

## ***Beautifying and Sanctifying Our Brokenness***

**Yom Kippur Sermon 2022~5783**

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On August 8 I marked 19 years since being diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer. But I didn't remember to recognize it like I have done in years past. When I realized I had missed the anniversary, I felt simultaneously disappointed and comforted to know that a day had passed (the most important day!), and I hadn't remembered that I had been diagnosed and treated for cancer, I hadn't looked at my many scars and paused. At all.

I imagine this is a feeling many of you know well - having experienced some kind of brokenness in your life that left you with memories or scars (emotional or physical); times when your lives, as you have known them, were shattered by the intrusion of fate, disappointment or unexpected trauma.

These shatterings could include so many things visible to the naked eye - illness, death, divorce, aging; and even more so, the things hidden from public view - anxiety, depression, infertility, challenges for our kids. And for all of us - the reemergence into a world forever changed by the COVID pandemic.

In my search for understanding this year I have become fixated on the traditional Japanese art of *kintsugi*, where artisans fill the cracks in broken pottery with gold or silver, transforming damaged pieces into something as beautiful if not more so than they were when new. The word *kintsugi* means "golden joinery." By mending the areas of breakage with lacquer mixed with precious metals the brokenness and repair are treated as part of the object's history, rather than something to disguise.

These bowls aren't valued any less once the cracks are illuminated, but those cracks are highlighted as a way to acknowledge the current form of the bowl and everything it has been through.

I'm thinking that our post-traumatic growth that is unfolding is like kintsugi for the mind,<sup>1</sup> and Yom Kippur is the perfect environment to identify the cracks in our hearts and bodies and begin to apply the lacquer to mend and beautify the experiences we have had this past year. The cracks need not only be significant life altering ones. They can also be small and seemingly insignificant to others. To adapt a teaching of the great poet Audrey Lourde / may her memory be a blessing / there is no hierarchy of brokenness.

But let me first be honest about something. Sometimes when i begin to notice the cracks and brokenness of my own life - I am sooner to grab the "clear lacquer." The kind that makes the scars *appear invisible* - because I don't want anyone to know where my cracks are. I feel so responsible - for my family, for this community, for the Jewish people...sometimes it's kind of a lot.

But glossing over those imperfections and challenges doesn't serve anyone, least of all me. So it is important to notice and learn how these breakages might beautify who we are, and who we are yet to be. And if Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was right when he taught that *there's nothing more whole than a broken heart*, I would see that message as indicative of these same ideas - that our ability to see and even recognize our flaws, our challenges, and our breakages is what constitutes the wholeness of heart.

A psychological theory developed in the 1990s, *post traumatic growth* suggests that people can emerge from trauma or adversity having achieved positive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/06/covid-life-after>

personal growth. It's not exactly resilience, because it isn't bouncing back from difficulty, as much as it is growing beyond where you were *before* the hardship. If you were to measure your appreciation of life, your relationships, personal strength, the recognition of new possibilities and spiritual change, Would you see growth?<sup>2</sup>

Our sources delineate the minimum requirements for mitzvot, and how we can enhance them through aesthetics called *hiddur mitzvah* - the beautification of ritual. And while there is no mention of how we might beautify our brokenness, I believe that *hiddur shevirah* - the beautification of the cracks in our lives might help to make whole our shattered parts.

We need only to look to the Book of Exodus to find how Jewish tradition has responded to the question of brokenness.<sup>3</sup> In one of the most well known passages, as Moses is descending Mt. Sinai with the 10 commandments, he sees the people dancing and worshipping a golden calf. In a moment of rage and disappointment, Moses hurls the tablets and they break into pieces.

The Torah tells us וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת הָעָם כִּי פָרַע הוּא - Moses saw that the people were exposed.<sup>4</sup> They were caught in the act, vulnerable from the sin they knew they wrongly committed. I can imagine a stunned silence descending over the scene as everyone - God / Moses / and the people stare at the broken tablets.

The brokenness of the tablets is emblematic of a rupture of the covenant - the relationship between God and the people. It's unclear at that moment what will come next, and what will be done with the broken tablets. The Torah text is silent.

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<sup>2</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun's Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) ([Journal of Traumatic Stress](#), Vol. 9, No. 3, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> I'm grateful for a study session with Rabbi Sarit Horwitz in which she shared her *dvar torah* on Parashat Ki Tissa which made the connection between kintsugi and the broken tablets.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 32:25

Only later will the rabbis in the Talmud will teach that the broken tablets were not discarded or left at the mountain, rather they were gathered up and eventually placed inside the Ark of the Covenant, along with the second set carved by Moses and inscribed with the Divine hand.<sup>5</sup>

The midrash wonders what happened to the broken tablets at that point? “Rabbi Judah bar Ilai taught that two arks journeyed with Israel in the wilderness – one in which the Torah was kept and one in which the tablets broken by Moses were kept. The one in which the Torah was placed was kept in the Tent of Meeting; the other, containing the broken tablets, *would come and go with them.*”<sup>6</sup>

*Would come and go with them.* This phrase underscores that the broken set was even more valuable than the whole set, because the people would take them everywhere they traveled. Like the art of kintsugi, the broken tablets were honored, and the story of them and their honored place is like gold lacquer that has fused them back together.

Each of us undoubtedly carries the broken parts of our lives with us, but are they packed away somewhere, or are they with us all the time? If you are like me, and have physical scars that you can see every day, we have no choice but to carry them with us. I haven’t beautified them - no decorative tattoos to hide them - I don’t like needles enough to do that - but all on their own they are reminders of my strength, my resilience, and my recovery.

Our tradition doesn’t call for distraction, dissociation or distance in the face of heartbreak, even though it may seem like a reasonable thing to do. Our tradition asks us to bring our broken hearts with us because it is from our brokenness that we understand what we love, what moves us, where our faith resides, and what motivates us to get up each morning renewed with the gratitude that we get to

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<sup>5</sup> BT Bava Batra 14b

<sup>6</sup> JT, Shekalim, 1: 1

live another day.

It is reminiscent of one of the most creative products to emerge from the Jewish wedding industry. Instead of using a plain wine glass to break at the end of the ceremony, a couple can purchase a colored glass which, when broken at the wedding, can then be sent to a company that will put the shards into a lucite mezuzah for the couple to hang in their new home. Such a mezuzah can remind the couple that in their greatest moment of joy the brokenness of their past and their present comes with them in an effort to build a more whole future.<sup>7</sup>

We can never go back and undo what we have done. We can never go back in time and undo the ruptures in our lives that have caused us pain. My scars are my scars - the physical ones from surgeries and the emotional ones from facing a potentially life threatening illness, long with the many knicks and cuts and bruises that I've weathered my whole life. And I know you have yours too.

We are here to do the repair together, for ourselves, of course, but also as we hold the hands of our children - for the next generation - to admire the strength and artistry and materials we used to build something majestic.

An old interpretation of the shofar blasts taught by my teacher Rabbi Arthur Green is a powerful metaphor for this kind of brokenness and wholeness – how to remember, rebuild, and renew ourselves and our community.

Each series of shofar blasts begins with *tekiah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings.” “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.”

Then follows *ter'uah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: “I was entirely smashed to pieces.” But each series has to end with a new *tekiah*, promising

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<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Sarit Horwitz

wholeness once more. The shofar cried out a hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, and we will conclude at Neila tonight with one final *tekiah gedola* Inviting us to proclaim: “I was whole, I was broken, I was even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!”

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg teaches: “We write history with our decisions and our actions. But we also write history with our responses to those actions... Repentance—*teshuvah*—is like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, repairing broken pottery with gold. You can never unbreak what has been broken. But with the sincere and deep work of transformation, acts of repair have the potential to make something new.”<sup>8</sup>

Gmar Hatima Tova - May our journey towards wholeness be inspired, beautified, and sanctified.

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<sup>8</sup> *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, p. 46