

The Broken Tablets

Have you ever accidentally broken something precious? No matter how careful we are, something will inevitably shatter. A few years ago, I was kashering a set of crystal wine goblets for Passover, by running them through my dishwasher. But I forgot to fasten the little clips that secure the top dishwasher rack, which I had removed for cleaning. So when I pulled out the top rack, it simply kept rolling and crashed to the bottom, breaking, in an instant, all but one of the glasses. I let out a cry, and then for a moment, I froze. Then I took a deep breath, and reminded myself that these are just things, and that things can be replaced. I cleaned up the shards and carefully disposed of all of that broken, exquisite glass. Those 12 beautiful Waterford goblets were a wedding present from dear relatives, and had graced our family table for countless holiday meals, for over thirty years. And now what remained of their sparkle were slivers of glass.

That night, at the Seder, we drank from inexpensive, very durable wine glasses. I told our guests what had happened, and, putting my best Rabbinic spin on it, suggested that there was a lesson here about impermanence, and the wisdom in not becoming overly attached to things. Yet, all my philosophizing could not completely cover up my regret for what was lost.

And yet, Fran and I decided not to replace them. When we got them, we were young marrieds, anxious to acquire the things that would establish our home. Crystal seemed important. Now, we are at that stage in life where we are more interested in simplifying, in giving things away rather than possessing them. Yet, the single glass that remains, salvaged from the wreckage because it suffered only a small chip at its base, reminds me of how much I

enjoyed serving wine in them to my guests, and the wonderful holiday gatherings that they accompanied.

According to Jewish tradition, the shattering of things is, quite literally, part of the nature of the universe. According to the great Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria, when God created the world, he began by pouring divine light into vessels: Imagine something like a cosmic laboratory. But the vessels were unable to contain the energy of this light, and they shattered. Ever since then, sparks of divinity are trapped, like shards of crystal, hidden within the outer shell of the material world. And it is our job to find them, and return them to their source. Whenever we do a mitzvah, according to our Jewish mystics, we are releasing these hidden sparks, and each such act is a *tikkun*, a small repair of the brokenness of the world.

Today, Yom Kippur, is a day to remember the broken things, and to think about what has become of them. Not the crystal, or the occasional cracked mug or broken figurine, but the other things in life that also break: the friendship that we have allowed to slip through our fingers, the dream that we have neglected and no longer pursue, or the broken heart, bereft of a loved one who has left this earth. Today, we give some thought to those shattered things that, really, inevitably, are a part of all of our lives.

When Moses descended Mount Sinai, holding the two tablets of Commandments in his arms, he saw the people at the base of the mountain dancing around an idol, a Golden Calf. You know what happens next: In his horror, he allowed the sacred tablets to slip from his arms and smash to the ground. Some commentators say that he smashed them out of anger. Others say that the words, engraved by the finger of God, made the stones feel light. But now, the words fled from the tablets and the tablets grew heavy, and Moses could no longer hold their weight. Still others say that Moses destroyed them in order to save us from culpability for not observing

them. It's as if, after the Israelites broke the covenant, the tablets themselves needed to be shattered, taking their place among the broken shards of divinity that wait to be redeemed.

Yom Kippur, according to Rabbinic tradition, is the day that God gave Moses the second set of tablets, signifying God's forgiveness of the people, and God's willingness to go forward with us, even after our nearly unforgiveable transgression.

But what of the first tablets- the broken ones? What happened to their shattered remains? Although the Torah does not answer this question explicitly, our Rabbis find clues in the text. Deuteronomy chapter 10:2 tells us, "**And I (God) will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, 'v'samtem ba'aron- and you shall deposit them in the ark.**" One can easily read the word *v'samtem*, (you shall deposit them), as referring back to both sets of tablets, both the new ones that God provides, and the original set that Moses had smashed. According to this tradition, the people gathered up the stones of the broken tablets, and eventually placed them in the Ark along with the new ones. They carried them through 40 years of desert wandering until they reached the land of Israel, and eventually placed them all, both the broken and the whole, in the holy Temple.

Why? Now, you might say that they carried them so that they would never forget the great sin that they committed- the sin of the Golden Calf; that the Israelites schlepped the weight of their guilt through the desert for 40 years! But that, my friends, would be a very cold reading, and not the one the Rabbis intended, nor a sermon that you would ever hear from me. Rather, let me suggest that they placed the broken tablets in the ark along with the whole ones, because they knew that they were still holy, that they still had essential divine teachings to reveal.

The first thing we learn from the broken tablets is that we don't have to hide away our mistakes; that acknowledging them and learning from them is how we grow. We may even

discover that they were necessary parts of our journey. Psychologists tell us that one of the qualities that gives us resilience is the ability to accept that making mistakes is necessary to our growth. The basketball coach Gregg Popovich once said, “The measure of who we are is how we react to something that doesn’t go our way...There are always things you can do better. It’s a game of mistakes.” He was speaking about basketball, but I think it its equally true of life.

If God can forgive us, than surely we can forgive ourselves. God could have destroyed the Jewish people right then and there, after the sin of the Golden Calf. But the broken tablets sit there in the ark, right next to the whole ones, to remind us that both change, and forgiveness are always possible. That’s the first message that the people carried with them.

The next lesson is simply that brokenness is inevitable. There are times in life when we will feel that the very ground beneath our feet is shifting and we are crumbling from inside, like the rubble of those first tablets. But out of the rubble of our situation, we will be able to glimpse a new paradigm, a new path to follow, new tablets to guide and to teach us. We will be different than we were, but we will be whole.

In Sheryl Sandberg’s recent book about loss and resilience, **Option B**, Sandberg describes the awful, numbing grief that fell upon her after her husband David’s sudden death. One minute he was in the gym at a resort in Mexico, and the next minute she found him lying on the floor, dead of a heart attack. Barely a week later, back home with her two children, Sheryl had to figure out what to do for the father-child activity at her young son’s school. A friend came up with a plan to find a substitute to accompany him to the program “But I want Dave,” she cried to her friend. He put his arm around Sharon and said “Option A is not available.” Life is never perfect. So let’s just kick the “heck” out of option B.”

Let me tell you the story of a man I know who worked for a company for many years. He was pretty high up in the organization, and felt that he had done as much as anyone to not only make the company successful, but to shape its corporate culture and values. For this person, the company was more than just the product that they made, and the people were more than just co-workers. They were family and he devoted his life to the work they shared, probably to the detriment of his own family and to other areas of his life.

And then, suddenly, surprisingly, there was a corporate restructuring, and he almost lost his job. The politics were nasty. People whom he considered loyal friends did not back him. He was shaken to the core. He fought back, however, and in the end, he succeeded in keeping his job. He was much luckier than many people today, in a world where ‘corporate loyalty’ and ‘job security’ seem like quaint values from a bygone era.

I asked him what had changed for him. He told me, “well, in some ways, very little and in other ways, everything. I still love my work; I still go to work every day and give it my all. But, the story that I had told myself for years, that we were family, that I was indispensable, and that I would keep working until they had to carry me out on a stretcher; well, that story died, and it makes me sad.” And then he looked at me and said, “but that’s ok. Because the story I am living now is more realistic, healthier. I now spend more time with my family, and have rediscovered some of my earlier interests and passions. You know,” he said to me, “it felt terrible when I was in the middle of it, but I’m glad it happened.”

Some things need to be broken, in order for something new to emerge. Therapist Esther Frankel talks about Sandy, a patient of hers who was unhappy about virtually every aspect of her life. On the surface, she had every reason to be happy- a good marriage, children, and a successful career as a teacher. However, she was struggling to reconcile her life as it really was,

with the expectations that she had in her youth. Sandy had come from a wealthy family, and they groomed her from childhood to expect success. Indeed, she was always at the top of her class academically, and got her master's in education. As long as she could devote herself to her studies, she felt happy, and on track. But things changed after her marriage. Having a child with special needs demanded that she focus less on her career. Her husband, whom she loved very much, was also a teacher, and could not live up to her grand expectations to provide the kind of financial security that she had enjoyed in her youth. Living on a tight budget was not something Sandy had bargained for. She grew angry and increasingly depressed about her life. To others, it might have looked like she had everything, but her clinging to an ideal vision of what life was supposed to be was destroying her.

Listen to the description of the ritual that Esther and Sandy devised in preparation of Sandy's 40th birthday: Sandy would first write down on a scroll "...all her childhood hopes and dreams for how she imagined her life was going to be. She would then place the scroll in a beautiful ceramic vase that she had owned for many years and deeply treasured, bring these object to therapy, read what she had written, and then smash the vase and burn the scroll....Smashing the vase...became a powerful symbol of letting go of the past, and allowing life to bring change. In grieving over her lost hopes and dreams, Sandy began to feel more ready to accept her real, though imperfect life. She even decided to take the broken pieces home...in order to make them into a mosaic that she could use as a reminder...of the wisdom of the shattered vessels."

For some of us, what's written on the broken tablets are old stories we used to tell about ourselves, stories that have given way to a newer narrative. For others, the tablets tell of a broken relationship, once cherished, but now forever changed. Not long ago, a colleague in

New York asked me to be his *Shaliach*, his agent, to deliver a Get, a document of Jewish divorce, to a woman who lives in Metrowest. I have done this on numerous occasions, here in my office. In a simple but powerful ritual, I place the document into the wife's hands, as she raises them up and takes a few steps, symbolically showing her assent. She and her husband are now free to get on with their lives, and to remarry.

It is neither required, nor in the Conservative Jewish world is it common, for the husband to be present at the delivery of a Get. However, on this occasion, the husband insisted that he needed to be there too, that they had gone through every step of their separation and civil divorce together, and that he and his former wife would see this through together as well. In such an instance, it is the husband himself who places the Get into his wife's hands. The legally prescribed words that he says mirror the words once spoken under the *huppah*, undoing the bonds of holiness, which they had once hoped would last forever.

I don't know this couple well, and I don't know what led to the end of their marriage, only that they first separated three years ago, have since civilly divorced, and that he is soon to remarry. However, the way they treated each other moved me. She asked him a question about his upcoming wedding. They occasionally held each other's hands. They both teared up. She turned to him and sighed, 'Oh, so I guess this is really it.'

After the ceremony, I wished them both well as they move forward with their lives. They had travelled this final piece of their journey together with tremendous sensitivity and care. And, now that their lives were diverging, I hoped that they would continue to honor the sacredness of the journey that they had shared, to find a place in their hearts, as it were, that could hold the broken tablets, along with the new ones. Wiping away tears, they thanked me for having offered them that blessing.

Ultimately, the story of the two sets of tablets, side by side in the ark, is an instruction about the human heart. In Hassidic teaching, the *Mishkan*, the Holy Ark within which God's presence resides, is the human heart. Our life's work is to develop our inner *mishkan*, a place where we can hold both the broken and the whole.

In a parable for these Days of Awe, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav teaches:

Ashrei Haam Sheyodea Trua: Happy is she who knows the broken sound of the shofar: Who knows the wisdom of the broken heart. Once, a king sent his son out to learn the great wisdom of the world. When he returned, full of wisdom and knowledge, his father wanted to test him, so he ordered him to move a great bolder to the top of a mountain. The son struggled and pushed, with all his might, and finally, after tremendous effort, he forced that bolder to the top of the mountain. When he told his father how he had completed the task, his father raised his hand to his head, and said, "And this is your great wisdom? What were you thinking, dragging such a huge, heavy rock as that to the top of a mountain? If you had broken it up into small pieces, it would have been easy for you to carry it to its place!" And the moral, according to Rabbi Nachman...? God commands us to lift up our hearts, which are hard and heavy as stone, and we have no way to do that other than smashing the heart of stone into broken pieces."

"God wants the heart," goes an old Jewish teaching. And Rabbi Nachman knows that, paradoxically, brokenness itself is the key to our rediscovering wholeness. A family in Israel loses a child in a terrorist attack, and they find comfort in working on behalf of all bereaved parents. A person suffers a traumatic permanent injury, and discovers an inner strength and courage to become an example and an advocate for others who are disabled. Such stories are not uncommon. Why? The therapist Esther Frankel puts it this way:

At those most difficult times, when my heart simply broke open, "...instead of feeling all alone in my pain...I felt deeply empathetically connected to everyone and everything around me. It was as though the walls that ordinarily separate me from others had been brought down by my heart's shattering. And as those walls came down, a universal love, a love for all sentient beings, came to rest in that place that once knew only a limited love. 'The heart must break to become large,' writes Andrew Harvey, for 'when the heart is broken open, then God can put the whole universe in it.'"

My friends, none of us ask for the reversals, upheavals... and tragedies that will change our lives and break our hearts. The tens of thousands of Americans whose homes were destroyed by hurricane winds and floods this past month are still reeling, wondering how to put their lives back together. A terrorist's knife or gun in an Israeli town, or in any town around the world, can in an instant change the life of a family and a community forever. And yet, we don't run; we don't cower in fear of what might happen. We reach out to one another when we are in pain, and draw strength and courage and faith from one another, precisely because we know what it is for our own fragile hearts to break open. And isn't that part of why we are here today- why we come to a synagogue at all- to be held by the love of a caring community, and to feel its strength in the face of our fragility.

Near the end of Sandberg's book, she reflects, *Sometimes grief hits me like a wave, crashing into my consciousness until I can feel nothing else. ...But just as grief crashes into us like a wave, it also rolls back the tide. We are not just standing, but in some ways stronger. Option B still gives us options. We can still love... and we can still find joy.*

Psalms 145, what we call *Ashrei*, is notable because every verse is a different expression of wholeness- of gratitude and joy. Even the occasional synagogue goer is familiar with these

verses, and because we say them so often, we may take the actual words for granted. Then one day last week, something hit me in that psalm, like an epiphany, and stopped me in my tracks. It was the last verse: *Va'Anachnu nevarech Yah, me'atah v'ad olam, Halleluyah: and we shall praise God, now and forever- Halleluyah!* How do I know that I will praise God now and forever? It's just not true! Not every experience in my life is a halleluyah moment. But then I realized that the verse was actually an expression of hope and faith that those moments of joyful praise, though fleeting, *will come again into our lives*. And then I saw something else in the verse, a final insight that I want to share with you, because this is important: this verse speaks in the plural, and not the voice of the individual. *Va'Anachnu nevarech Yah; and We will once again praise*. Because whatever it is, we don't have to go through it alone, we can turn towards one another and go through it together. And isn't that partly why we are here today, to remind ourselves of our shared vulnerability? Yes, our experiences are our own, but the heart recognizes that pain, and joy are not ours alone. In community, we find our commonalty, our comfort and our courage.

My friends, all of us inevitably live some form of option B. Indeed, it is likely that one day our hearts may break open again and we will have to forge option C. Yet, *there is nothing so whole as a broken heart (the Kotzker Rebbe)*. And like that Holy Ark, which our ancestors carried on their journey *together*, our hearts hold both the sacred fragments of what we once dreamed, and the building blocks of who we may yet become.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu v'Techateimu: May we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, and may we hold each other in love and compassion as we journey forward together.