

Most of us have heard the old joke about Jewish holidays, "They tried to kill us. They didn't. Let's eat." Our festivals and holy days are connected to historical moments in the story of our people and events in the Torah – *Pesach* to the exodus from Egypt, *Hanukkah* to the Maccabean revolt, *Shavuot* to receiving Torah at Sinai. Even Rosh Hashanah is linked to the creation of humanity. But what about Yom Kippur? Is there any historical link to this Day of Atonement? In later Jewish traditions there is – to the moment Moses came down from Sinai with the second set of Ten Commandments, having shattered the first ones when he saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf.¹ The second chance God gives the people of Israel after their apostasy, then, is a model for the forgiveness we seek today.

But ... what happened with the first tablets, the ones Moses smashed? The Torah says nothing about them. Centuries later, however, the rabbis of the Talmud suggested that the "the complete second unbroken set of tablets, as well as the broken fragments of the first set, were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. The first set of tablets shattered by Moses resided with the second unbroken set."² Throughout their wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai, the broken and whole tablets were carried together.

At this time of *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur we are, perhaps more than at any moment in the year, reminded how each of us are mirrors of the ancient Ark of the Covenant, for in this moment we carry with us memories that restore us and memories that break our hearts. In this communal remembering we become, in so many ways, living Arks – broken and whole.

As we take time to remember those we loved, the details of the lives of those lost to us come back with a vivid clarity.

We remember a mother or father who tucked us in, drove us to our practices and games, who moved us into college or made us meals they knew we loved.

¹ Rashi to Exodus 32:1

² Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 8b and *Bava Batra* 14b

And we are whole. For some, thoughts turn to painful times – when a parent would not accept our choices, or said something that diminished us, or recalling months on end watching their slow loss of dignity and capacity. And we are broken.

We remember a wife or husband who knew us like no one else – and even still, stayed with us. Our heart beats with gratitude for the knowing glances, the shared laughter, the times of intimacy and challenge. And we are whole. Also in this sacred space are memories of spouses taken long before we were ready – the unfairness of life, the unexpected pain. And we are broken.

Some remember precious, beloved children. As vivid as yesterday we remember when they were born. We feel blessed from the joy they brought, their curiosity and energy. And we are whole. And our hearts are shattered by those young people taken from us far too soon, upending our expectations of how life should be and the natural order of the generations. We are broken.

We remember other relatives and so many friends – and when we do, we are enriched by the memories, and so made more whole; and we grieve their passing, our hearts splintered with misery.

For some, there is the added anguish of the death of those with whom we had not made peace or with whom there was unfinished business, who hurt us in word and deed. We are broken not only by their deaths, but a relationship lost before they passed. Yet we also find strength that, despite the pain of those tainted memories, we have not been sullied on the possibility of good and decent relationships and of finding a way to inner peace and acceptance. We are, despite that pain that is like broken glass, whole.

At Yizkor memory makes us whole and memory wounds us – all at once and all at the same time.

How do we live with all that within us? How can we find a way, as our ancestors did, to walk together to a better place, a Promised Land where we can be at peace with this inherent paradox of living?

My wife, Anne, has a great way to help me when I'm feeling anxious, a bit down or overwhelmed. She calls me to come watch video clips from the TV show "America's Got Talent." Most of the time I say, "I can't. I'm too busy. I've got too much to do." But because she knows me better than I know myself, she *insists* that I sit down and watch the videos. After a few minutes, I am inevitably "hooked", not only by the incredible talent, but the moving stories the contestants share. One of the most memorable auditions was of a 30-year-old singer who introduced herself as Nightbirde. She told the judges that she would sing an original piece titled "It's OK", explaining that it was a response to dealing with cancer, which had – at the time – spread to her lungs, spine and liver. "I'm more than the bad things that happen to me," she said. Then Nightbirde sang about a pain she (and none of us, really) can run from:

I moved to California in the summertime
I changed my name thinking that it would change my mind
I thought that all my problems they would stay behind
I was a stick of dynamite, and it was just a matter of time,
Oh dang, oh my, now I can't hide
Said I knew myself but I guess I lied
It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay
If you're lost, we're all a little lost and it's alright
If you're lost, we're all a little lost and it's alright ...
It's alright to be a little lost sometimes.

After a pregnant silence, the crowd erupted with applause and tears. The toughest judge, Simon Cowell offered gentle praise: "There was something about that song after the way you almost casually told us what you are going through ..." And then Nightbirde said words that touched all who watched: "You can't wait until life isn't hard anymore," she said, "before to decide to be happy."

She knew her chances for survival slim - only 2%. "But", she said with a smile, "2% is not nothing." Nightbirde, whose given name was Jane Marczewski, died 8 months after that memorable appearance. She died ... and yet the way she

lived – and chose to be happy – teaches us how to be whole, even in our brokenness.

Just before going into a funeral with a family, as we stand together for *kriyah* (to tear the clothing or a ribbon) I usually share a teaching from the Kotzker Rebbe, who taught, “the only whole heart is the broken heart.” His words speak to the truth that no one can go through life – with their heart open to laughter and love – and not feel bereft when the ones held dearest are lost. The Kotzker’s student, Simcha Bunam, was troubled by his teacher’s words. Do we not believe in a God who heals? How can a broken heart be one that is whole? He answered his own question. God may heal, but even God cannot take away the shattered sense of loss. What God can do – and we pray it happens soon to all broken hearts – is take away the sadness. The goal then is, paradoxically, a “broken wholeness.”

A “broken wholeness” means embracing the pain of losing as the cost of the gift of laughter and love - a rich, full, joyous, hopeful and connected life.

It means that time may bring healing, but not forgetting. And with the passage of the months, years or even decades, we know that the brokenness will ever be there, even if the anguish of our sadness wanes.

A “broken wholeness” offers us the insight that when we mourn the passing of those we loved – whether their end came early or late - we know our days are not endless, and so we ought to live in a way that treats each moment as a gift.

Our “broken wholeness” means that when we are empty and lost, we must open our broken hearts to those whose love and friendship seek to heal us, that it is love that makes us whole.

And when we come to accept the “broken wholeness” as the truth of living, we learn that heartache is the common lot of humanity, and from that we can become more empathetic and less judgmental.

A final thought. Scientists and heart specialists will tell us that there is a physiological reason for the heart to have multiple chambers. There is, however, also a spiritual reason for this – to hold every aspect of our lives. As the 16th century Rabbi Eliyahu Vidas taught, ““The human heart is the Ark, thus a person’s heart must be full of Torah but simultaneously be a broken heart, a beaten heart. Only then can it serve as a home for the Divine Presence. For God’s Intimate Presence only dwells in broken vessels.”

We are all a mirror of the ancient Ark – carrying within the broken and whole. And it is *through* that “broken wholeness” that God dwells in us, leading us greater understanding, acceptance and wisdom. May we ever see ourselves as living Arks the Covenant, through our whole *and* broken hearts we become fully and completely human, as we call on God to be the Healer of us broken hearted ...