was on a very similar subject. At that time, my brother Willie was alive and he drove up from Santa Cruz to “see his little brother in action.”

I can still picture him sitting right over there ... After services he came up to me and said, “You speak the truth bro, you really do...” It breaks me to think about it, but that is not the whole story. That was over 9 years ago. He died 4 years ago. Since then his family has suffered and recovered in many ways. It was rough at first; they were broken wide open, but life does go on and they are now moving towards wholeness.

The broken and the whole – this is who we are, this is the human condition. We can't escape it.

We can not escape it, but we can work with it. In fact, many of the Holy Day rituals are designed to help us move from the broken to the whole. Three practices especially come to mind this evening –

1. The focus on introspection or a *chesbon hanefesh*;
2. The use of memory;
3. and being in community.

Essential to the Holy Day experience is the act of introspection. In Hebrew we call it a *chesbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. Ideally this 'accounting' starts in the month of Elul, but even if you haven't spent a moment contemplating what your year was like and what you hope the New Year will be, the moment you set foot into the Synagogue (even when it is also an LDS church) you can't help but begin to think about what is really true for you.

For some just showing up, just setting foot in a Synagogue, gets the whole process going. For others it's hearing a certain prayer like *avinu malkeinu* that sets a chain of thought in motion. Perhaps seeing an old friend (or enemy) is what makes you stop and look inside. What ever it is, the Holy Days are set up to foster introspection.

We may spend the rest of the year running away from our brokenness, our pain, our deep longing, but during these Days of Awe, especially tonight, we are given this great, important, even profound chance to stop running and take a deep look inside. It may be painful, it may be hard, but it is the way toward wholeness.

That I believe is what Moses realized while he was on the mountain the second time. Remember, he had smashed the first set of Commandments, and climbed back up the mountain for the second set. He was up there a long time, 40 days and 40 nights according to the Torah. What was he doing up there? My guess is that he was doing a serious *chesbon hanefesh*.

Think of what Moses had been through. He killed a man in his youth. Sure, the guy he pummeled to death was a tyrant, but it was murder all the same.

He'd shattered the first set of tablets. In fact, he struggled with anger his whole life. He had also abandoned his wife and children for the Israelite cause.

In other words, the tablets weren't the only thing broken in Moses' life. He had a lot to think about. It took 40 days and nights on the mountain, and a serious process of *chesbon hanefesh*, before Moses was ready to receive the second whole set of tablets. Only after he faced his brokenness could Moses be a vehicle for wholeness for his people and himself.

What is true for Moses is also true for us. It's so basic – psych 101- yet it is not so easy to do. Sometimes it seems we would rather do anything than face the truth. The problem is this: there is no redemption without telling the truth. The secrets we keep, the lies we tell ourselves, the broken, shattered pieces of ourselves that we hold inside, they fester, they grow inside us like cancerous tumors, sucking our life energy away.

In an essay called “After The Fire,” the author, Kate Wenner, painfully describes what happens when the broken past remains buried.

Kate was her father’s caregiver the last months of his life. His illness was unexpected, and swift. She writes, “He had gone...in eight short months from being a skiing, bikeracing, dating man of 70 to a shrunken, (and) exhausted soul with paper-thin skin...” He had been a difficult and harsh father who kept his children at a distance. But now approaching death, he would tell them something that brought them together in an unexpected way.

“When he was 14 years old, his mother and sister had deliberately set fire to their dry goods shop to collect the insurance money. It was late at night, and the couple that lived in the apartment above the store came running out from the flames, screaming and carrying their children in their arms. They could have easily been killed.” Her father had witnessed everything and had kept it a secret his whole life. After he told her the story he said, “I came from people who were despicable...to risk killing children so you can have a fancier store is evil. I was a part of that evil. Now you see why I am ready to die.” “But”, she reasoned, “you didn’t set the fire”. “No,” her father responded, but “I am tired of living with the shame. I’ve held on to it all these years. I’m exhausted from trying to cover it up, driving and driving myself. Dying is the way I can let go of it at last.”

A whole life of hiding, a whole life of secret shame that chased him like an angry dog, snapping at his heels, driving his family away.

We don’t have to wait until death to tell our secrets, to face our brokenness, to let go of our past. Nor do our families have to suffer endlessly because of what we can’t face. Yom Kippur is here, atonement is our promise if we only do our part.

Introspection, a *cheshbon hanefesh*, is one way the Holy Days encourage us to do teshuvah, to repair our brokenness and reach toward wholeness. Another important vehicle toward wholeness is the use of memory. For me, the best example of this is Yizkor.

Yizkor is the time we remember our dead. The longer I live, and the longer I serve our congregation, the heavier my Yizkor experience is. I sometimes wonder if there is another choice; do we have to remember our dead? Do we have to enter into that painful place of hurt and loss? I think we all know the answer to this question. If we want any hope of healing, any possibility for wholeness, acknowledging, and remembering our losses is essential. We pay now, or we pay later. There is no other way. It is not closure that we seek – there is no such thing until they put the earth on our grave.

Yizkor is more about perspective than closure. Boundless grief eclipses what is good and whole in our lives. Yizkor offers a framework for our grief so that our grief won’t overwhelm us. But Yizkor is not just about grief. It is also an opportunity to recall with fondness those we love and lose. Their smiling faces, and the qualities of their lives we strive to emulate. Yizkor can also be a time to re-affirm our place among the living. In this way, memory helps us move from broken to broken open, alive anew to what life still has to offer. The image that comes to mind for me is

a geode. A geode is a round, nondescript hard rock that when broken open reveals a beauty and splendor which would otherwise never be seen.

Finally, there is the fact that we do all this intensely personal work in community. This is quite remarkable when you think about it. When else would you work in such personal ways in such a public setting? Imagine walking down the street, beating your chest and saying, “ *al chet shekhatanu lifanekha*, we have sinned before you...” I don’t think so. But our Holy Day journey is essentially a public one – why? Because on some level we recognize that our burdens, our brokenness, our pain is too much for us to carry by ourselves. Wholeness is not achievable in isolation. We need each other to be whole, only together are we really one.

That, by the way, is the wisdom in saying the vidui, the confessions out loud in community. I am sure none of us have transgressed in all the various ways listed. In fact, I would guess that many of them don’t relate to most of us. But some do, for some of us here tonight, and all of us have something we are ashamed of, something that is hard for us to bear by ourselves. *Al chet shekhatanu lifanekha*, we have sinned before you. We say it together so that no one will have to stand alone and all of us can acknowledge where we have gone wrong, what is broken and what can be made whole again.

*Al chet shekhatanu lifanekha*, we have sinned, we have missed the mark, we are broken and we shall be whole again.

Moses really started something when he broke those tablets. The rabbis of the Talmud were brilliant in putting the broken set in the aaron hakodesh with the whole set. The broken and the whole, that’s us, that’s fundamentally who we are. The question is, will we be broken or broken open? Will our losses crush us or will we continue to live for what is whole and good in our lives?

Redemption, redemption is not some future time of perfection. Redemption can not be found in forgetting, escapism or denial.

Moses and the Israelites never forgot who they were. The ark of the covenant with the whole and the broken tablets was at the head of the camp every day.

Yet, every day they got out of bed, packed their bags and continued on their way towards the Promised Land remembering, not just what was broken, but also what was whole; not just what was, but also what was yet to be.

We are Moses and the Israelites. Their mission is ours. The broken and the whole, they are in every one of us. The Promised Land, it’s theirs too, in the realization of who we are and whom we can become, now and the year ahead.