

Rosh Hashanah Morning – 1 Tishrei 5784 - September 16, 2023

Finding Wholeness in the Broken

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I first discovered the writings of Shel Silverstein when I was a student teacher in the mid-1980's. I loved the simple, one-dimensional illustrations and the way Mr. Silverstein could communicate the most profound of truths simply through a whimsical poem, story, or book. They say that children's books are *enjoyed by* children, but they are not written necessarily *for* children. This axiom certainly applies to Silverstein's works. One of my most favorite of his books is *The Missing Piece*, published in 1976. It's about a circle (sort of a Pac-Man-looking figure) that 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 it, and it is so happy. Now it can roll along quickly, but soon the circle realizes that it can no longer do the things it used to enjoy doing, like singing or rolling slowly enough to enjoy the company of a worm or butterfly.

It decides that it was happier when searching for the missing piece than when it had it. So, it gently puts the piece down, and happily goes along its way. I find myself thinking of 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's a beloved symbol of American freedom, enshrined in a special building in Philadelphia. 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? Have you seen pictures or examples of the Japanese way of repairing things? What do we do when we break a china teacup or saucer or something else fragile? We either say, "Oh, well," and toss it or we go to great lengths to glue it back so that the break is invisible or hardly showing. The Japanese, however, fill the cracks with beautiful gold, transforming what was broken into something even more lovely and cherished. I have two noticeable scars on my neck: one from a car accident and one from skin cancer removal. I tried every brand of scar cream because I thought the scars were so ugly, but they never worked. After a while I realized that I could not imagine my neck without those scars. I actually began to embrace them, because, while unsightly, they tell a story of two times I survived something that could have taken my life. They are part of my life's map, reminding me of my brokenness, but also of the life I've had since earning them.

It seems that the culture in which we live offers limited space for brokenness, whether it be grief, suffering, or physical imperfection. Our society has almost become consumed with "brokenness."

Have you ever flipped through the TV channels late at night? Station after station hosts any number of pastors and gurus who can give you all the tools you need to fix yourself. Informercials tout products designed to fix your face, your hair, your scars, your weight, your love-handles. Every drug imaginable can repair whatever ails you.

Being “broken” in today’s America is a horrible thing. The role models for our young people today are picture perfect, carefully crafted, sculpted, airbrushed celebrities. Transforming their bodies to achieve perfection teaches our girls and boys that they must do the same. The loud and clear message is “You are broken. You have acne. You are broken. You have wrinkles. You are broken. You are not thin. You are broken. You don’t have the biggest television, the most expensive car, the latest iPhone. You are broken. You don’t have straight A’s? You must be broken. You didn’t get into 12 colleges? You must be broken.

This mentality has transferred to many of today’s parents, who, fearing their child will experience a let-down, a bad grade, the trauma of riding a school bus, or *any* kind of struggle go to great lengths to keep their children insulated from the realities of the world. Research is showing that this approach to parenting is creating a generation of insecure young adults who cannot make decisions, who panic at the thought of failure, and are in ever-growing numbers seeking coping strategies in the form of drug addiction. In trying to not break their children, parents are ruining their children. Perhaps experiencing a little brokenness is not such a bad thing.

Unlike our American culture of today, Jewish tradition has a much more expansive, accepting, and loving view of brokenness, replete with writings and teachings about brokenness from the most ancient of times through today. The Jewish view could perhaps be best summed up by the Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk who said, “There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.”

And I would be remiss to not share this piece of Jewish wisdom from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In 1972, during an appearance on the television program *Eternal Light*, Rabbi Heschel forcefully asserted: “Here stands a man and I’ll tell you, this is a man who has no problems. Do you know why? He’s an idiot!” So there we are: To be a mindful human is to have problems, is to be broken.

One of the most important interpretations of brokenness, and one of my most favorite teachings, is embedded within the Creation story that is sometimes read on Rosh HaShanah. You may be familiar with this teaching because we refer to it when discussing social justice, environmental action, and the mandate to make the world a better place – a defining purpose for much of our modern Jewish life, *tikkun olam*. Literally “repair of the world,” *tikkun olam* refers to the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, who was a revolutionary and influential 16th century mystic and scholar.

When God created the world, according to Luria, God’s presence filled the universe. To make room for creation, God first drew in a large breath, contracting God’s essence. From that contraction, darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light,” the primordial light that came into being poured into ten vessels. Had the vessels all remained intact, the world would have been perfect; but the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, sparks of God’s holiness scattering everywhere. We may not be able to see these pieces, but according to Luria, they are there, and we, through *mitzvot* and acts of justice and kindness, can gather up those divine sparks and achieve cosmic healing. How interesting it is that at the very heart of Creation, in the most complete, seemingly perfect act that we know (think Garden of Eden), there is shattering, breaking, and imperfection. Brokenness is thus a part of the fabric of this life, woven into our human experience of the world.

Not one of us can say we have never experienced some kind of fracture in our lives, some kind of disconnect.

So, knowing that the world and the people within it are broken, Judaism gives us a book filled with stories of broken and imperfect people – the Torah. As you know, the first human beings, Adam and Eve, broke the one rule they were instructed to follow, so they were expelled from the garden. The first child, Cain, kills his only brother.

Abraham, the first Jew, tells local kings that his wife is his sister so to save himself, almost sacrifices Isaac (the story we read earlier) and then kicks out his other son, Ishmael. Jacob, the patriarch from whom we get our name Israel, is a weasel, a wimp, a thief, and a liar. And that's just the first book! That all being said, however, the Torah, through all these broken characters, teaches us that, yes, we will all go through heartbreak and pain, and we will often do the wrong thing, but there can be hope in our brokenness.

One of the most poignant examples of this occurs in the Book of Exodus, following the incident of the Golden Calf. Moses is descending the mountain with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments inscribed by the finger of God. When he sees the debauchery going on and the worship of a graven image, Moses, in disgust and anger, throws the stone tablets to the ground, where they shatter into numerous pieces. Moses must bring two new tablets to the top of the mountain to have them inscribed anew. But what of the original tablets which now lay in pieces on the ground? The Talmud answers: The broken tablets were placed in the most sacred of places, the holy Ark, along with the second, intact set of tablets: "*Luchot, ve'shivrey luchot, munachim be'aron*" (Talmud Bava Batra 14b). Together they remained in the Ark as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness. The whole and the broken were together, carried into the Promised Land.

Let's pause for a moment to imagine those collected shards – broken and jagged, representing the worst sin the Israelite people ever committed – being placed into the Ark. Imagine the feelings of shame and embarrassment that the people felt while picking them up. Yet those broken pieces were treated with utmost respect and care. The broken tablets were not tossed away as we would probably do today, nor were they buried, which is what we generally do with holy items no longer in use. How many times have we buried our own feelings of pain or hurt, not giving ourselves the space to feel, accept or acknowledge our feelings? How many times have we pretended to be OK when we are not?

So, the rabbis were giving us a wonderful teaching. They instructed us: You don't have to bury your broken pieces, cover them up, or discard them. Place them in the Ark inside you in a sacred place. Your broken pieces are part of you. Cherish them and appreciate them as real, authentic, and integral to who you are.

In my work as a cantor and rabbi, I have found that those with whom I have interacted and have counseled who have experienced more than their share of pain and suffering generally seem to have a deeper sense of relationship to the Divine. You would think that those for whom tragedy and hardship is so commonplace would have a cynical view of the world, turning away from God; but I have found that for these individuals and for myself as well, God seems to be present in the lowest depths, rather than in the highest heights. One of the most well-known Psalms affirms: *Karov Adonai l'mishbarei lev...* God is close to the brokenhearted. Perhaps it is that when our hearts are broken, we can be more spiritually open and more sensitive to the suffering of others, as well as more appreciative of the blessings in our own lives. As Leonard Cohen, one of our more recent Jewish teachers, wrote: "Everything has a crack in it. That's how the light gets in."

This reminds me of a story about the Ba'al Shem Tov, who founded Hasidism. In this story, it was almost Rosh Hashanah. The Ba'al Shem Tov, who by this time was a famous rebbe and teacher asked a rabbi named Zev Kitsis to be the *Ba'al Tekiah* who sounds the shofar. We are all commanded to hear the shofar, and its blasts are meant to crack open our hearts and the very walls of heaven so to send our prayers to God and to awaken in us a desire to return to being our best selves.

Blowing the shofar is therefore a very great responsibility, as our students who are blowing the shofar for us know, and Rabbi Kitsis took it very, very seriously. He studied everything he could find about Rosh HaShanah and the shofar blasts and all their secret meanings.

He studied mystical meditations so he would know what to be thinking about at the moment of blowing the shofar, and he prayed that his shofar would open the gates of repentance wide. He was so excited and so determined that he wrote down all these words and meditations and put them in his pocket so he could look at them just before he was called up for the shofar blasts. When the moment arrived, he reached into his pocket but there was no piece of paper. He couldn't find it. It was nowhere to be found, and he realized he couldn't remember a single word of those mystical formulas he'd written down. Just at that moment of terrible realization and despair, the Baal Shem Tov called out, *tekiah* for Reb Kitsis to blow the shofar!

Reb Kitzis stood there, not knowing what to do, so in his hopelessness he just blew all of the blasts of the shofar that he knew. Tekiah. Shevarim-Teruah. Tekiah Gedolah. When he finished, he stood there, absolutely crushed, tears streaming down his face.

The Baal Shem Tov came over to him with tears on his face, too. Reb Kitzis began to apologize for failing so terribly. But the Baal Shem Tov interrupted, "No, you don't understand. You didn't fail. You see, God's palace has many doors. And each door has its own unique key. But there is one key that opens every door: the axe. And the axe is the broken heart. You played the shofar with your broken heart and every door of God's palace burst open. And all of our prayers ascended and entered." I love this story. Sometimes those moments of despair are our most real, our most open, and the closest we are to God.

As Jews there is no time in which we are asked to be more spiritually open than right now during these Ten Days of Repentance. On the High Holy Days, our tradition bids us to look head-on into the reality of our brokenness so that we might eventually find our way toward wholeness. This wholeness is not perfection, and it's not a heart that is completely unscathed.

It's not a body free from scars or wrinkles. The wholeness we seek is the contentment and peace we find in knowing we have tried our best, knowing that God accepts us in all our brokenness, with all our flaws, and is waiting for our return. We don't have to sing *Oh, I'm lookin' for my missin' piece, I'm lookin' for my missin' piece*. Life is usually more fulfilling and complete without it. L'shanah tovah!