

Ki Hinei KaHomer

We are as clay in the hand of the potter. On page 227, the anonymous 12th-century poet riffs on a theme from the prophet Jeremiah.

The editors of our *Machzor* placed this poem under the rubric of “Human Vulnerability.” But instead, I hear a song of human potential.

Artisans practice their crafts, shaping raw materials into objects that are useful and beautiful. Clay, stone, cloth, glass, or silver—the material responds to the will of the skilled artisan, while the artisan in turn brings out the hidden potential in the material.

The materials are malleable; the artisan can work them in many ways to form a desirable product. We humans are flexible too; we can learn to become even better versions of ourselves. This quality is essential to the purpose of this season and this day: *teshuvah*.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, and imagine yourself in this poem.

We are clay. See God’s loving hand shaping you into a deep bowl with strong sides, or a graceful pitcher with light walls for easy lifting and pouring.

We are stone. See God squaring up your edges, fashioning a solid foundation block to support a large communal structure, or the small but precisely shaped keystone of a soaring arch.

The heat of the forge makes iron soft. As you cool, you become strong enough to cut, dig, plough, hammer, chisel, or smooth hard stones.

The tiller moves the rudder. See yourself steering your boat left, right, or straight ahead, racing through the water to your destination.

Glass can assume a virtually unlimited range of shapes and colors. What precious substance do you contain?

Cloth can lay straight, or gathered in decorative pleats. See yourself as an elegant garment, or as a fine curtain that lets in the light while maintaining inner privacy, or as a tapestry that tells a magnificent story through pictures.

Silver we can purify and polish to a brilliant luster, or blend it with other metals for strength, or to hold an edge. See your true value, and your ability to serve and adorn.

Ki Hinei KaHomer

On this day, God sees our potential to be useful and beautiful in many different ways. Our challenge, with God's help, is to bring out the best that is already in us. All these materials can be reused and reshaped. Now is the time for us to begin again.

We look to our divine Artisan to supply a goal, a plan, and the tools. As apprentice artisans, we supply a vision, will, and work. And we ourselves are the materials we reshape, refine, and beautify.

The poet speaks of this covenantal partnership in the refrain: "Keep Your heavenly eyes on our *brit*. Turn away from our earthly origins and base urges." We can be more than dust and clay when You, God, show us the way.

In each stanza, the poet adds another quality of God. In addition to a Master Artisan, God is also a guardian of love and kindness. The Creator of both life and death. God supports the poor. God is good and forgiving. Forgiver of intentional sins *and* unintentional errors. God protects us from harm. And God heals us, body and soul.

Many of these descriptions paraphrase God's 13 attributes of mercy, which we recite so often over the course of this day. The liturgy calls it *brit shlosh esrei*, the covenant of 13. This is the *brit* that our refrain asks God to recall. *This* is the Teacher who shows us how we too can become artisans who work with our human souls—loving, forgiving, supporting, protecting, healing.

- We are clay, so we learn from God to be potters, as we look inward to assess our deeds with forgiveness, and reshape our character with love.
- We are cloth, so we learn from God to be tailors, as we strive to strengthen the social web and mend the fabric of human relations.
- We are boats, so we learn from God to be skippers, steering our lives toward new destinations, and back to our home port for healing, while avoiding the rocks and the reefs.
- We are stone, so we learn to be masons, as together we build a world of peace.

May this be God's will. And may this be our will too.