

Good bones

An anxious mother gazes into the darkness and worries.

(Isn't this what we as mothers do best?)

As one mother, poet Maggie Smith, watched her children grow up in an increasingly conflicted world she channeled her angst into words:

*Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real sh*thole [fixer-upper], chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.¹*

Tonight, we can make this place beautiful.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>

As we enter the new year, we are no strangers to our challenges. Summer seems to bring endless reminders of our changing climate. Violence and divisiveness abound.

We have experienced illness, hurt and loss in the past year.

But Rosh Hashanah is here to remind us that the world has good bones.

Tonight we don't deny the ugliness.

But we do open our eyes and our hearts to the beauty that exists at the core. For we tonight we have also found kindness and community.

Friendship and love. And, hope to see the good bones and say "this place can be beautiful."

The Hebrew word for "bones" captures this sentiment. The root "ETZM" means essence. In the Torah we read the phrase "b'etzem ha yom ha zeh" to describe the essential transformative nature of a holy day. Atzmaut, or independence, is based on the same word. To be independent is to solidify one's essence. Etzem is what is inner and essential. Incidentally, it is also the root for the word "otzma" meaning strength. When we know what is essential, we find our strength.

Our bones hold us up and carry us forward. They are our strength and our core. And even when broken they can magically knit back together again. This summer I had a stress fracture in my foot, a common and minor injury. Certainly less severe and painful than the breaks I know many of you have suffered and healed from in the past. What I found remarkable about the hairline crack in a small bone in my foot is that it couldn't be seen at the moment of its worst brokenness. Only when healing had begun could the doctor confirm the break where the bone showed repair.

Rosh hashanah is about checking in on our bones. It is an x-ray of our inner selves. Where are we broken? How have we healed? Where do we have yet to heal? What is so important to us that we hold it in our bones?

Joseph (of the coat of many colors fame) lived most of his life in Egypt. He assimilated to Egyptian culture. He and became part of the pharaoh's court but always felt a stranger in his new land. His dying wish, at the end of Genesis, was to make sure his bones were brought out of Egypt. He wanted to be buried in the land of his fathers. Moses doesn't forget this promise. Joseph's bones are carried across the sea and through the desert. One rabbi points out that since the word for bones also means

essence it was really Joseph's essence that Moses carried with him. That is what gave him the strength to receive the Torah².

We hold memories in our bones. The essential love and wisdom of those who have come before nourishes and sustains us on our journeys.

For those who have a love of detective novels and podcasts as I do, you will know that bones tell a whole story of our lives—where we have lived, even what we have eaten. They tell the story of our hurts and their repair. Bones tell the story of our strengths and our weaknesses and even of our potential.

Bones can also tell a story of compassion and kindness. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student about the earliest sign of a civilized society. Mead replied that the first sign of civilization is a healed human femur—the long bone that connects the hip to the knee. Mead explained that wounded animals in the wild would be hunted and eaten before their broken bones could heal. A human with a broken leg would have had to

² Shney Luchot HaBrit, Vayeshev, Miketz, Vayigash, Torah Ohr 111

have had someone else to provide food, water and care for a protracted period of time for the bone to heal. So a healed femur is a sign that a wounded person received care and assistance from others. When we help others to mend, it heals us as well. When we can reach out to hold another person's hand, to walk with someone through suffering we ourselves are strengthened. Caring for another is itself a powerful salve for the soul.

Bones remind us that what is concealed on the inside, is often the most important part. Our essence, our core is what we bring to the world.

We are all fixer-upper's and we can't deny the world needs some fixing too. But there are good bones and this New Year we commit: We can make it beautiful.³

³ This entire sermon was inspired by the recent memoir of the same title written by Maggie Smith.

Extra material
Do not print

Margaret Mead story about broken femur

The bone heals where it knots together but she points out, the real healing is in the care and love

But the fact is We don't always heal just where we are broken.

When our hearts hurt, when our spirits hurt, when our souls feel torn apart, the healing doesn't always come at the source of the pain. Time and reflection are balms that reveal how healing comes in another places.

Consider the reality that sometimes we don't know when we have hurt others.

Other times we can't be the healer. The healing comes with the passage of time.

Healing takes patience and time. That's the biggest part of the challenge when we don't have much of either. Healing comes where we let it in. The broken edges knit together where we encourage their growth. In a thousand small acts of love, kindness and grace. In relationships built and nurtured over time.

So much is out of our control. When that is the case healing sometimes happens outside the broken parts.

It reminds us of a few things. First, we are always a little bit broken. And that's ok. It is the human condition. The broken parts are the cracks that let the light in. We aren't perfect and we won't be perfect. Our broken parts makes us more compassionate and empathetic

Now that doesn't mean we should strive for repair. Healing comes in a sneaky way when we can't always see it. It originates in our strivings and comes to fruition in ways that surprise us.

Our nation is deeply broken as well

We look at the divisiveness and rancor and wonder how these divides can be healed.

Israel is more broken than ever.

I know many of you hoped I would speak to this during these holy days. Democracy is threatened and society torn apart. The ministers of this government champion values that are not my values, anathema to Reform Judaism. I won't give you a history or a civics lesson on this holy day but suffice it to say that I am worried about the future of the State of Israel and it's soul. All the more reason why you should join me on our TBE mission this January to learn in depth.

Let me share one of the a hopeful visions of how a small act can transform, perhaps not exactly there the brokenness exists but despite it.

The backyard National park movement is based upon the principle that each of us can heal the small space of our yard or even our patio. Large swaths of wild land may be diminished, but by including native species of trees, shrubs and perennials we can make our property hospitable to the birds and insects necessary to preserve a healthy ecosystem. Does this heal climate change at the spice of carbon emssions? Of course not. But does it repair the world in ways we can control and make a difference? It does!

Good Bones

BY MAGGIE SMITH

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.

Life is short, and I've shortened mine

in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,

a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways

I'll keep from my children. The world is at least

fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative

estimate, though I keep this from my children.

For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.

For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,

sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world

is at least half terrible, and for every kind

stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
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