

Broken Vessels

Kol Nidre 5768 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

There are two teachings I want to share with you before we begin the communal Selichot prayers, the penitential prayers unique to Yom Kippur.

The first is from an early collection of midrash, a commentary on the Biblical prohibition of using any kind of blemished animal or utensil to offer a sacrifice. The midrash begins with a verse from the book of Psalms: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not reject* (Psalms 51:19)...In a commentary on this verse, Rabbi Abba bar Yudan said: What is considered ritually impure in an animal, is permitted in a human being. An animal is unfit if it is *broken or maimed or with a growth* (Lev. 22:22), but in a person *a broken and contrite heart* is considered fit. Rabbi Aexandri said: if an ordinary person makes use of a broken vessel, it is a shameful thing. But the Blessed Holy One only makes use of broken vessels, as it is written, *Adonai is close to the broken-hearted* (Psalms 34:19).

Many of us here are feeling broken-hearted. We have, as a community, experienced a truly tragic loss this week, the death of a beautiful 19 year-old, coming only months after the heartbreaking loss of another Dorshei Tzedek member. According to the last verse quoted by the midrash, again a verse from Psalms, “*Adonai is close to the broken-hearted.*”

What does that mean? I know it doesn't always feel that way; we often feel furthest from God when we are suffering, when we are bereaved, when we have to watch loved ones suffer. We wonder where exactly God has gone in such moments; we may feel abandoned. We may decide this whole God business is nonsense. It's an entirely reasonable way to feel.

Yet there is a truth in this teaching, a great possibility here, that I have experienced in my own life.

About four and half years ago, my father died very suddenly and unexpectedly. He was 64 years old, and had a heart attack while he was out bicycling with a friend. I was at a meeting at the shul when Gina received the call from my mother; she told me the news when I got home that evening. I'll never forget that moment, when she said to me: “Toba, Bill is gone.” I can't begin to describe the shock, and the excruciating pain I felt in those moments.

In the blur of the next few days—getting a flight to my parents' home in DC; making funeral arrangements—amidst a dazed kind of dealing with details, there were moments of what I can only call utter brokenness. There were moments when it felt like I couldn't live with this pain; moments of darkness and despair. I remember sitting on a chair at the graveside, the chairs pushed right up close to the open grave as the heavens opened and we attempted to squeeze everyone under the canopy. It was muddy and pouring rain and simply miserable. I remember thinking about how horrible it all was, and then in the next moment, realized that “horrible” was entirely appropriate, because indeed this was a horrible thing, to be sitting next to my father's open grave, to be mourning his premature death.

At one point during the graveside service, I glanced back and saw one of my colleagues from my national rabbinic association standing behind me. This was a woman I did not know well at all. I only recognized her because I'd seen her at a few of our conventions over the years. And yet there she was, she'd shlepped down from Columbia, Maryland to do the mitzvah of attending my father's funeral. Her presence was just one of the glimmers of blessing that began to unfold throughout the ordeal of mourning my father's death. These were some of the others:

Sitting in the little *sh'mirah* room at the funeral home the night before the funeral, listening to the men of the *hevra kaddisha*, the Jewish burial society, on the other side of the door, chanting verses from the Song of Songs as they ritually washed my father's body with great care and love.

At the funeral, getting to know the man, the boss, that my dad was from the perspective of those who had worked with him.

Again at the funeral, listening to one of his closest friends lovingly articulate some of the ways in which my father was a complicated person to be in relationship with, and feeling reassured about my own complicated feelings.

Watching a woman he had mentored and nurtured at his work, a woman who walks with a pronounced disability, watching her teeter at the edge of the grave as she gripped the shovel and added dirt, her determination to participate in a mitzvah that was totally unfamiliar to her.

Experiencing the outpouring of loving support for me, my mother, my entire family during the days of shivah, both in DC and back in Boston.

Each of these moments—and there were many many more, too numerous to describe—each of these were moments of blessing. And all of this blessing was inextricably related to the loss of my father. I couldn't have one without the other. This was my experience of *Adonai is near to the broken-hearted*—the palpable sense of God's presence not just in my own inner grapplings with this loss, but in the voices and bodies and hearts of so many people whom I encountered over those days and weeks. One doesn't erase the other, one doesn't justify or make sense of the other. They simply both exist as two sides of the same human coin. Our fragility, our vulnerability, our potential for brokenness—these are places where Godliness resides.

A second teaching, from *Likkutei Yekarim*, a collection of early Hasidic teachings:

“This is a fundamental principle: in everything in creation there exist sparks of holiness. No thing, nothing is devoid of these sparks, even trees and stones. And also in every human deed, even in a transgression that one does, there is a spark from the original shattering. What is the spark within the transgression? It is *teshuvah*. At the moment that we do *teshuvah* for a particular wrongdoing, we raise up the sparks that are within it to the upper worlds.”

This teaching is based on the kabbalistic notion that at the very beginning of the creation of the universe, there was a great outpouring of Godly light into cosmic vessels that were ultimately unable to hold that light. Some of the vessels shattered, and sparks of the original light fell down into what became our world, trapped here in our material world. Our goal, according to this

particular creation myth, is to “raise up” these holy sparks, to reunite them with their Godly source above.

What I love about this particular Hasidic teaching is the notion of discovering sparks of Godliness within the most difficult aspects of our selves—within our imperfections, our transgressions. And what are those sparks? They are the possibility of *teshuvah*, of repentance and transformation. If we follow this teaching, then in order to redeem the potential holiness within our imperfection and wrongdoing, we need to dive right in, not to avoid these aspects of ourselves. We have to dig deep to uncover the potential for *teshuvah* there, to discover the possibility of greater awareness, the path to transformation and growth, right at the point where we go off the path.

These two teachings echo one another. In the first—the promise and challenge of finding Godliness through our brokenness. In the second—the promise and challenge of “raising up sparks” of holiness within our worst moments. These 25 hours of Yom Kippur are an invitation into both of these truths. During Yizkor and the Eleh Ezereh service, we are invited into the sorrow and pain of our losses, to discover the blessings there. In the Selichot prayers—which we will recite multiple times over the course of this day, individually and as a congregation—we are invited to take a close look at the aspects of ourselves we are least proud of, all the ways we have fallen off a good and holy path in the past year. We’re invited to be honest in looking at the places where we’ve done wrong, missed the mark, failed to live up to our values. We tap our chest gently during each recitation of wrongdoing, as if we are saying---broken, broken, broken; open, open, open.

And throughout this awesome day, we are invited into an awareness of our own mortality, fragility, vulnerability.

We are invited into these place not to beat up on ourselves, not to feel miserable or hopeless or bereft—but rather, in order to discover the many sparks of holiness there. We’re being given the opportunity to transform the lessons we’ve learned from our missteps into something positive in the year to come. We’re being given the gift of re-experiencing the blessings left to us by those whom we’ve loved and been connected to in our lives, to hold closely the love that is the flip side of loss. We’re being given the opportunity to ask for and to offer forgiveness, and in that give and take to reconnect sparks of light that have become hidden and dark.

In the midrash that I cited earlier, it says that God “makes use” of broken vessels—of us, in our broken state. Our wrestle with sorrow, loss, imperfection opens us up to something divine; it allows a certain light to shine through us. Sorrow, loss, imperfection—these are inescapable aspects of being human, of being alive. But so is the blessing, if we are able to become vessels for it.

So however whole or broken you may be feeling this Yom Kippur, the invitation is there—I hope each of us can make use of that, can accept the invitation, can find those sparks just waiting to be lifted up and redeemed. And know, as you do so, that you are not alone in that task—that the beauty of this day is that we stand here together, each caught up in our own private spark-raising, yet supporting one another just by our presence.