The story of the Oven of Akhnai[1] is one of the foundational texts in the Talmud, describing a halakhic dispute between some of the leading rabbis of the time. The story features supernatural events of increasing intensity: streams running backwards, carob trees bending over, schoolhouse walls shaking, a Voice calling down from Heaven to support one side of a disagreement, and God's rejoicing at humans' rejection of divine intervention. The central character of the text is a man who suffers such shame at the hands of his peers that his eyes burn anything he looks at, his anger destroys a significant portion of the world's food supply, and his pain causes the death of his brother-in-law. The story ends with the world in a state of brokenness.

There is a lot to unpack here, and I'll be offering some opportunities in the coming year to study this text and examine what it has to teach us about human interpretation of Torah and the importance of respect in disagreements between peers—but for now, I'd like to

[1] Bava Metzia 59b, Talmud Bavli

focus on the starting point of this whole situation: a dispute amongst a group of rabbis about whether an oven that has been broken into pieces and then reassembled can be considered a pure, kosher vessel. Every part of the story that follows hinges on the question of whether an object that has been shattered and then put back together can continue to operate and exist in the world in the same manner as one that has never been broken.

Three years ago, while visiting Jill's sister's family in Ottawa, my son Daniel tripped while running around their house and fell headfirst into a wooden toy box. He fell with such force that his forehead split open, and he had to go to the hospital and have dermal adhesive, or skin glue, applied to the resulting head injury.

I was in Israel at the time of this incident, so I only found out about it when I woke up the following morning, with a seven-hour time difference slowing the flow of information. As I waited for more details, I wondered and I worried. Was my child going to be OK? Would the shock

of the incident traumatize him? Would this injury leave a scar on his perfect, untouched face? A reminder that he had experienced something that changed him permanently?

It's one of the biggest worries a parent can imagine: permanent damage. You trust that your child is going to grow up eventually, and you understand that you can't keep them fully protected from the world. But the first time that you are faced with something that you can't fix is a pretty terrifying experience. I felt helpless to do anything to help my child. It didn’t help that I was on another continent at the time. Incidents like this one are reminders of the limits of your own control.

Fortunately, aside from the wound on his forehead, there were no serious medical issues, and he quickly recovered. The only lingering impact of the injury was a brief interest in touching the mark and saying "head." We applied Vitamin E to his forehead daily, but there was only so much we could do to minimize the scarring.

Of course, scars are a fact of life; a sign of experience. Some scars are minor, like this one on my head, from falling off the swing at the Brooklyn Heights Promenade when I was about three. I don't remember the injury, and if I had more hair on my head, I would barely remember that the scar was even there. As it is, I still don't notice it very often.

But other scars are much more serious, and can impact the rest of your life.

Whether physical or emotional, the damage of a traumatic event can linger for years. I would imagine that all of us have had painful experiences in our lives – whether accidental or intentional, due to human actions or so-called, “acts of God,” at the hands of strangers or at the hands of people we loved and trusted. These traumas can change our worldview and cause us to question our very sense of self. Even as time and other experiences may have allowed some healing, the scar tissue can still cause

complications in the future, or serve as a reminder of a painful time—a time of vulnerability, at odds with the way that we'd like to view ourselves, or with the strength that we hope to project.

We can also be spiritually scarred by an experience. Traumas can damage our sense of wholeness, leaving us feeling vulnerable, broken, imperfect, fragmented. We may wonder if we are still ourselves after all that we've experienced. Or worse, we may worry that we are merely the most fragile versions of ourselves.

In the kabbalistic tradition which emerged from the writings of Isaac Luria, the sixteenth century master of mystical tradition, it is taught that in order for the universe to be created, God had to contract - to recede in order for there to be space for something else to exist. God then filled the empty space with divine light, held in heavenly vessels. But the vessels were too fragile to contain the divine light, and they shattered, spilling the contents

throughout the universe. The holiness contained within was scattered, with no sense of order.

The kabbalists taught that by doing *mitzvot*, acts of kindness, the study of Torah, and prayer with deep intention, humans are capable of gathering together these broken shards and unifying the divided aspects of divinity. When a person engages in these practices, they raise up the broken things in our world to a higher level through a process of repair, which in Hebrew is called *tikkun olam*.[2]

I find this theology to be tremendously powerful. Even divinity is in need of repair. And with each act of goodness and devotion that we offer to our imperfect world, we bring healing. It's an ongoing process, but by virtue of our actions and intentions, we can repair some of the brokenness in our world.

This example can also offer a model for our own healing. By recognizing the pieces of us that feel broken,

[2] This article, reprinted from George Robinson's Essential Judaism, provides a good overview of Lurianic kabbalah.

acknowledging their fragility, and doing the work to raise and strengthen them, we can once again approach wholeness. This doesn't necessarily mean that we will be "perfect." On the contrary, we will always carry scars with us. But with healing efforts, maybe they won't hurt us as much.

Think about the most famous scar in pop culture - the lightning bolt on Harry Potter's forehead. This mark brought Harry a tremendous amount of attention, both positive and negative, and served as a psychic link to the person who created enormous amounts of trauma to the world. When Voldemort returned to power, the scar caused Harry tremendous pain. Which is why the last book ends with the most satisfying final line a faithful reader can imagine: "The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well."

His scar doesn't hurt anymore…but it's still there. At the end of the book, the world is not perfect. Harry and his peers have had to face devastating losses, repair major rifts

in their communities, and rebuild a fractured society, amid constant reminders of the traumas of the past. Regardless of the plot of Harry Potter and The Cursed Child, these events can't be undone. They have become an essential part of his identity.

After healing, we don’t suddenly become different people; we remain ourselves. Jewish tradition recognizes this in the language used around someone who reconnects with Judaism. Unlike the term "born again," which is often used in Christian communities, a recommitted Jew is known as a *ba'al teshuvah*, a master of the return.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are compelled to pay attention to our vulnerabilities, notice our own brokenness, and reflect on the ways in which we have been imperfect, the ways in which we have hurt others, and the ways in which others have hurt us. We think about ways to do better in the future, and we aim for *teshuvah*, a return. A return to what? Torah? God? Community?

In an interview with Vanity Fair magazine, Bruce Springsteen says, "...whoever you've been, and wherever you've been, it never leaves you...I always picture it as a car. All your selves are in it. And a new self can get in, but the old selves can't ever get out. The important thing is, who's got their hands on the wheel at any given moment?"[3]

I concur with Rabbi Springsteen: when we make *teshuvah*, we are returning to our selves. All of our selves: the self that is joyful; the self that is mourning; the self that is regretful; the self that is confident. We are not only our worst moments, but neither are we only our best moments. We contain all of our scars and our smiles; our hugs and our tears; our strengths and our vulnerabilities; our fears and our hopes.

Returning to our selves means acknowledging and honoring the multitudes that comprise each of us – while making sure that we pay close attention to who we're putting in the driver's seat.

[3] https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/09/bruce-springsteen-cover-story