

Every year before the Days of Awe, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, held a competition to see who would blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Now if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Baal Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of kavanot -- secret prayers that were said just before you blew the shofar to direct the shofar blasts and to see that they had the proper effect in the supernal realms.

All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these kavanot for months. They were difficult and complex. There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar for the Baal Shem Tov so badly that he had been practicing these kavanot for years. But when his time came to audition before the Baal Shem, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy

man, and he choked. His mind froze completely. He couldn't remember one of the kavanot he had practiced for all those years. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Baal Shem in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously -- how utterly -- he had failed this great test, his heart just broke in two and he began to weep, sobbing loudly, his shoulders heaving and his whole body wracking as he wept.

All right, you're hired, the Baal Shem said.

But I don't understand, the man said. I failed the test completely. I couldn't even remember one kavanah.

So the Baal Shem explained with the following parable: In the palace of the King, there are many secret chambers, and there are secret keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all, and that key is the ax. The King is the Lord of the Universe, the Baal Shem

explained. The palace is the House of God. The secret chambers are the sefirot, the ascending spiritual realms that bring us closer and closer to God when we perform commandments such as blowing the shofar with the proper intention, and the secret keys to those chambers are the kavanot. And the ax -- the key that opens every chamber and brings us directly into the presence of the King -- the ax is the broken heart, for as it says in the Psalms, "God is close to the brokenhearted."

On Yom Kippur we listen not to the shofar but to the heart-rending melody of Kol Nidre. It is the sound of a soul in pain. In other centuries, in other places, souls cried out, tormented by the religious conversions forced upon them. This Yom Kippur, we listen for the sound of our own breaking hearts.

- For all that this past year could have been, should have been, but wasn't;**

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- **For the actions we took in haste;**
- **For the challenges we failed to face;**
- **for the times we did the best we could, and it wasn't good enough.**

During the high holy days, we hear echoes of earlier Shofar blasts. When Moses first ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, the mountain's peak was obscured by clouds, smoke and lightning. A Shofar called without cease, growing louder and louder. Those below literally quaked with fear.

Ten days later, Moses made a second trip up the mountain to replace the tablets he smashed when he saw the golden calf. This trip was entirely different. There was no Shofar, no smoke or lightning. "Total silence enveloped the mountain and the half-light of a wondrous and secret dawn shrouded it. Moses alone, unaccompanied by friend or disciple, climbed the cold

and steep cliffs. As he walked, Moses underwent spiritual suffering, out of a sense of aloneness, out of a silence of a man whose life is at a standstill, and without foundation; in fear, the fear of a creature when he is, for a fleeting moment, cut off from his Creator, alone but for the beating of his breaking heart. (after Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik)

On Yom Kippur, it is we who make a solitary climb; it is we who seek God's forgiveness and a second chance. Like Moses, we come with a breaking heart, bearing broken tablets – our mistakes and transgressions – that testify to our iniquity.

Our tradition suggests a pathway to Teshuvah – true repentance. Maimonides, the 12th century teacher, taught us Teshuvah entails three steps: recognizing our wrongdoing, then making restitution to those whom we've hurt, and then sincerely resolving to do better next time.

According to Maimonides, Teshuvah is a total transformation, a complete cutting off from the past, so much so, that when one achieves complete repentance, Teshuvah Gemurah, it is as if one has become a new person.

Is Maimonides right? Is it possible to forgive and forget, to let go of all the hurts we caused as well as those we endured? Can we ever erase the past and move on unburdened to the future?

The answer is: probably not, because, in truth, life inevitably leaves its mark. A Midrash relates that as Abraham stood ready to sacrifice his son, he began to weep. One tear fell directly onto Isaac's cheek, leaving a scar never to be erased.

Like Isaac, each of us carries scars of our most painful moments. Each of us carries an "Akedah" – aching memories etched into our souls.

So it was for Isaac's son, Jacob. Jacob wrestled with a divine being and prevailed and was given the name Israel. But he was forever changed. During the encounter, his thigh was wrenched from its socket leaving him permanently disabled. For the rest of his life, Jacob walked with a pronounced limp.

And so it is for us. The trials we endure are etched into us indelibly. Like Isaac, life's scars are written on our face. Like Jacob, the battles we wage, even those we win, take their toll, emotionally and physically. Like Moses, we carry the fragments of our broken tablets with us, all the days of our lives.

What are the fragments we carry with us? Some are the mistakes we've made. The times we've:

- Failed to hold up our end of a bargain, or broken faith or trust with others**
- Or slandered others.**

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- **Or failed to follow through and complete what others needed.**
- **Or stepped on toes to get what we wanted.**

Some of the broken tablets we carry are memories of times when others hurt us. Times when:

- **Others took advantage of our weakness,**
- **Or allowed us to take their fall;**
- **Or impugned our honor or dignity;**

And some of the broken tablets we carry are not artifacts of human error, but the pain generated when bad things just happened.

- **A diagnosis of a life threatening illness;**
- **A sudden tragedy;**
- **Becoming unemployed, or underemployed.**
- **Mourning a failed relationship.**
- **Experiencing our children's pain and knowing we can't fight their battles or solve their problems.**

Sometimes there is no one to blame or apologize to. At such moments, our broken tablets weigh us down and the question on our lips is not: why me, but: how will I go on?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the 20th century orthodox leader so influential he was know simply as “the Rav,” the rabbi, endorsed Maimonides’s ideas about repentance, but disagreed with one point. Even when Teshuvah is successful we never become new people. “On the day of atonement,” he wrote, “we are not bidden to tear out pages from the book of life.” The past cannot be erased. We are who we are, and we bear the signs of every past encounter and experience.

Isn’t that true? Friends battled cancer and, thank God, some are now pronounced cancer free. But is any cancer survivor ever the same? For that matter, can anyone who has faced one of life’s difficult challenges emerge unscathed? Those who have passed through the

valley of shadow of death know that we forever after carry those broken tablets.

This is true when we mourn the death of a loved one. The pain and sense of loss never go away entirely. As some of you have told me, “I lost my my parents, my child, my siblings, twenty years ago. And a day doesn’t go by that I don’t think of them.”

For the transgressions we committed or for those committed against us, the traditions of Teshuvah suggest a response. Yet, those shivrei luchot, those broken tablets can still weigh us down.

What can we do with them? An answer begins to take shape when we consider the fate of the Torah’s first set of broken tablets. The Talmud asks: whatever became of tablets smashed by Moses? The answer: The broken tablets were placed in the ark along with the second, intact set. luchot v’sshivrei luchot menuchot be’aron.

That the broken tablets were not thrown away, or buried, but preserved, confirms that our past is forever part of us. Teshuvah, then, is not about “letting go” of the past, but coming to terms with it. Moreover, that the broken tablets are preserved in the holy ark signals that broken-ness itself is a normal, perhaps even sacred, part of the human condition. Broken-ness is not a curse, or a punishment. It is the cost of being alive. The price for being created with free will is that we will make mistakes. We don’t have to feel good about our mistakes, but we should never confuse who we are with the mistakes we’ve made. Rabbi Chuck Kroloff put it well, “the mistakes we make are one thing, the lives we build are another.”

If you need proof that imperfection is part of the human condition, look no further than our tradition’s heroes. Consider Moses, who suffered a profound speech impediment. Or King David, whose moral

judgment was so skewed that when he fell in love with a married woman, Batshevah, he had her husband killed. According to the Torah, even God makes mistakes, gets angry, and is sometimes depicted as being less than all knowing and all-powerful.

Yet, their imperfections did not disqualify them from serving holy purposes. Despite his speech impediment, Moses was privileged to serve as God's voice to Pharaoh and the Israelites. Despite his moral failings, King David became the progenitor of a family line from which would arise a person no less important than the Messiah.

While broken-ness may seem to drag us down, it is paradoxically what enables us to become most human. Broken-ness is what moves us from sympathy to empathy, from having distant concern for those in need, to an identification with, and an urge to help, those broken souls around us.

***Luchot v'shivre luchot menuchot b'aron.* The tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark. Experiencing broken-ness does not make us less holy, less worthy, less the object of God's love.**

In fact, experiencing broken-ness makes us more human. What's more, our broken-ness may enable us to reach higher than we ever did before. The Talmud's discussion of Moses's broken tablets continues. "How were the two sets of tablets arranged in the ark? The broken tablets were set at the bottom of the ark, and the complete set was arranged right on top, the broken set forming a steady base, a foundation for the new set."

Thus, the broken-ness we experience is really the foundation for the rest of our lives. Our task is not to jettison the past, but build on it. This is hinted by the word Kippur, of Yom Kippur. We translate it as atonement, but it has another meaning, to cover over.

Thus, the task is to build on our past by overlaying it with new, better experiences.

A past of dishonesty and lying can be overlaid with a future of straightforwardness and candor. A past of slander and gossip can be covered with a future of discretion. A past of disrespect toward parents or teachers can be followed by a future of honoring and revering them. As we overlay new experiences day after day, month after month, year after year, the new layers reduce the sting of what lies beneath.

What a great paradox, that sin and transgression, the very things that distance us from God, in fact have the potential to bring us even closer. The Talmud asserts that in the place of a truly repentant individual, even a wholly righteous person cannot stand. Why is this so? Because the truly repentant person has come face to face with his yetzer, that essential creative urge within us that compels us to create a family, and build

homes and businesses, but which, if left unchecked, can get us into a lot of trouble. Herein lies the dialectical dimension of sin. That which severs us from God can lead us to the highest peak. In doing something wrong we find a passion and energy, a side of ourselves we did not know. We uncover that passion, we see our Yetzer in its fullness, and then are able to use that passion and energy to take us up the mountain higher than before.

But what about the trials we've faced that have nothing to do with our own impulses? This Jewish response to broken-ness holds true when it comes to those losses as well. We can't expect God to cure the disease, or restore the lost job, but God can give us strength to go on. To paraphrase our prayerbook, God cannot mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; But God can help us mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will.

In fact, God has given us the tools to enable us to respond. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer depicts God poring over the books, determining our fate. We translate the last verse, “But prayer, repentance and tzedakah avert the bitter decree.” But in truth, a more accurate translation would be: “But prayer, repentance and tzedakah soften the bitterness of the decree.” Our ancestors were wise. They understood we have little control over what happens to us in life. But they also understood that we have much more control over how we respond. Repentance and prayer and charity may not overturn our fate, but they go a long way to enable us to respond to life positively and with hope.

The Bible tells us there was no day in Jerusalem more joyous than Yom Kippur. The great white fast was celebrated because it held out the possibility of reconciliation between humanity and God. Today, we too celebrate. Repentance offers us great possibilities,

not of uprooting the past, but of picking it up and shaping it to mold the future.

On this Yom Kippur, may we gain strength from God and from each other as we walk the solitary path of Teshuvah.

May our broken tablets, our transgressions and misdeeds come to be a steady foundation on which to build a lifetime of growth and human achievement.

And when we face life's inevitable challenges, may the prayer, repentance, and tzedakah we do soften the bitterness we will inevitably encounter and inspire us to reach out to comfort one another.

For at this very moment, we have nothing to offer but each other and our broken hearts. And that will be enough.

AMEN. AMEN.

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