

Broken Pickles & Hearts: On Openness & Vulnerability

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A few weeks ago, I bought a can of pickles. Yes; a can of pickles. Not a jar, not one of those fresh ones half-sour or full-sour from Kosher Nosh. A can of pickles. You know the kind that is imported from Israel. The ones that have about 13-17 mini pickles in each can. HMMM...like this (open up can of pickles). By the way, do you ever truly get that many pickles in each can? In any case, I was sitting with a friend slowly eating said delicious pickles and before we knew it, I looked into the pickle can and there was...1 left! I said to her: “here, you have it.” And she looked inside. And at the bottom, she saw that the pickle was broken. “But it’s a broken pickle,” she said. And I said “so?” And then she said: “But that’s bad, right? I mean, I shouldn’t eat a broken pickle?” To which I responded: “why not?” And then she said: “but broken...doesn’t that mean that it’s bad?”

How did I respond to my friend?

This morning, we read about the story of two woman struggling with some of life’s difficulties. In our Torah portion, we learn about Hagar who is banished by Abraham into the wilderness. She and her child are sent out without much food and water. And eventually, it becomes clear that her child, Ishmael, might die. And in the haftarah that we read this morning, Channah is unable to conceive a child and so she prays to God, asking for a miracle to happen. What do these stories of these two women have in common?

Leading up to the High Holidays, I often ask people what they want me to speak about. Some of you wanted to hear about certain topics going on in the world around you. Some of you did not. But there was one theme that overlapped most – if not all – of your requests: “Tell me something good that I want to hear, rabbi. Rabbi, I open the newspapers, I turn on the TV, I watch the news and I’m sick to my stomach. There is no good news anymore! All I learn about is this shooting or that political problem, this natural disaster or that devastating tragedy. What do I do with all of this bad news?” What do we do with all of our brokenness?

Some of us in this room might personally feel broken. We might feel broken because of an unfair situation that was thrown at us, not by our own choices: poor

health, a sick relative, a dying loved one. Some of us might feel broken in our relationships: a broken heart, an unintimate marriage, disloyalty in a friendship. We might feel broken professionally: maybe we lost our job or maybe we feel insecure about our profession; maybe we are questioning if we are on the right career path. We might feel broken personally: like we can never meet that goal that we have for ourselves, like we are not good enough, that we cannot achieve enough, have enough, get enough, look enough, be...enough. We, my friends, let's face it, in some way, are all broken.

I have to tell you. There have been times – and some of you have seen it – when I have been moved to tears while delivering a sermon. And often after I allow myself to be vulnerable like that, I hear one of two responses from you, the listeners. The first response, my preferred one, goes something like this: “Wow, rabbi, thank you. That was so moving.” The second response, however, goes something like this: “Boy, rabbi, I'm really sorry that you started to cry up there. It must be really hard to be strong and hold it together while you're on the bimah.”

Now, tell me, how am I supposed to respond to a statement like that? What has society taught us about expressing our emotions such that it's inappropriate for me, a rabbi to emote, to shed a tear on the bimah on the High Holidays while delivering an impassioned sermon about how to change or grow or love? Why does such a thing make us feel uncomfortable?

And it's not just me. So many of you come into my office. I ask you deep questions. You are going through so much: infertility, illness, divorce, abuse, financial troubles...things that are really, really hard. Things that really make you feel broken. And then what do you do when you shed a tear? You look around in my office for a box of tissues to blot your tears and then you find yourself apologizing for getting choked up, as if you are embarrassed, as if it's a bad thing, as if it shows a sign of weakness to cry when experiencing something so broken. Once I even had no idea that someone was so upset about something because she forced herself to be strong and cover it all up. And at funerals, when I ask family members if they would like to say some words about their departed loved one, many of them say: “if I can get through it without getting choked up...” Really? It's not okay to be choked up at a funeral for a loved one? My friends, I'm here to tell you, that's it's okay to cry. That's it okay to express your brokenness.

We have this tendency to cover things up, to cover up the pain...and I get that. I understand why we want to cover up our anger, our sadness. We don't want to take

ourselves to that place, for fear that someone will see a different side of us. We don't want to show our weakness. Perhaps society has told us that men don't cry. We are all taught to "be strong." We want to cover up our pain, as if we had a shield of armor protecting us from all of the pain...wouldn't that be nice, a shield of armor?

Some of you might know that among "normal music" that I like, I also enjoy country music. One of my favorite country artists is Miranda Lambert, whose songs and lyrics speak to the truths in our lives. I was in my kitchen recently after asking Alexa to play some Miranda and I heard her song "Tin Man," a song which describes the tin man in the Wizard of Oz, how his armor is made of tin and he is known as being cold and without a heart. At the same time, she, the singer, is experiencing heartache and wishes that she didn't have a heart, because of the pain that she's going through. The opening lyrics go like this:

Hey there, Mr. Tin Man
You don't know how lucky you are
You shouldn't spend your whole life wishin'
For something bound to fall apart
Every time you're feeling empty
Better thank your lucky stars
If you ever felt one breaking
You'd never want a heart

"If you ever felt one breaking, you'd never want a heart." This might resonate with so many of us. Like a tissue blotting our tears, we want to cover up our pain. Like those of us who feel hopeless or helpless when we open up those newspapers or watch TV. If only we didn't have a heart - like the tin man - we wouldn't be able to feel all of this pain, we would be able to shield ourselves from this pain.

And, by the way, when I say that it would be nice to have a shield around us, these shields can have many forms. Think about how we use sarcasm or humor to put up a front for what is really happening inside. Perhaps some of us fight back tears, swallow our pride, take out our pain on others because there is no other outlet for that pain. Don't we, like the tin man, try to put up those shields to protect us? And I don't blame us because the pain is so deep, so unbearable, so palpable.

Let's take a look back at Hagar and Channah to see what happens when they express their brokenness.

We read in our Torah portion regarding Hagar, whose son was about to die in the wilderness without water: “When the water was gone...she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance...for she thought, “let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears” (Genesis 21: 15-16). She burst into tears.

And Channah did not react much differently. As Channah was praying for a child, the priest Eli was watching her pray, so fervently with her lips moving. In fact, Eli thought that she was drunk. But instead, Channah replied: “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink but I have been pouring out my heart to God...I have only been speaking all of this time out of my great anguish and distress” (I Samuel 1:15-16). She prayed out of great anguish and distress.

How did these women deal with pain?

They went toward the pain, through the pain, allowed themselves to experience it. They cried, pouring their hearts and souls into a miracle. And the message that we are meant to learn today is that we should do this, too. Messiness, brokenness, vulnerability, rawness is GOOD my friends. It reduces stress, calms our nerves. It’s an authentic expression of what we are experiencing, so that we don’t have to try to be fake or someone we’re not. As a mentor of mine once shared with me: “The only way beyond the pain, is through the pain.”

Our High Holiday prayer books are called “Lev Shalem,” which means “complete heart.” But we don’t come to services today having already achieved a complete heart. If we already had a complete heart, why would we come? Rather, a complete heart is something we strive to achieve. In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, human beings are compared to a *cheres ha’nishbar*, a broken shard. Brokenness is our natural state, brokenness is what allows our prayer to be deep, to be real. According to a Hasidic teaching by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov: “There’s nothing more whole than a broken heart.” And do you know the reason that the *V’Ahavata* prayer, recited after the Shema says that the commandments should be placed UPON our hearts and not IN our hearts? According to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, “Of course God’s words should be IN your heart, but that is not always possible. At the very least, you can put the words UPON your heart and they may just sit there for a very long time. Someday your heart will crack and, if the words are already on top of your heart, they can slip right in!” When we are broken, the cracks allow something very special to enter inside. What goes inside?

Let's take a look at what entered the life of Hagar and Channah in the midst of their brokenness.

We read in the Torah portion that after Hagar sits at a distance and bursts into tears, God hears the cry of the boy and a messenger of God calls to Hagar from heaven. God opens her eyes, a well of water appears and the boy is saved. And in the haftarah? After Channah prays for a child out of anguish and despair, God hears her prayers, she conceives and eventually has a child. What happens after these two women experience brokenness? God meets them in their brokenness. God enters those broken cracks in their hearts.

We read in Psalm 34: קרוב ה' לנשבר־יִלֵּב ואת־דכֵּא־יִרוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; those crushed in spirit God delivers.

God meets us where we are broken. God is there with us when we are broken. During these High Holidays, God wants us to be broken because often it is during that brokenness that God gets to be a little closer with us. That is what *teshuvah*, repentance, is all about, returning to God, only this time in our brokenness.

So how did I respond to my friend when she asked about the broken pickle: “but broken...doesn't that mean that it's bad?”

I said “oh no, my friend,” brokenness is where it all begins.

And how would I respond to Miranda Lambert when describing her broken-heart, how she would switch places with the Tin Man any day?

I would respond by saying that brokenness is where it all begins; it's where we allow the beauty to shine through, it's where God meets us as our hearts are a bit more cracked open.

Furthermore...without that heart that experiences pain, we wouldn't have the same heart that basks in joy. Without that heart that is broken, we would not have that same heart that feels full and complete. Without that heart that suffers from anguish, we wouldn't have that same heart that is capable of loving. I would take a broken heart any day over being shielded like the Tin Man.

So this year, don't be your "best" version of yourself, if your best is putting on a happy face. I want you to be the authentic version of yourself. Be messy. Be real. Be broken.

And, by the way, it's perfectly acceptable to eat a broken pickle. (Bite and crunch!)

Shannah tovah.