

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5780:
Begin with Brokenness
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I was feeling a bit righteous—okay that’s overstating the case. I was feeling responsible because I had made it to a workout. I was on the treadmill warming up while the trainer explained the routine. Instructions over, the trainer called out: 60 seconds of base pace, followed by 90 seconds of push pace in “3-2-1.” We all took it up a notch. Now we were into our push pace. The trainer was encouraging us. 30 more seconds. “It’s push pace,” she said. “You should feel uncomfortable, so assess yourself.” And as I self-assessed, I thought to myself, I felt uncomfortable even before I walked into the studio. And I didn’t mean physically. The world seems to be in a very uncomfortable place. And for too many it feels uncomfortable to be in this world.

We feel uncomfortable for any number of reasons. It’s personal and individual. It’s political. It’s environmental and existential. It is uncomfortable to push oneself on a treadmill or a bike even though you’ll feel better if you do. It’s uncomfortable to have the hot humidity greet you at the door or the biting cold slap you in the face. Now, the crudeness, the rudeness in our culture has come to a fore, and engaging publicly—in the various ways that we do—is like a slap in the face. So, there is the

discomfort of exercise--positive, and the assault of unrelenting outrage--negative. Some of us are dealing with professional stress. We harbor anxiety about failure or success, and about letting others down or of being brought down. Our aging bodies bring a litany of discomforts. We worry about our parents' future or our kids'. There is also the ache of loneliness.

And though I presume we have "first world" problems most of us, they are real and they are ours and we need the proper support so that each hurdle doesn't throw us into an anxious spin; so that our discomfort becomes a familiar feeling reminding us that we are alive, part of an ever-evolving world, and that to *be* alive is a gift.

Oftentimes our worldview plays a conscious or unconscious role in our suffering. Since the new year is a time to assess ourselves, let's not forget to also question the perhaps hidden assumptions that motivate our decisions. What is *your* worldview? *And* since we are celebrating the creation of the world, I thought to review two stories we as the Jewish people tell about our beginnings, to uncover if possible, underlying sources of unnecessary suffering, on the one hand, and welcome inspiration on the other.

The most familiar birthday story is found in the beginning of Genesis. We read the six days of creation and we imagine the world and humanity

coming into being. Look back in time like you are watching a bar or bat mitzvah video and see Adam and Eve tending the garden of Eden. They seem so carefree. We learn that of every tree of the garden they could eat except for the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We watch as some time later, despite the warning, they eat the fruit of that tree. And we ask, did we, human beings, really begin in a garden-paradise now long-lost, a place of interspecies peace, with no obstacles to overcome, just one limitation to respect? We wonder, did we start in a garden where everything was perfect except us?

The familiar story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden can't help but inform our understanding of ourselves. It seeps into the way we westerners tell the human story, consciously or unconsciously, and says to us: in the beginning was paradise where humans were surrounded by perfection, protection and comfort—all gifts from God. By contrast, suffering, labor, struggle, pain, whether from physically giving birth, from raising children or raising crops, or from simply growing up, the struggle, the pain, the labor was to be a form of punishment. Oh, if we could only get back to the garden. It's almost cliché to say that we lament the loss of and that we yearn for that return to paradise—we recognize this founding story in the plots of our movies, our novels, our music, the nostalgia of our

politics, even our relationships. What are lovers walking hand in hand into the sunset but a promise to live happily ever after?

We live in a society that seeks the quick fix. The most convenience. A world of comfort. And can you blame us if we do? After all, our story tells us that there was a time when that was possible. If only Adam and Eve had understood the difference between listening to God from listening to the serpent—we would not have to suffer at all. And to add insult to injury, this story tells us that all pain, struggle and suffering are associated with punishment. And so we feel guilty. There's an ideal we're supposed to meet and when we don't we suffer from guilt.

Author Mary Widdicks describes how mundane and yet how intense this experience is in an article about parenting.¹ She writes, “I was suffering from back-to-school-induced parent guilt. . . . My mind and social media feed were filled with reminders of all the things I should be doing better. Like making creative Bento-style lunches. . . .” She continues, “And let me tell you, parental guilt isn't a fluke occurrence. It feels like a full-blown cultural epidemic. Western culture has cultivated an idealized expectation that all parents should be caring, nurturing, patient above-all-else, ever-present.”

Widdicks says researchers refer to this “guilt-inducing trope of perfectionism as the motherhood myth or the goddess myth.” To my mind, this is the Garden of Eden myth. Widdicks couldn’t have more accurately described God’s role vis a vis Adam and Eve in paradise: caring, nurturing, patient, ever-present. Well, maybe God could have been a little more patient. In any case, the myth of a perfect place exerts its influence on us any time we set goals we can never achieve. If we have internalized the guilt that is also part of the story, we also feel the need to punish ourselves when we fall short. This prevailing narrative is a recipe for low-level, ongoing, background discontent.

Maybe we need to look again at this script. How could the first humans have known the difference between Creator and created, between good and evil, until after they tasted that fruit from the Tree of Knowledge? Adam and Eve were either set up, or it’s a paradox: a contradiction meant to propel us into a deeper truth, and get Adam and Eve to leave the comforts of home. It was time for them to make their way in the world and show God what in fact humans are made of. Yes, there is suffering and sweat and anguish. But there is also joy and satisfaction and freedom. The wisdom of this journey lies in expecting the mixed blessing, the challenged faith, the derailed effort, the imperfect result.

Let's check ourselves: Do you harbor your own version of the "guilt-inducing trope of perfectionism" as a parent, a spouse, a provider, a citizen? Wayne Dyer, the "father of motivation," said "if you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." Consider instead that the truth on which our creation stands, which we celebrate tonight, is not an eternal paradise that we somehow need to make our way back to—but a founding paradox, a contradiction of competing urges—of curiosity on the one hand, and contentedness on the other, of going with the flow and of challenging the status quo—contradictions that will propel us from time to time out of our base pace and into our discomfort zone. You could say I'm calling on us to pave paradise and put up a paradox.

Now consider this story. Sixteen years ago, a 28 year old adventurer named Aron Ralston ventured into an isolated part of Canyonlands National Park in Utah. Unusual for him, he went alone without telling anyone. His planned daytrip turned into a more than five day ordeal that included his having to self-amputate his arm that had been crushed and wedged against the canyon wall by a fallen boulder. He literally cut off his right arm in order to save his life. Ralston tells his story in his book *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and the film *127 Hours* also tells his tale. Why do I mention him? Because here was a man in his late twenties, now in his mid-forties,

who had to literally break himself in order to survive. But more to the point, that kind of brokenness, an amputated forearm, was just a more obvious and physical illustration of his worldview. “Suffering, pain—that’s how you grow. That’s how you explore yourself,” he explains.

Ralston remained an avid adventurer. Within two years after his accident, he ran the Hardrock Hundred Mile Endurance Run and became the first to solo climb all 59 of Colorado’s 14,000 foot mountains in winter. He says that each of these experiences, including his ordeal, brings him “closer and closer to the raw essence of being alive.” They are “moments when he is enveloped in the creation and the Creator.”²

With Aron Ralston’s example in mind, let’s review the second story the Jewish people tell to explain the birth of the world. It goes like this: In the beginning there was nothing but God. Everything was God, a divine light. Then God wanted to create the world. But in order for there to be a world, there first needed to be space for a world. And to create space, God had to contract, draw in the light, in a process called *tzimtzum*. As God contracted, the divine light became more and more concentrated. The concentrated light was stored in many different vessels. At some point, these vessels shattered from the intensity of the divine light. This shattering, called *sh’virat ha’kaylim*, the shattering of the vessels, is what explains the

origins of suffering. For into the world along with creations like humans, plants and animals, came pieces of these shattered vessels—in fact the whole world and all its creations contain these broken fragments.

Unlike the Adam and Eve story where we are born in paradise and then suffer expulsion as punishment, here our very existence depends on our separation from the original Oneness. Whereas the first creation story posits our creation then our exile, this second creation story posits God's partial exile then our creation. The story of the *sh'virat ha'kaylim* flips the script and with it perhaps our willingness to embrace our struggles. Think of Aron Ralston.

His visibly broken body paired with his adventuring spirit striving to be enveloped in the Creator gives an image of our broken souls created in the shattering of the vessels. Brokenness is just part of the picture, part of the experience—there is no guilt or sense of punishment or desire to return to a mythical place of perfection. There is only the adventure of the lived experience of being with God. Is Ralston a role model? Sharing his story to incredulous audiences, Ralston learned that he has indeed saved people from their depression. People have quit their jobs, and in other ways changed their lives, radically influenced by his experience. So for some, yes.

For me he represents the world view that normalizes our brokenness and imperfections, and does not punish us for them. Ralph Waldo Emerson has said, “There is a crack in everything God has made.” The shattering of the vessels creation story can empower us to embrace rather than regret or resent our discomfort.

The stories we tell about our beginnings have power over us. These narratives work their way into our individual psyches and societal expectations. Did we begin in a perfect garden or did we begin in a world that was already broken? If you are at constant battle with your place in the world, with who you are—not good enough, not healthy enough, not perfect enough, suffering the imposter syndrome writ large, then you are living under the negative influence of the paradise narrative. Better to understand the world as shattered, redeemed through the sacred sparks found in each broken piece. We think of Aron Ralston’s example—a brokenness to embrace, repair, and enlist in our tasks of raising children, harvesting crops, enjoying grandchildren and one another, and creating healthy societies.

Over the next ten days, we are called before God to advocate on our own behalf—to beseech God to love us in our grand imperfection. This was Moses’ role: to advocate on behalf of the Israelites, and the High Holy Days are our Moses moment. And yet even Moses, out of anger, broke the tablets

with the Ten Commandments that are the centerpiece of our tradition.

Broken tablets that were not jettisoned or left on a trash heap; broken tablets that were placed in the ark alongside the second set of tablets, and which were carried through the desert by the Israelites on their trek toward the Promised Land.

And though the world we live in is uncomfortable for myriad reasons, we can legitimately, with humility, approach God as imperfect beings for *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking account of your soul as well as assessing your approach to life, your worldview—seeking to uncover unnecessary sources of suffering and welcome sources of inspiration.

At the last workout I attended, I was on the last leg of the treadmill portion. “This is it, this is your last 30 seconds,” barked the coach. “I want to see you struggle.”

May we find in our struggles the sparks of sacredness and new life, and may this new year bring renewed strength, renewed courage, and renewed hope.

L’shana tova u’metukah. Keyn y’hi ratzon.

¹ Widdicks, Mary. “Endless Cycle of guilt has parents Tripping over their Expectations,” *Washington Post*, 8/28/19.

² Fallesen, Gary. “Enduring agony to survive,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 9/18/05.