

Rabbi Jen Feldman
Yom Kippur Sermon 5769

A colleague recently confided to me that each year, at some point during High Holy Day services, he will begin to cry. A collage of images fills his mind as he remembers encounters with illness, death, and loss in the preceding year – either in his own life and the life of his family, or among members of his community. He always hopes that the moment when he “breaks,” when he “loses it,” will be when he is turned toward the ark, his face out of sight of his congregation.

It is understandable why he may feel the need to keep his emotions from view. We are immersed in a secular culture that values having it all together and keeping it all together. It stresses the achievement of constant happiness and undying perfection. We strive for eternal youth and health, to fill our wrinkles before they even start to form. We are taught not to reveal physical or emotional “flaws;” in our professional and personal relationships, we hide our true selves lest we send others fleeing. In short, there isn’t a lot of room in mainstream society for the vicissitudes of life.

But Judaism, with its ancient wisdom, offers a different message. Even at our most joyous occasions – weddings and holidays – we acknowledge that *simchah* is happening in the context of real lives. A wedding ends with the shattering of a glass, reminding us even in a time of great hopefulness that our world is imperfect and incomplete.

Each major festival from Passover to Sukkot to Shmini Atzeret and Shavuot is characterized by the chanting of Hallel—ebullient songs of praise and triumph. But smack in the middle of Hallel there is a pause, and we actually plead with God to save us, to be with us in our difficulties and our struggles.

No, even when it could, Judaism simply doesn't fall into the "just be happy" message. Instead, it's "let's be real."

Every year there are individuals who tell me that they don't know if they can handle coming to High Holy Day services. Personal events have battered their faith or their sense of security and happiness. I try to assure that there is no "right" emotional and spiritual place to be in order to usher in the New Year and to do the work of *teshuvah*. In fact, it is

often from our places of greatest vulnerability that we may discover new connections to our community and to God.

Indeed, here Judaism is both radical and compassionate: It values, even embraces the shattered places in our souls: In psalms we read *Karov adonai l'mishbarei lev*, “God is close to the brokenhearted.” (Psalm 34:18). The rabbis went on to say that the truest prayer is a broken heart. In the words of the great Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.”

None of us gets through this life without experiencing loss. Financial arrangements that seemed dependable prove not to be so secure after all. People close to us – or we ourselves – fall ill and require care. We endure the end of important relationships, the loss of people we love, personal and professional failures. We discover that we are not, after all, invulnerable. We may feel that life is broken – or that we have been broken.

My colleague, Rabbi Brant Rosen, writes that when this happens,

We assume that as a result of our broken-ness, we will never fit into the world around us. And so, these broken places often become sources of shame. We try with all of our might to deny them, to pretend that we are more whole than we actually are, in the hopes of being like everything, like everyone else.

Listen, though, to the sound of the shofar. It has something to tell us. On Rosh Hashanah we sound a *tekiah* – a single, whole note. We follow it with three shorter blasts – called *shevarim*, which literally means “shattered ones,” and then we sound *tekiah* again.

Technically, the duration of *shevarim* should be the same as that of *tekiah*: that is, the sum of the three shattered notes should equal the one whole note. So, when sounding *shevarim*, the person blowing shofar must remember and hear in their mind the unbroken *tekiah* – and when sounding *tekiah*, the shofar blower must simultaneously hear the broken notes of *shevarim*.

As with the call of the shofar, so too with our lives. We weave between brokenness and wholeness, and learn to hold on to one in the midst of the other. Rabbi Rosen writes:

The path to wholeness comes not from overcoming, but embracing...brokenness. Because on some level, when we greet the difficult, painful parts of life with openness, we are embracing our essential humanity.

For many of us, observing Yom Kippur involves a sense of loss: regrets for some of what we have done during the past year, and regrets for what we have failed to do. In a moment, we will begin our Yizkor prayers, and for many of us, this too evokes a sense of terrible loss, of incompleteness in our lives.

Our tradition tells us that we must permit ourselves to experience all of this. If we do not shy away, if we do not hide from ourselves and from our community, then we will discover others who can accept and embrace us as we are, and we can accept ourselves as well. As we learn to stop expending effort on hiding – as we permit ourselves to be fully

present -- we make it possible to move into the new year with renewed energy and sense of purpose.

On this Yom Kippur may we be strengthened by our prayers, by our community, by our sense of God's presence -- and may we be able to embrace the fullness of our lives. May we find comfort, connection, and return to wholeness. G'mar chatimah tovah.

We turn now to our Yizkor prayers. For those who will not be staying for this service, please respect the prayers of those who do remain by exiting quietly. Be aware that noise from the lobby travels into the sanctuary, so please refrain from conversation until you are outside of the building.