

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5783
Perfectly Imperfect. Broken and Whole. May it Be Enough
Rabbi Bryan Wexler

On Rosh Hashanah we say: HaYom HaRat Olam—we celebrate the birthday of the world. We recall the creation story found in Genesis: Six days of creation. Creatures existing in harmony. Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. Shabbat. Rest. God creates a world of perfection. But that doesn't sound like my house. Does it sound like yours? With two first graders starting a new school and with a five month-old infant at home, we are doing fine—but it is certainly a far cry from the calm and perfection of Genesis 1.

Kabbalah, our Jewish mystical tradition, offers a unique interpretation of Genesis 1, a reading that in fact acknowledges the very impossibility of perfection. It goes like this: in the beginning, God's presence filled the universe. Because God was everywhere, there was no room for anything else. So God had to contract, in order to make space in which to create the world. The mystics called this divine contraction *tsimtsum*. In the newfound space, God created darkness. God then poured a stream of Divine Light into ten vessels. But these vessels could not withstand such awesome, primordial energy. So, they shattered, showering holy sparks everywhere. Human beings were created in part to find these splinters of divine light, to make a *tikkun*—a repair—by helping God gather them together and lifting up the broken pieces, to restore and re-create the world.

According to Kabbalah, at the very heart of creation – at the origin of all life – is a shattering, a breaking. Brokenness is literally part of the fabric of life, woven into our experience of the world. Personally, I find this bold acceptance of brokenness to be incredibly comforting. Instead of feeling isolated, we can gather strength from knowing that brokenness is simply part

of the human experience. There is no person that is immune. We all experience some kind of fracture or disconnect in our lives.

Brokenness. And today, Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year, comes after some really rough days, and months, and years. Do you feel worn-down or overwhelmed? Have you experienced a loss this past year? So many people have told me in recent months that they are simply tired. Yes, a physical fatigue, but more pervasive is an emotional fatigue. Does that resonate with you? Brokenness.

The fatigue is not only personal. We live in a fractured country where many struggle to talk to one another or respect opinions that are different from their own. Inequality, racism, and antisemitism are pervasive. If our economy is not broken, then at least it is displaying serious cracks. And then there is the pandemic. COVID has had a seismic impact on our country and our world, socially, emotionally, and economically. And I believe that this has led to a spiritual depletion and brokenness.

But wait, I can hear my fourth grade teacher's voice now.... "Bryan, don't forget to always define your terms." Good point Mrs. LeBaron! When I say brokenness, I think of a definition offered by Jewish author and therapist, Estelle Frankel who said that brokenness comes from the "times when our lives, as we have known them, are shattered by the intrusion of fate or disappointment." Brokenness is defined by any kind of loss, struggle, disappointment or pain. Who among us has not experienced pain, heartbreak, struggle, or loss? What brokenness are you carrying with you as we end one year and enter a new one?

The media and social media do not help with all of this. On the one hand, they feed us the message that the world is a mess, that the world is broken. We turn on the news at night and we see a picture painted of a world on fire. Brokenness. On the other hand, there are aspects of

social media that sends the message that everyone needs to be perfect. People share the “perfect” photos and sound bytes of the perfect relationships and families. Informercials tout products designed to fix your face, your hair, your weight, and your scars. The role models for our young people today are picture perfect, carefully crafted, sculpted, airbrushed celebrities. Together the message rings clear: the world is broken around us and we don’t measure up to the perfection that is held as an ideal. Oy. As a result, sadly we live in a world in which we are encouraged, and sometimes even pressured to keep our broken edges hidden. Too many people struggle with mental or physical illnesses, addictions, financial worries, family strife, and more in the shadows or behind closed doors.

Unlike our secular culture, Our Jewish tradition has a much more accepting and loving view of brokenness. There are powerful Jewish teachings that instruct us not to run away from our pain or our struggles, not to try to hide our brokenness – but rather to embrace it and to wrest meaning and blessing out of it. The Jewish view could perhaps be best summed up by a teaching from the early 19th century Hassidic rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk who said: “There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.”

A midrash illustrates this idea in a teaching about the two sets of tablets that the Israelites received on Mount Sinai. We know the story from the Torah. While Moses is receiving the Torah from God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites become restless and turn to idol worship in the form of a golden calf. Upon his return, Moses is so infuriated that he hurls the two tablets of the covenant to the ground, smashing them into pieces. After the requisite punishment of the people from God, Moses then must again return to God atop Mount Sinai in order to carve out two new stone tablets.

It is noteworthy that the Torah, normally overly focused on details, does not say anything about what happens to the first set of tablets. We are left to wonder: what happened to those shards? Did someone clean them up and throw them away? Were they left on the ground? Buried? With incredible insight, the rabbis of the Talmud tell us that the broken tablets were actually placed in the ark alongside the two new tablets. And these two sets of tablets, both broken and whole, traveled with the people into the Promised Land.

I have to imagine those shards were both physically and emotionally heavy. They must have triggered intense feelings of imperfection. Yet those broken pieces were given the highest seat of honor, as if to say: “Our broken pieces are part of us, and we can learn from them if we cherish them and hold them with loving care.” How many times have we buried our own feelings of pain or hurt, not giving ourselves the space to feel, accept or acknowledge our emotions? How many times have we pretended to be “okay” when we are not? The rabbis of the Talmud were not just solving a textual problem, they were offering a worldview and a universal teaching. Do not bury your broken shards, cover them up, or discard them. Place them, in the ark inside you. Your broken edges are part of you.- Hold them with tenderness. Honor them as real, authentic and integral to who you are. The ark becomes an embodiment of our own hearts– that are whole in their brokenness. Remember: there is nothing as whole as a broken heart.

I have long admired the writings of Shel Silverstein, but in recent years, his work has become particularly special because whenever we visit my sister Andrea and brother-in-law Dan in Massachusetts. Each night at bedtime, they make it a point to read Shel Silverstein poems and stories to my children, Meyer and Gavi. The kids love it and I cherish it because I get to watch Andrea and Dan shower them with love. Each night together provides me with a wonderful sense of wholeness. One of my favorites of Shel Silverstein’s books is entitled “The Missing

Piece.” It is about a circle (sort of a Pac-Man-looking figure) that is broken. It is missing a wedge-shaped piece. Unhappy to be missing its piece, the circle sets out to find it. As it rolls along, it sings a little refrain, as it enjoys the scenery along the way: Oh, I’m lookin’ for my missin’ piece, I’m lookin’ for my missin’ piece. Hi dee ho, here I go, I’m lookin’ for my missin’ piece. Silverstein writes: “because he is missing a piece, he can’t roll very fast. Thus, he could stop and chat with the worm..... Or smell the flowers..... Sometimes he overtakes the beetle..... Sometimes the beetle will also overtake him. This kind of moment is the happiest for him.” After encountering various pieces of different sizes along the way, only to find they were not the right fit, at long last the circle finally finds the exact-sized wedge that fits, and the circle is elated. Now it can roll along quickly. But soon the circle realizes that it can no longer do the things it used to enjoy, like singing or rolling slowly enough to appreciate the company of a worm or butterfly. The circle decides that it was happier when it was searching for the missing piece than when it had it. So, it gently puts the piece down, and happily goes along its way.

Whenever I read this story, I find myself thinking about other things that could be considered broken or missing a piece or cracked... What about the Liberty Bell? It sounded only one time which caused its iconic crack, yet it has become a beloved symbol of American freedom? What about breaks in the clouds that allow beautiful rays of light to shine through? Or geodes...those plain, round, gray rocks that when broken reveal wondrous, beautiful crystals of all colors inside?

Our brokenness does not need to break us. Brokenness is not a curse or a punishment. It comes with being alive. In fact, experiencing brokenness not only makes us more human, but it often helps us reach higher than we ever did before. Because when we acknowledge our brokenness, we step into a universe in which we are not measured by perfection, but rather by

our willingness to repair ourselves and our world. **A broken heart can also become an open heart.**

This reminds me of a Hasidic story. It focuses on the verse of the Shema which instructs: Take these words which I command you today and place them upon your heart—*al levavecha*. The story goes like this: One day a student asks his rabbi: “why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* your hearts? Shouldn’t it instruct us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?” To which the rabbi answers: “it is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them **on top** of our hearts. And there they stay *until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.*” The words fall in. The broken heart can allow us to “let in” — wisdom, understanding, faithfulness, hope, acceptance, and love.

Now let me be clear: I am not saying that bad things happen in our lives **in order** for us to learn from them. I am not advocating for more challenges and struggles or suggesting we should seek out brokenness in some way. However, since brokenness is a part of all of us, I do believe we can change our mindset around it. As Rebbe Nachman taught: “there is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” But more recently modern orthodox rabbi, Yitz Greenberg amended the mantra to read: **“there is nothing more whole than an OPEN, broken heart.”**

Long before I knew of the teaching by Rebbe Nachman, I learned this lesson from a very important person in my childhood, Margie Downs. Margie was a Catholic nun and my Grandmother's best friend. She was compassionate, sincere, honest, and fun-loving. One minute she would be sharing her spiritual findings with us- a conversation she had with Jesus perhaps- and the next minute she would be teaching us silly, borderline inappropriate songs such as "Mickey Mouses' Underwear, Flying Over Delaware." Being from Delaware, young me thought

the song was absolutely hilarious. Margie lived a life of walking with G-d and in doing so, she taught me deep truths about faith, kindness, and love. She died from complications of Hepatitis B at the age of 59, about one year before my bar mitzvah. I miss her to this day. But I am grateful for the time we shared and the significant impact she had on my life. My relationship with Margie is a large reason why I decided to become a rabbi. How do you like that?! The catholic nun inspired the Jewish boy to become a rabbi.

I introduce her to you today both to honor her memory and also because, although it took me years of maturing to realize it, Margie taught me a lot about brokenness and opening my heart. Margie experienced challenges and pain in her own life. Her mother died when she was young, she cut off a romance in order to enter the convent, and she faced significant health issues in the last years of her life. And still, Margie taught me that there is beauty and Godliness in the brokenness. She was my Mr. Rogers-- teaching me that you do not need to be perfect to be loved. Once Margie said that she did not like wearing her habit because it restricted her vision. The habit is designed to only allow nuns to see straight ahead, to block out the surrounding distractions. Look ahead and focus on a perfect God. But Margie would peep around the sides of the habit saying she wanted to see God's imperfections. She wanted to see the brokenness and engage in life fully. Margie helped to crack my heart open.

Margie's legacy helped to teach me and in turn, I hope all of us, that we can transform our thinking. We can look into the proverbial mirror and see not only the cracks in our physical appearance but even more the cracks in our souls, and understand that they are part of the human condition. It's what it means to be human. We are imperfect. And yet, we ought to be able to say: **"I am enough."** It's okay to be human. It's okay to be kind and forgiving to ourselves. I am enough. How does it feel to hear that? How does it feel to think that about yourself? Of

course we want to be smarter. Of course we need to work harder. Of course we want to be more successful. Of course we want to be better in our relationships. Of course we want to do more, be more, and achieve more. That's also part of the human condition. I feel this pressure all of the time. I think: I'm not a good enough husband, father, brother, and son. I'm not a good enough rabbi. Have you ever felt this way? I imagine that you have. But here is the thing: while we may never be perfect, and broken as we may be, we still have enough within us to move forward.

Now, I want to pull back the curtain a bit here. Give you some behind the scenes thinking of a rabbi. To have an opportunity to speak before the entire congregation each year on the High Holy Days is a tremendous privilege and one that I most certainly do not take lightly. It is a privilege but also a responsibility. I get one shot per year to share a message that feels important to the given moment. And generally, as I think about what I want to share, I feel it is important, really it's my job to challenge everyone. Judaism says we can always do and be better. It's not about perfection, but rather, progress. Most of the time, we need to push ourselves. In many ways, that's what the High Holy Days are all about; pushing ourselves to change, to grow, to evolve. However, I think this is a rather unique moment. The last few years have been incredibly challenging for all of us. This is a moment where I feel less inclined to challenge and more inclined to embrace. **I want to tell you that you are enough.**

Melissa Camara Wilkins author of the book "Permission Granted: Be Who You Were Made to Be and Let Go of the Rest." writes about this idea of being enough. She says: "...you are enough, just as you are, just as you were made to be." Being enough does not mean that you can't grow and improve. It does not mean that you worked long enough, tried hard enough, presented well enough. It doesn't mean that you never need help or are by any means perfect or a finished product. It is simply who you are. The you that you

are is enough. Or as Camara Wilkins writes: **“You are enough means that you were made to be you, as you are, on purpose...”** You are enough as you are, mess and all, beautiful and broken, and yet, showing up for your life every day.” To me, this does not mean that we can not be better or do better. Rather, it means that we have enough within ourselves—enough strength, enough ability, enough resilience, enough soul- to deal with that which is broken and to overcome or transform it. That’s what *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* are all about. *Teshuvah* is change—we have enough to make a change. *Tefillah*, prayer- we have enough to reach out to God, to find in prayer the strength to go forward. *Tzedakah*- we have enough resources to share with others and to help others along the way.

I think this is a key message for the new year of 5783. We are enough. We are enough in the sense that we have enough within us to help to heal what is broken in ourselves and in others and to meet the challenges of these past years and the year to come. And as a TBS community we have proven it by the fact that we have stayed together as a community despite all of the challenges that we have faced. And while we may never be exactly the same, we may in fact be better. We have discovered that we have enough capacity to help those who can’t come and be with us in the sanctuary. While we want people and encourage people to join us in person, we have the ability and resources to reach those who can’t. Two years ago today was a shattering experience- to go through the High Holidays with no one in the sanctuary. We even used humor to deal with it with those cardboard heads. And now look, there’s not a cardboard head among you! We have discovered that we have enough reserve and creativity within us to meet the challenges of yesterday and today, and it hasn’t stopped us from looking out for

others, both within our community and beyond. We are gathering food for people who need it. We are helping refugees fleeing Ukraine and elsewhere. When members of our congregation sustain a loss, we have been there, and will be there. The past few years have been a lot. It continues to be a lot. **But I believe in you. I believe in us.**

There is much work to be done in the new year of 5783. But allow me to suggest that part of that work is opening our hearts. Opening our hearts to be kind to ourselves and to others. Opening our hearts to the belief that our breaks and our cracks are beautiful and holy. Opening our hearts to the understanding that that which makes us feel broken may be the very places and opportunities where we can let God in. And opening our broken yet magnificent hearts to the realization that we have been through a lot. We are strong. We have enough within us. We **are** enough.

And there is one more thing to recognize. Look around. We are not alone. We have each other to help fill the cracks with love, kindness, and support. Together, collectively, we have enough wisdom and strength to be a blessing to each other. Our broken tablets can come to be a steady foundation on which to build a lifetime of growth, if we do it together. I hope and pray that in this new year of 5783, we can embrace our broken places and seek healing. May all of us – our whole selves – broken and whole pieces together – be honored. May we see that we are enough. We have enough to move forward. May we recognize that God has given us this sacred task, and may we walk forward into the new year, perfectly imperfect, broken and whole together.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah.