

Rosh Hashanah 5783
From Broken to Beautiful
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Shanah Tovah.

Everything in this room looks so pristine. You are all wearing your finest clothes. The room is filled with hundreds of people. This Bimah is adorned and holds the holy Torah. And yet through this veil, I see brokenness all around.

Each one of us has relationships that are not exactly as we would like. Each one of us set goals for last year in work or school or family life that fell short. Each one of us had our lives upended by the pandemic. Each one of us wishes things were a little different - or completely different - in our own selves, in our families, in our community, in Chicago, in the US, in Israel, and in the world. There are so many broken pieces to pick up in 5783. Where on earth do we begin?

I want to tell you a story that I think about again and again. I heard this from my Nativ counselor Avi Taff when I spent a year in Israel:

There was once a king. This king had everything. Most precious of all was a certain crystal. It was the size of my hand. The king loved this crystal to no end. This was the perfect crystal. No cracks, no asymmetry, no smudges, perfect.

One morning the king was doubly eager to see his prize. The king unspooled the velvet cloth and reached for the crystal. He held his hand up to the light and

The king stopped. He picked up the crystal and held it to the light. The outside was the same, but now there was a hideous white vein shooting up the middle of the crystal.

The king was devastated. He called his sages to give him advice. They said that he should invite all the jewelers in the land to fix his crystal. The word was spread, and the next week one hundred jewelers lined up outside the palace, eager to prove themselves. But when each one saw the jewel, they shook their heads. Except one. Only one jeweler said, "Yes, I can fix it. Give me three days."

He was hired and given an army of servants to attend to his every request. But this jeweler never left his own room on the first and second day. The king asked him, "Why aren't you *doing* anything? You haven't stepped in to see the crystal yet!" The jeweler answered, "I'm thinking. I will have it finished tomorrow. Leave me to think." The king walked away, mystified over what there was for the jeweler to *think* about.

On the final day, the jeweler went to the crystal's room. He brought a few tools and closed the door, emerging an hour later. When the king heard that the jeweler was ready, he sprinted up the stairs. The jeweler held the crystal in front of the window to let the light shine through. The king's

heart rose when he saw his precious jewel....,and then his heart fell. The hideous white line was still there. The jeweler had not made it go away.

The jeweler said, "Sire, look at it yourself. It is perfect."

The king held it up and answered, "What? The crack is still there! You didn't fix it at all!"

The jeweler replied, "Lower it a bit."

The king took the crystal with a trembling hand and lowered it. He turned it around and looked it all over. He noticed something new. Some parts of the top were shaved off. Curious, the king held it to the light again. The broken white line extending upwards ...was a stem. And the shaved portions on the top...were petals. The crystal held a perfect rose.

The king smiled. "It is perfect."

Not even the king could go backwards in time. But what the jeweler showed him was that though the brokenness could not be made whole, it could be turned into something new and beautiful.

Brokenness is part of our people from the beginning. You recall the Torah's story of the Golden Calf. After the Israelites were freed from Egyptian slavery, they marched through the desert to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Moses came down with the two tablets of the covenant - the Ten Commandments. As he descended, he saw the Israelites dancing in front of an idol, the Golden Calf. In his anger and disgust, Moses hurled the two stone tablets to the ground, shattering them into bits. How could they? How dare they? Mere minutes after G-d liberated them from slavery through the 10 plagues and splitting the sea, how could they commit such an injustice against their Redeemer?

G-d decided to destroy that generation, starting over with Moses. But Moses, full of chutzpah, had other plans. Moses convinced G-d to forgive the people, to let them do Teshuvah. G-d agreed, and 40 days later Moses descended with the second set of tablets, symbolizing G-d's forgiveness. That day was the 10th of Tishrei, now called Yom Kippur. And this is why that particular day is the annual day of forgiveness, as it is the anniversary of forgiveness for the Golden Calf.

Readers of the Torah focus on the second set of tablets, the whole ones. Readers tend to forget about the broken tablets because they are not mentioned again. But the rabbis of the Talmud did not forget about these broken shards because they once contained holiness. The Talmud teaches that the broken tablets were retrieved and placed in the holy ark alongside the second, intact set of tablets. (לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחים בארון). These broken tablets were not buried in the ground, as we do today with holy items no longer in use. Instead, they were placed in the holiest chamber and carried at the center of the Israelite camp. In other words, the broken pieces were preserved and held in the heart of the camp. The brokenness was not to be forgotten.

The two tablets are not the only broken ritual object in our tradition. On Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar with the broken notes of the Shevarim. The word itself means "broken." But we always conclude with the full, unbroken Tekiah.

We begin the Passover Seder by breaking a whole piece of Matzah and hiding it away during Yahatz. But we later return the Afikoman to the table and share with everybody for dessert.

We conclude the wedding with the smashing of the glass into tiny fragments. But we shout Mazel Tov! and celebrate a new family being born before our eyes.

We Jews incorporate brokenness into our rituals because we don't deny that life throws punches at us. When it does, we always respond by creating something new, something beautiful.

Each of us in our own lives will face our own failures, some shared by others, some just by ourselves. The Jewish tradition urges us not to forget and move on, but to take the broken pieces and construct something beautiful. Just like the Japanese art of Kintsugi, of repairing broken pottery by mending the broken pieces together with a gold/silver/platinum polish. When we face failure, it's never easy to absorb. But how do we respond?

Very similar in some ways to Moses was Theodor Herzl. In the Torah, it's Moses who delivers the Jews to the brink of Israel. Though he himself cannot enter, his people cross over and establish a Jewish home in Canaan. In the late eighteen hundreds, a young Herzl devotes nine frenetic years to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Though Herzl himself does not live long enough to see its creation, his people make Aliyah and establish a Jewish state in Israel.

Herzl's quest began with an epic failure, with brokenness. In 1895, Herzl met with the man he hoped would bankroll his dream of creating a Jewish state. Baron Maurice de Hirsch was one of the world's wealthiest people, a most generous philanthropist who funded resettling the persecuted Jews of czarist Russia in other lands. The partnership sounded most promising. Author Howard Sachar describes the meeting:

"[Herzl insulted his host and was arrogant]. When Herzl began elaborating upon [his] theme, de Hirsch, provoked and incensed, interrupted with vigorous objections. The discussion soon collapsed in a mutual shouting match." As Herzl noted later in his diary, "I only got as far as page six – I had 22 pages!"

But Herzl didn't give up. In a fit of fury, Herzl returned to his hotel and poured his mind and heart into writing a newer, more detailed, more convincing argument. These writings formed the core of the iconic 1896 pamphlet he would call, "*Der Judenstaat*-The Jewish State." Translations into Hebrew, English, French, Russian, and Romanian followed. And this single pamphlet would be largely responsible for putting Zionism and Herzl on the map. Herzl's original failure propelled his success. His tenacity led to Zionism entering the mainstream. He was dealt a shattered crystal, as it were, but from it he created a magnificent rose, a timeless book for his people.

But what if we're stuck? What if we have our broken crystal but don't know how to carve the rose?

It's easy to look back on Herzl's story now and tell this feel-good story. But it's excruciating to be Herzl in the days after the disastrous meeting and before he writes his book.

I acknowledge that my message today is far easier said than done. However, entering a new year should give us optimism that maybe this is it. Maybe this is the year. Maybe this is the time we can be like the jeweler dreaming up something better. Recall that the jeweler spent much more time thinking and planning than he did crafting. Most of this repair work involves our imaginations more than our hands. Fortunately for us, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide ample time for us to imagine something better for the year ahead.

One thing that gives me energy during difficult moments is hearing about other people overcoming significant obstacles. Sports are great for these stories.

Earlier this year I heard about Carson Pickett, a 26 year old professional soccer player on the US Women's National Team. She was born without a left forearm, but that didn't derail her from chasing and achieving her dream of being a pro athlete. Pickett had to endure immense challenges along the way, like learning how to tie shoes with just one hand. She said: "My parents have two hands and two arms and unfortunately they weren't able to teach me how to tie my shoes. There were definitely times where I cried, and just couldn't figure it out, and they kept pushing me. Tying my shoes was almost impossible, it did seem impossible, but I overcame it."

Fast forward to this year. This pro athlete, driven to give back and advocate for disabled athletes, collaborated with Nike to design a soccer cleat that requires only one hand to put on. The Nike Phantom GT FlyEase features a fold-down heel for easy entry and a wrap-around strap closure instead of laces. This laceless cleat also looks really cool.

Pickett said: "Honestly, my first reaction when I saw the Phantom GT FlyEase was relief. I thought about my younger self and what it would have meant for me if something like this existed when I was growing up. I feel like this boot represents me and anybody else who is unique. FlyEase is very easy for anybody to put on quickly, which I love."

Carson Pickett faced down gigantic challenges on her way to being a pro athlete with one arm. Once she reached that mountaintop, she built something amazing, a new kind of shoe that will make it easier for others to get in the game too. From that broken crystal she carved one beautiful rose.

Brokenness. Failure. Challenge. Each of us has dealt with these in the past, present and future. But how will we respond? Lean into the Jewish tradition. Judaism shares wisdom and strength: the urge to create beauty out of brokenness. The presence of community, reassuring us that we are not alone. The gift of these holidays and Shabbat, which are precious times to think, to imagine, to dream. The instinct to imitate the jeweler, who took the brokenness and rose to the occasion.

Shanah Tovah.