

## **Finding Holiness in the Broken Pieces**

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It's taken me nearly two years to give this sermon, but with time, telling this story has become easier. It all began when I entered the eerily empty lobby at the University of Chicago Center for Care and Discovery around 5 am on February 13, 2017. I was nervous, a little scared, and hopeful. Hopeful that the surgery would result in remission from my Crohn's disease. After countless intake questions, an IV, and a few shots - for good measure, I apprehensively laid back on the hospital gurney as doctors and nurses wheeled me into the cold, bright white operating room. What seemed like thousands of lights glistened above me. I remember how the nurse anesthetist peered down at me, and encouraged me to take a deep breath, as I breathed in the medicine which ushered me into sleep. The doctors performed an ileocectomy, a procedure to remove the diseased portions of my small intestine.

A few hours later, I laid dozing in and out, awakening into a new groggy reality. I had a lot of fears going into surgery: the pain, the hospital food, the efficacy of the surgery, and most of all what I imagined would be a HUGE gaping wound on my abdomen. It took a lot of courage to look at my wound for the first time. Now, all that is left of the physical wound that I agonized over before surgery, and obsessively checked after, is a smallish scar under my belly button. An everyday physical reminder of my surgery and my disease. I have come to terms with the idea that my scar will never completely fade away, and will serve as a permanent reminder of that moment and particular difficult and painful chapter of my life.

We all have our scars, both physical and emotional. Each of us carries our own burdens. As a rabbi, I regularly hear stories of brokenness in our community. Whether it be divorce, illness, death, addiction, mental health, family estrangement, or a host of other issues or challenges, we all lead complicated lives. And I hear it all. I have the honor of spending time with families in moments of great grief and pain and immense joy and celebration, and often it's a mixture of both at once. On our joyous occasions, we feel great longing for our family members who didn't live to see this beautiful moment. And in our times of sorrow, we find a reason to smile over the simplest memory. We are all imperfect, searching for meaning, hope, and connection in our lives. The emotional and physical wounds that we carry are a heavy burden, representing the overwhelming weightiness of the human condition. We are all broken.

Now, I realize that some of you may be thinking, "Not me," or "I'm not broken," "Nothing that bad has ever happened to me," or "Even though I've experienced difficult moments, I am not broken." Each of us have our own distinct stories of loss, pain, or difficulties. Some of us are able to move on from those moments quickly, and for others in the same of different situations, it may take longer. And some of us may feel fine one day,

and the next day that old wound rips open again. I just ask that even if you feel disconnected from the idea of being “broken,” please hear me out until the end.

Perhaps this kind of brokenness is not just a human condition. Earlier in the summer, off the coast of Victoria, British Columbia, Tahlequah, an orca known as J35, gave birth to a calf that lived for less than an hour. The baby’s carcass began sinking, but Tahlequah would dive down to retrieve the calf and support it on her head. When the mother became tired, other whales from the pod would take turns keeping the calf afloat. A witness who observed the pod off of the coast of the San Juan Islands reported, “At sunset, a group of 5-6 females gathered at the mouth of the cove in a close, tight-knit circle, staying at the surface in a harmonious circular motion for nearly 2 hours. As the light dimmed, I was able to watch them continue what seemed to be a ritual or ceremony. They stayed directly centered in the moonbeam, even as it moved.”<sup>1</sup> J35 carried her deceased calf on what researchers called her “tour of grief” for a total of 17 days and over 1000 miles. The latest sighting of Tahlequah indicates she is in good physical condition following her unimaginable sorrow. Like humans, whales are known for their social and emotional behavior. It is through these acts that we feel a connection to this majestic creature who was distraught by the death of her calf. We can relate to this feeling of brokenness, this feeling of despair.

Like Tahlequah, each of us carries our burdens. We are all fractured. On Rosh Hashanah we are reminded of this brokenness, through the sounds of the shofar: tekiah, a sustained blast, teruah, a series of short staccato blasts, and shevarim a series of broken notes. The Talmudic rabbis believed that the latter two calls are meant to sound like cries.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word shever means broken, and the root is connected to shevarim- the name of the three broken notes we hear in our Shofar call. We can trace this Hebrew root of shever, the idea of brokenness, back to the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Psalms we read, “God heals the **brokenhearted** and binds up their wounds,<sup>3</sup> and the prophet Isaiah professes, “The Eternal has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to free the captives.”<sup>4</sup> The metaphors of God as healer of wounds and the brokenhearted, resonate throughout our tradition. Why is the concept of brokenness found so often throughout our Bible? Because it is so central to the human experience. A common condition, across time and across culture. No one escapes this fate. We are all wounded and broken.

Even revelation, the moment Moses received Torah on Mount Sinai, is a story of imperfection, moral collapse, and brokenness. When Moses received the Ten Commandments, he carried the two tablets of stone down the mountain to the people. When he reached the bottom of the mountain, he saw the Golden Calf. Moses was up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, and the people were sick and tired of waiting for Moses. So they built an idol to worship. Moses saw the calf, and in his rage he threw

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whaleresearch.com/j35>

<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashanah 34a:20-21

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 143:3

<sup>4</sup> Is. 61:1

down the tablets, shattering them into pieces.<sup>5</sup> Our sages asked, what became of the broken tablets? The talmudic rabbis taught, that the broken pieces of the first set of tablets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant, the moveable Ark that the Israelites carried with them on their journey. When the second tablets were created, Moses was instructed to place them in the ark alongside the broken pieces of the first tablets.<sup>6</sup> But why would God instruct Moses to place the completed tablets in the ark with the broken tablets? A modern orthodox rabbi teaches, that wholeness and brokenness exist side by side even in what we consider one of the holiest places.<sup>7</sup>

Our biblical narrative is filled with stories that mirror our reality of brokenness: stories of infertility, death, betrayal, war, and famine. Both realities exist side by side, in the same container. The whole and completed tablets and the broken tablets. They occupy the same space in two different states, and it's the combination of the whole and the broken, that tell the complete story of our people. After Moses broke the tablets, it's in that broken and fragile state that the Israelites and Moses continue on their journey through the desert. And it's also in that same state of brokenness and fragility that we move forward. The broken pieces become an integral part of our story, of our history, of our heart. Through those states of brokenness we thrive and face life.

Those in the recovery community understand this. In early March, I participated in a week long immersion experience for rabbis and Jewish educators at Beit T'shuvah, a Jewish addiction treatment center and synagogue community, in Los Angeles. We spent a week engaged in the Beit T'shuvah community, learning about their innovative approach to addiction, and hearing personal stories from residents and staff.

Harriet Rosetto, the organization's founder, led a session called, "You Don't Have to Be an Addict to be in Recovery." Harriet teaches, that essentially we all broken, and everyone needs connection, passion, and purpose in life. When we learn to address our own brokenness, it makes us less judgemental of others' mistakes. That is what Beit T'shuvah is about: helping broken people find their passion and purpose. Each resident at Beit T'shuvah learns to share their story as a part of their recovery, and that openness is what enables them to connect with others and allows them to create and sustain a beautiful loving and supportive community. Ultimately, it's through our vulnerability that we create meaningful relationships which lead to feelings of connection and purpose.

My experience in LA this past spring has inspired me to better understand my own vulnerability and imperfections. I have never spoken openly about my disease, to a crowd of this size. My goal is not to burden you with concern for me, but rather, my hope is that speaking about my own brokenness inspires you to consider yours. It's easy to attempt to hide our wounds and scars, to try to cover up our illnesses, imperfections, and life challenges. I pray that my sharing is received as invitation to foster an environment of honest sharing and truthfulness among members of this

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<sup>5</sup> Ex. 32:1-19

<sup>6</sup> Bava Batra 14b:6

<sup>7</sup> Goldscheider, Aaron. "The Broken Tablets." *Aishcom*, 28 June 2015, [www.aish.com/authors/285798721.html](http://www.aish.com/authors/285798721.html).

congregation. In that spirit, I encourage you to contemplate your own brokenness and vulnerability. On this Rosh Hashanah the season in which our tradition beckons us to perform *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our souls, I invite you to join me in this holy work. In doing so, just as I witnessed at Beit T'shuvah in LA, together we can build something truly special. Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotzk taught, "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart." The scar on my abdomen serves as a reminder of my personal wounds and struggles, and it has also become a piece of the whole of who I am. The scars that represent our brokenness remain, we carry the broken pieces and whole pieces together in one container, as one holy community, moving forward in vulnerability, compassion, and hope.