

I am broken and have been broken many times... failed relationships, friendships that needed to die, and health scares. May, 6 years ago, I had a stroke. They say you forget pain; but this was the kind of pain I could not forget. I felt like I was on fire and dying. I knew my head had been hurt and searched for blood or bandages or tubes. My body could not move. I was trapped in a mind that could think yet could not communicate. I forgot my name, my life, what I did for a living, but the pain I could not forget. I learned several hours later, with Shane at my side, that I had not been in a car accident, that I would not die yet, that I had driven myself to the hospital and told the doctors I was having a stroke as I fell to the floor. They were able to give me medicine to reverse some of the effects of the stroke and later that day, I could stand, and speak in a voice that belonged to a robot, not something human. I loved that voice- although it had no intonation and could say basic words, very slowly and with a pronounced stutter because it meant that there was possibility.

That night, God granted me an amazing blessing, which I will never forget. I went to the nursing station and asked if they could make me a sign to wear around my neck- the sign read, I am a Rabbi, I too have brain trauma. May I hold your hand? A nurse wheeled me from person to person. No one was aware. There were tubes, and empty eyes and open mouths. There were comas, and brain tumors, and stroke victims. I could not move my hand so well, but the nurse laid my hand on the hand of every other patient. And I said a silent prayer for each and every one of them for peace. When she wheeled me back to my bed, I thanked her and then cried because God had helped me to realize that even in this broken state, I still had the capacity to be me. I was no longer afraid. The morning MRI showed a small-blackened dot on my right frontal lobe, meaning that I may not be able to attain the agility that I had before. I was released from the hospital with many scheduled appointments with neurologists and physical and speech therapists. The stroke happened on a Wednesday. By Saturday night, I officiated at a wedding with many other rabbis ready to jump in. A month later, I was reading the dictionary, writing every day, and walking around the neighborhood. Was it luck- absolutely. Was it God- absolutely. Would I ever complete heal- no but believe me, I am more than okay with that.

So I am broken. In so many ways and that brokenness makes me more whole. We all have many missing pieces in our lives. We have all experienced loss and tragedy. We have all suffered from broken relationships. At this time of year, on our holiest night of nights, we pause to try to mend our brokenness, to reclaim the missing piece.

Jewish tradition is replete with lessons about brokenness. In fact, the ultimate simcha- a wedding- is concluded with the breaking of a glass. At the most joyous of times when two souls come together, we break something, acknowledging that our world is still not whole. That there are those who are

suffering all over the world and we need to put them back together by repairing the world.

When Challah is prepared for Shabbat, it is kosher only after a small piece of the corner is broken off and burnt before baking the rest. And a Sukkah, because it must have three walls instead of four, is flawless only when it is flawed. Despite the missing wall, the Sukkah stands firm, and through the three walls we look to our neighbor's Sukkah and see that theirs, too, has a wall missing. And at eight days, the foreskin is taken off a Jewish boy, and somehow the Covenant is held together by this small missing piece.

Our tradition recognizes these simple truths: first, we are made larger when we make ourselves smaller. Estelle Frankel, a Jewish teacher and psychotherapist in the Bay Area discusses this story in her book, *Sacred Therapy*. She suggests that the story of the two tablets is teaching us that mistakes and failures are a natural part of life. From her perspective, failure is a gateway through which we must pass so that we may receive our greatest blessings. By worshipping the Golden Calf, and the destruction of the first set of tablets, we were able to experience the greatness of what we had lost. Most of you can probably remember a time in your life when through a mistake you made, you lost a great gift. It is only in losing this gift that we come to fully appreciate its preciousness.

The first set of tablets was given as an act of Divine grace, but to receive the second set, we had work to do. As we learn in the text, unlike the original tablets, Moses was instructed to carve the second set himself. It took human effort, a partnership with the Divine, to create a lasting covenant. The first revelation at Sinai, given from grace, was not sustainable. As Estelle Frankel teaches "Ultimately the Israelites had to do the inner work of repentance to strengthen their own vessels." Then they would be ready to provide God with the materials for the giving of the second set of commandments. When the Israelites received the second set of whole tablets, they were put in the tabernacle with the broken tablets. Our Rabbis ask, which set of tablets was considered holier? The broken tablets because they held the true soul of human beings.

This is true of our own lives as well. When we accept the reality of our own broken places, we can go about the process of building and healing that we need to embrace the fullness of life. It is our unique gift as human beings to be able to learn from our mistakes. We have the emotional intelligence that helps us find the strength to change our behavior and make different choices in the future.

On Yom Kippur we are encouraged to open ourselves to truth. We are asked to experience this day as if it were our last. Our fasting and our prayers are the tools we use to get beyond our physical selves and explore our lives as honestly

as we are able. Just as our ancestors gathered the shattered fragments of stone, we too must examine our broken pieces.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a 19th century Chasidic master, taught that there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. He was telling us that brokenness is often the only way back to wholeness. At the moment when things seem to be falling apart or ending, we may become more open to new choices that are just waiting for our recognition. It is so hard for us to see this in the moment of our pain, but when we look back upon our lives we can discover that when one door closes, another one opens.

Most of us have spent at least some time running from our difficult experiences. It is challenging for us to sit with what truly hurts us. We try to avoid pain by watching television, working too hard, eating too much...But paradoxically, we can only access our real potential by being willing to stay in the struggle long enough to find our way.

Hasidic thought reveals this truth, even in pain there is a holy spark of the Divine, but it is concealed in many garments. When we are able to experience this spark, the garment is removed and the pain can then dissipate. The healing or tikkun is on a personal level- tikkun nefashot, the healing of the soul. When we find a way to connect with God, despite our pain, or sense of betrayal, we uncover the spark that is hidden. But we know that pain usually causes us to feel alienated from God. We may welcome God as healer, but we usually struggle to find God when we suffer. It is the realization that pain is part of living that can help us experience God in the face of our challenges.

The more you lose of yourself, the more you gain for yourself. The more you give of yourself, the more you get more back for yourself. I love the midrash which has Ima Shalom, a late 19th century scholar arguing with a heretic about the verse in the Torah in which Eve is "taken", or created from Adam's 'tsela', correctly translated as his side. "Your God is a thief, to take a piece from Adam!" says the heretic. "You are right," answers Ima Shalom. "I had just such a thief come to my house last night. He took away my brass goblet, and in its place, he left a gold one." "You are right," says the heretic. "I should have just such a thief in my house every night!" This is the lesson we receive when donating blood or bone marrow. The blood I'm missing, now worthless to me gives life to someone else. The money I give, now useless to me, is survival for someone or something else. You give brass, you get back gold.

For Jews, our strength as we take the journey searching for our missing pieces are the community, and God. The sure knowledge that everyone has a small piece missing is why we do yizkor together tomorrow afternoon, why we find solace in the little sighs and muffled tears of the strangers behind us. All of us have places at the table missing this year, maybe from death, or from illness, or from distance; maybe from separation, or maybe from anger. Some of us

hold the sadness of failed relationships, disappointments from our children or our parents or our spouses, a year made more difficult because of work or illness or the fear of the unknown. On Yom Kippur we acknowledge that we are all incomplete, and we need each other to fill in those aching spaces. Unetaneh token, who shall live and who shall die? Whose circle will be whole and who's broken? The ending line says: uteshuvah, utefilah, utzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'ah hagezeirah; that teshuva-changing our behavior-, tefila-connectedness to God- and tzedakah-righteous action- change the harshness of our fate. It does not say that teshuva, tefillah and tzedakah will change our fate altogether; for we are forever human. But we ameliorate the harshness of human destiny through behaviors and attitudes, which help us to live better, stronger lives. We do teshuva when we allow ourselves to be transformed and changed through living. And we shape our fate through tefillah, connectedness with something bigger than ourselves. And tzedakah fills in so much of the gap, for we can feel absorbed and isolated about our own missing pieces, or we can reach out and use our pain in "rachmones", in compassion, to someone else in pain. Yom Kippur makes us hungry, both literally and figuratively, for that kind of sharing; that kind of reaching out. It should make us wiser to our own responsibility to practice it.

Although each of us has a piece missing in our lives, we have also experienced wholeness. We have been blessed to know love, and sweetness, and joy; the tenderness of a touch or a word that has changed our lives, a closeness if even only for brief moments or few encounters. Would we have traded that if we knew it was only to be ours for short while?

Through embracing the brokenness do we become more than whole, we become complete.