

Imperfection and Brokenness

Several months ago I was driving in my neighborhood when a sign caught my attention. Prominently displayed on a sidewalk board at the entrance to the Parish of St Paul in Newton was a sign listing the various attributes of its congregants. I was grateful for the red light, which gave me the chance to quickly scribble it all down. I'd like to read this list to you– and let you be surprised, as I was, by one of the attributes: inclusive, welcoming, joyful, friendly, seeking, imperfect, active, risk taking, justice-loving, totally caring and thoroughly vibrant. Yes, imperfect, was right there, front-and-center, for everyone to see.

I now fast forward to a day in July when I came into the Sanctuary to check out the progress of the construction work. I was immediately taken aback by the sight of a giant “spider” at the very center of this beautiful space. Not a real spider but a machine that gets its name from being able to reach all the way to the far corners of a room. On that day it was high up right next to one of the verses from Torah that line the dome. I thought to myself: This is our big opportunity to tweak the message that gets front billing in our community! The one that says: “walk before me and be thou perfect.” In Hebrew the verse is: “hit’alech l’fanai v’heyeh tamim.” These are God’s words to Abraham. The King James translation of the Hebrew word “tamim” is “perfect.” However, a better translation for “tamim” and the one that we have in our chumash is “pure of heart” or “whole.” I don’t believe God ever expected Abraham to be perfect nor do I believe God expects us to be perfect.

And tonight -more than any other time, we need to remember that it’s not about perfection. It’s about bringing our whole selves before God: our faults –those parts of ourselves we wish were different, as well as our virtues. And it’s about taking comfort in the knowledge that God accepts us-blemishes and all.

When I came to interview at Ohabei Shalom – almost five years ago! –I was asked to do a teaching on the weekly Torah portion. We were in the midst of reading the Book of Leviticus – the one that has all the gory details about animal sacrifices. Contrary to what you might expect, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to focus on passages that describe the blemishes that disqualify animal sacrifices. Having seen the ceiling inscription with the verse about perfection, I was eager to share a teaching about the ways in which God responds differently to our imperfections. In a mid-rash, the rabbis tell us:

“Whatever God declared unfit in the case of an animal, He declared fit in the case of man. In animals he declared unfit the blind, or broken, or maimed or having a wart whereas in man he declared fit.

The midrash continues: *“If an ordinary person makes use of broken vessels, it is a disgrace for him, but the vessels used by God are precisely broken ones, as it is written in the psalms: ‘Adonai is close to the broken-hearted’ (Psalm 34:19). Adonai heals their broken hearts and binds up their wounds. (Leviticus Rabba 7:2 Tsav)*

We are all broken in some way. For some of us our brokenness is physical, for others it is emotional. Sometimes our brokenness is a result of the choices we’ve made and other times, it has more to do with the “cards we’ve been dealt.”

For some of us, our brokenness is rooted in the death of a loved one. We might find meaningful ways to honor their memory but whatever we do, we will go through life with a missing piece. And it’s not only those who grieve the loss of someone dear that are incomplete. Some are broken by divorce –disappointed by their partners. Others are broken because of their children. Maybe they didn’t grow up to be the type of people we hoped they would be. Perhaps they are estranged from us or from their siblings. We also have dreams and expectations about our work. Maybe the job we dreamed of isn’t a realistic possibility any more. Some among us face medical setbacks – of our own or our family, which have forced us to change course and to give up on cherished dreams.

This missing piece that we carry with us weighs us down and compels us to see things differently. And while we don’t welcome any of these disappointments, these experiences have the potential of making us whole. Rabbi Harold Kushner likes to refer to the children’s story entitled *The Missing Piece* -by Shel Silverstein, when explaining the way in which brokenness can make us whole. It’s a story about a circle that is missing a piece and is very unhappy about this. So, it goes searching all over the world for its missing piece – over hills, across rivers, down into valleys. But because it’s missing a piece, it has to go very slowly. As it goes along, it has a chance to look at the flowers and the butterflies and even to stop in the cool grass. Finally, one day it finds a piece that fits perfectly. The circle is whole again. It takes the piece into itself and starts to roll away. Now, however, it’s rolling much faster -past lakes, butterflies -too quickly to get a good look at them. And when the circle notices that it’s rolling too fast to do any of the things it had done for years, it stops and very reluctantly puts down its missing piece. It heads out into the world looking, once again, for its missing piece.

Rabbi Kushner tells this story to help us understand what it means to be whole. He says: “to be missing a piece, to have to go through life carrying around an emptiness where something important and precious used to be, and to understand that despite that pain you are a deeper and richer person because you’re missing that piece –that’s what it means to be whole. That little bit of incompleteness cures us of the illusion of self-sufficiency. It opens us up, to feeling more, seeing more, experiencing more.”

Wisdom on “brokenness” comes from someone who, at first sight, might not seem like the most likely source. Remember Bryan Stevenson, the civil rights lawyer who visited with us this spring and who I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah? In his book he devotes an entire chapter to this subject. In it he reflects on the brokenness of his clients –some of whom are innocent people

condemned to death. He tells us: "Being broken is what makes us human. Our brokenness is the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion." Mr. Stevenson goes on to say: "We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion and, as a result, deny our humanity."

This idea about embracing the brokenness in our lives is one that our rabbis taught long ago. Do you remember the story in the Torah about Moses breaking the tablets he brought down from Mt. Sinai? He sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf and in his anger, he lets the tablets fall to the ground. God commands Moses to carve a second set. We then learn that the Israelites carry the tablets in the Ark of the Covenant throughout the forty-year journey in the wilderness. According to the rabbis, the Ark includes not only the intact set but also, the first set – with all its broken pieces.

That the broken tablets were not thrown away, or buried, but preserved, speaks to the idea that brokenness itself is a normal, perhaps even a sacred, part of the human condition. It also tells us that our past is forever part of us. Teshuva –is not about "letting go" of the past, but coming to terms with it.

What's more, our brokenness may enable us to reach higher than we ever did before. The Talmud's discussion of the broken tablets continues by telling us how the tablets were stored in the Ark: "The broken tablets were placed 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." The brokenness we experience is really the foundation for the rest of our lives. Our task is not to jettison the past, but to build on it.

We build on the missing pieces in our life by tapping into the greater openness, compassion and humility that are often the byproduct of brokenness. We tap into these traits and work towards reconciliation, towards forgiving others their faults and ourselves for the ways in which we have fallen short.

Tonight we hold onto the idea -the tension, between striving towards our best selves *and* accepting human imperfection. On the one hand we acknowledge and work towards changing the ways in which we have fallen short. On the other hand, we embrace our flaws and accept that all of us are imperfect.

There is a story about a disciple who -wondering about the purpose of Yom Kippur, asks his rebbe: "If we know that next year we'll be back, right here in the synagogue, with a list of the ways in which we have fallen short what's the point?" The rebbe tells him to spend some time at the river bank where the townspeople wash their soiled clothes—and there, to consider the purpose of Yom Kippur. He sees them washing their garments, scrubbing them hard and then returning the next week with these same soiled garments in hand, to repeat the process all over again.

And so, I conclude with the words of the famous Canadian poet, singer and songwriter,

Leonard Cohen. In his song, entitled Anthem, he echoes the sentiment of the rabbis who gave us that beautiful teaching about our blemishes and imperfections. He tells us:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

While we might not be able to change the verse in our Sanctuary about perfection, I invite you to listen to Cohen's words and to use them as a *kavanah* – as a way of thinking about the work of *teshuva* that lies ahead of us.

May we embrace the imperfection, the cracks that are part of us, recognizing that this is how the light gets in – how we nurture humility, compassion and connection. May this light illumine our way –and help us return to our best selves.