

Embracing Brokenness for Healing, Hope, and Living Life
Erev Rosh haShana 5777
Central Synagogue Beth Emeth
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Thursday morning, August 21, 2008, I am on my way to the City for what would be an eight hour surgery and a fifteen day stay in the hospital, I was a mix of calm, courage, and chaos. These feelings were expressions of my frailty in the face of life threatening illness, my vulnerability, and a deep humility. I was with people who cared about me, but still felt very much alone. The chaos was a mix of anger, sadness, grief, loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, depression, fear and despondency. The courage was rooted in an unshakable optimism and confidence that I would live and be well. I recognized like Job (42: 1-6) that I had reached the limits of my ability to help myself and I needed help from others, family, friends, community, medical professionals, and God.

Nevertheless, wholeness was elusive. Even after recovering from surgery, my insides would be a little differently configured. The illness and the isolation of illness left me broken.



Tekiah: We are whole.
Shevarim: We are broken.
T'ruah: We are completely shattered.
Tekiah g'dolah: We are more whole than before.

Wrote Rabbi Jill Jacobs. She explains,

The sequence of shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah takes us from wholeness (the unwavering sound of the *tekiah*) to the beginnings of vulnerability (the three sounds of *shevarim*) to the utter despair of *t'ruah* (with its nine staccato notes) to a wholeness more complete than before (the long call of *tekiah g'dolah*). And then the process begins again.

She confides:

The shofar reveals a secret: Wholeness and brokenness cannot be separated from one another. As we do a *cheshbon nefesh* — a personal accounting — and delve deeper into ourselves, we may find cracks that we never before noticed. Only a sincere encounter with this brokenness will allow us to put ourselves back together again, more whole than before.

"Broken Notes," *Sh'ma Forward*, June 2016, Sensibilities, *Sh'ma Now*, A Journal of Jewish Sensibilities, June 2016 - Sivan 5776, V.46 No. 718. forward.com/shma-now



I was broken and in order to heal I needed to embrace my brokenness. We have been taught that we need to let down our armor to feel our vulnerability. My armor was completely shattered; it was pulverized to dust. When we feel broken we are reminded that we are both physical and spiritual beings. Healing is helped from both perspectives. It is easy to see the physical; often we do better taking care of our bodies or our stuff. Yet, taking care of our spirits may be

even more significant if we are to heal well.

The brokenness of illness is just one example of shattering we may experience. I do not think the experience of brokenness and vulnerability is fundamentally different as its cause changes. A divorce, a bereavement, the loss of one's livelihood, or the loss of one's home are other examples of trauma that can leave us broken. In any of these circumstances and others, embracing one's brokenness is very difficult.



The Psalms teach that the experience of brokenness may give us greater access to God. 34:19 affirms, "God is close to the brokenhearted." Psalm 51:17 declares, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart." When we offer our vulnerability to God, we are able to feel God's presence in our lives. Isaiah (57:15) explains, "For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, 'I dwell on the high and holy place, yet also with the person who is of a contrite and humble spirit.'" Feeling the presence of the Eternal One helps us to heal and become more whole.

I acknowledge that I derived strength from an odd mix of family, community, God, nature, liturgy, scripture, Jerusalem, and just **living**, and my strong will to continue living. I simply could not imagine quitting life. During the difficult, impossible times when I felt most isolated and most alone, God's presence sustained me and continues to give me fortitude and optimism.



Healing is not a one shot deal. There is no magic *ta-dah!* - *all better!* and we are complete and whole again, it is a process over time. Often it is a journey made in solitude, sometimes with the pain of loneliness. At other times a community needs healing and our solitudes are braided together like a *havdalah* candle. Like the candle, we ultimately burn more brightly. Even when the journey is private, others can strengthen us and bolster our spirits along the way.

Some of you may remember an inclusion *shabbat* at Central Synagogue when our guest speaker was my friend and colleague, Lynne Landsberg. As she tells her story,

In 1999, I sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury when my Jeep Cherokee skidded on a patch of black ice and wrapped itself around a tree. When I slowly awoke from a six-week coma, I was unable to remember how to live. Through years of intensive rehabilitation, I re-learned how to walk, talk, concentrate, and more. Now, I walk with a cane, speak slowly, and require assistance with many tasks.

"A Call to Action," Lynne Landsberg, WRN News, Summer 2008

While Lynne was in a coma one-hundred-fifty colleagues each took a Psalm to recite on Lynne's behalf every day. When she was well enough to understand, we each wrote a note on a copy of the Psalm and sent them to the colleague who organized these recitations. She arranged them as a Book of Psalms and presented them to Lynne. The Psalms are a collection of writings from people with broken spirits and contrite hearts. We helped offer Lynne's brokenness to God. We offered Lynne the strength of our community.

Lynne acknowledged her brokenness and embraced it. She turned her brokenness into advocacy for people with disabilities. Lynne will never be the same as she was before the accident. For six years she and I co-chaired the *CCAR Committee on Awareness and Inclusion of People with Disabilities*. Lynne embraced her disability and learned to be clear asking for what she needs to be effective. She is part of our community so we respond and help her to contribute to our work. Her contribution is significant.



How do we proceed to do this exceedingly difficult thing: embracing brokenness? It is hard because we open ourselves to pain. First tell your story to yourself, and then tell it to someone else. At times we may find that someone else is God. Remember, when we tell our story to God, there can be no fabrication and no evasion, only the truth. After such a telling we develop enough insight and emotional balance to bring the brokenness to a place and time of healing.

In his song "Anthem," Leonard Cohen sings the refrain,

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

We cannot make brokenness disappear but we can affect, in significant ways, our ability to cope. We can "temper judgement's severe decree."

The *mitzvah* of supporting others who are hurting trains us to stretch beyond our natural impulse to recoil from pain. It teaches us to be messengers of God bringing a bit of strength, a touch of life. A friend conveys vitality, care, relationship, a reminder of one's status as a healthy person, meaning, continuity in life, and hope. Trauma has a dimension of solitude but this need not mean loneliness. We can offer these wonderful, life affirmations to one another.

We need other people. In significant ways this is important to our lives. I know that another person's presence helped me to manage tremendous amounts of pain. Some view the need for others as a weakness, but I believe it is a human strength upon which we can build.



When we offer prayers for healing, we are attempting to create a human connection for a person who is not whole. When we hear the name of a member of our community as we offer prayers for healing, we should be alerted that we need to reach out to this family. When we pray for healing, I attempt to bring a measure of power from the God's reservoir of *rachamim* into the world. We add this energy to ours for a greater measure of healing.

Just one personal example, I visited a congregant who had an accident and hit her head. She lay in bed and was non-responsive. I visited in ICU with her husband who was on the edge of hopelessness. We were asked to leave the room because the nurses needed to change some tubing. Since the time permitted for visits was restricted, I asked that we be able to stay for a little bit longer after they finished their task. I told the husband to talk to his wife; I am convinced by experience that hearing remains even when people cannot respond. He seemed dubious. I proceeded to speak to the woman in the bed. I took the husband's hand and held the wife's arm and prayed. As I uttered the words of healing, she opened her eyes and began to speak. The husband ran to get the nurse. They were floored. All of us were thrilled. The woman is healed, doing the tasks of wife and mother, and back to work. She does not remember that day in the hospital. The husband and I do.

All who were present agree that we experienced a remarkable moment of connection for ourselves and the patient, and something more. The harmony in the room, everyone holding hands and attuned made it possible to access something beyond ourselves. We knew a powerful religious moment, a harmony on earth and beyond.

What is the nature of the power of prayer? I think that the answer is hope. Hope is a significant element of healing. Our presence and our words reached through the fear and isolation.

The words and melodies of worship or private prayer help us move from our intellects to the creative side of our souls and the experience of transcendence. Indeed prayer can mend a broken heart and lift a troubled spirit.

There is a power within us and beyond us that can enable us to triumph over despair. God has given us the ability to survive and impose meaning on tragedy. God does not prevent the brokenness of infirmity, betrayal, or loss, but God does give us the will and strength to stop suffering and feel replenished. This is what Isaiah taught (40:29): "God gives strength to the weary, fresh vigor to the spent."



What is personally true is true for communal loss. Sometimes we are traumatized by events beyond the personal. We have just marked the fifteenth anniversary of the terror attacks on 9-11.

As we recall those who perished in the attacks, tragically we are reminded that the human capacity for evil will not die. We have the perpetual task of proving that the human capacity for good will be at least as resilient. The bravery of many, including those brave passengers who crashed a plane in rural Pennsylvania so that it could not become another weapon of even greater destruction, inspires us. We are elevated by rescue workers around the world who selflessly labor, often endangering themselves, to aid other people, most often people they do not know. They teach us that our human capacity for good is boundless.

Judaism offers us hope and support for rebuilding confidence. In two weeks we will celebrate *Sukkot*. The observances of this festival convey this message. The *sukkah* is a structure that is intended to be frail, vulnerable, and temporary. Yes, we humans are frail, but our vulnerability waxes and wanes; our troubles are temporary. The *sukkah* provides some shelter and represents our faith in redemption. We did survive the wilderness and settle the Promised Land. We are commanded to thoroughly rejoice during the festival. We always have something worth appreciation and celebration. We invite guests, present and past, into our *sukkah* and their stories and their fortitude inspire us. We eat meals together in the *sukkah* at home and here at our communal home and we feel tangible connections to our family and community.

To be human, then, is to encounter brokenness and to live in a broken world. Though we try to fix our world and ourselves, we know that some brokenness may be necessary — and may even bring us closer to the divine.