From the Cracks of a Broken Vessel, Light Shines Through

Every year during Rosh Hashanah we engage in the sacred task of studying and hearing Torah and Haftarah portions that our Sages of old selected specifically for this day. And every year we grapple with their meaning. What are we to make of these stories - of our barren matriarchs Sarah and Hannah who cry out to God, their pain and infertility? How are we to deal with the reading of akeidat Yitzchak, of Abraham who is sent by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac?

Despite our desire to find the positive in these stories, to look for the source of comfort and resolution (the nechemta), I cannot help but notice that these teachings from our Torah and our Prophets are stories of brokenness.

Unfortunately, it is not difficult to relate. We experience, all too often, this same sense of brokenness in our own time.

At the start of this new year, many parts of the world feel broken. – Americans are being attacked overseas, Haiti and the Gulf Coast are recovering from devastating tropical storms, Greece suffers from economic crisis, Syria is at war, Iran harbors nuclear weapons, and Israel’s security is threatened.

Just this morning, a teacher of mine was interviewed in the Jerusalem Post. She lives outside of Jerusalem and is a scholar and social activist. She fights against social and economic inequalities in Jerusalem and Israel. She noted that Israelis are known to protest, to make their voices heard in the fight against injustice. She has joined with
thousands of others to fight higher prices in impoverished neighborhoods, violence against Arabs, and the inequality of women. But, she says, this month there were few protests. This doesn’t mean that these problems have gone away or even subsided. Instead, she says that her fellow Israelis are waiting online for hours… not to protest or make change…but they’re waiting online for gas masks. - The threat of an Iranian attack is too great. The quote “smaller” problems haven’t been solved. There are just bigger problems that stand in the way.\textsuperscript{i}

\textbf{What are we to make of this story?}

Here is another problem that I consider often: Just a few days ago, we learned from the Census Bureau that nearly one in six Americans live in poverty – a record 46.2 million people.\textsuperscript{ii} Our poverty rate, over 15 percent, is the highest of any major industrialized nation.\textsuperscript{iii} With this news, many agencies (Voices of Poverty and Story Corps, for example) went looking for the people behind these numbers and they were not hard to find. By listening, this is what they learned:

Poverty is a state of loneliness. It pushes people to the psychological and physical margins of society—isolated from friends and relatives, pushed into public housing, removed from banks, stores, and cultural institutions. The poor live on society’s scraps—a few dollars in government assistance or charity, donated food, thrift store clothes. They can afford neither transport to venture out of their communities, nor simple luxuries such as a movie or a cup of coffee. Embarrassed by their poverty, many withdraw from all but the most necessary, unavoidable social interactions.

Poverty is diverse and complex. Some people have no high school education while others are university graduates. Some have made bad choices; they have taken drugs and burned bridges with friends and family. But then there are others who have never taken a drug in their life or who have huge social networks. There are people who have never
held down a job and others who hold down multiple, low-paying, jobs, frequently for some of the most powerful corporations on earth. There are people who have never had a bank account and there are others who have owned large houses and expensive cars. There are children whose only hot meals are eaten at school, military veterans who struggle to find a place in civilian life, and the elderly whose savings evaporate. Poverty is, in other words, as diverse as America itself.iv

We are not so far removed. At the beginning of August, I heard from a friend who teaches at a high school in inner city St. Louis. I could not believe that she welcomed her students on the first day of class without enough chairs for all of them! She also began the year teaching without a single text book for any of her students.

What are we to make of these stories? What are we to make of the brokenness in our world?

We learn from a young age that our world is one to be “fixed.”

It almost feels like the world was created to be broken. Well, maybe it was… according to the mystical tradition of Lurianic Kabbalah.

Luria theorized that God filled up the entire universe before creating human beings. God’s light was to be contained within 10 vessels or sephirot. But God’s light was too strong to fill the vessels and they shattered. Tiny pieces of the vessels, like shards of glass, scattered and brought chaos to the universe. When the shards of the vessels began to fall, they brought with them sparks of God’s light. In place of a harmonious, perfectly balanced world, human beings entered a broken world filled with scattered sparks of divine light.
In the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Teruah*. Referring to the sound of the shofar, this means a "day of broken cry."\(^v\) Every time we hear the sounds of the shofar we are to recognize the brokenness in our world. Traditionally, we hear the shofar sound 100 times on Rosh Hashanah. Two thousand years ago Rabbi Abbahu instituted the following order for the blowing of the shofar: *Tekiah* - a simple complete note, then *Shevarim* – literally three broken notes, or *Teruah* - several weeping notes, and once again, a simple complete *Tekiah* note. Each series of shofar blasts begins and ends with a *Tekiah*, a whole and unified note that surround a *Shevarim* or *Teruah*, broken fragmented notes. The Talmud teaches that the broken, disconnected sounds of the *Teruah* are representative of the fragmented parts of our lives.\(^vi\) Rabbi Art Green teaches, “This is the theme of Rosh Hashanah. We were once whole, but we become broken, shattered into the fragments of *Teruah* and *Shevarim*, but we shall yet be whole again!”\(^vii\)

How is it that one can become or feel whole after feeling so utterly broken? Consider this Chassidic story.

One Rosh Hashanah, the Ba'al Shem Tov said to Rabbi Zev, one of his disciples, "I want you to blow the shofar for us. And I want you to study all the kabbalistic meditations that pertain to the shofar so that you can focus upon them when you blow it."

Rabbi Zev applied himself to the task with joy but also trepidation over the immense responsibility given to him by his Master. He studied the kabbalistic writings diligently and he also prepared a sheet of paper on which he noted all of the main points - so that he could see them when he blew the shofar.

Finally, the great moment arrived. It was the morning of Rosh Hashanah, and Rabbi Zev stood on the *bimah* in the center of the Ba'al Shem Tov's synagogue amidst the Torah scrolls, surrounded by a sea of *tallit*-draped bodies. An awed silence filled the room in anticipation of the piercing blasts and sobs of the shofar.
Rabbi Zev reached into his pocket and his heart froze: The paper had disappeared! He remembered placing it there that morning, but now it was gone. Furiously, he searched his memory for what he had learned, but his mind was a total blank. Tears of frustration filled his eyes. He had disappointed his master and his congregation, who had entrusted him with this most sacred task. He just had to blow the shofar like a simple horn. With despair, Rabbi Zev blew the sounds required by Jewish law, and avoiding his master's eye, resumed his place in the congregation.

At the conclusion of the day's prayers, the Ba'al Shem Tov made his way to Rabbi Zev who sat sobbing under his tallit. "Gut yontif, Reb Zev!" the Ba’al Shem Tov called, "That was the most extraordinary shofar blowing we heard today!"
"But Rebbe...Why...?"
"In God’s palace," said the Ba’al Shem Tov, "There are many gates and doors, leading to many halls and chambers. The palace keepers have great rings holding many keys that each opens a different door. But there is a master key that opens all the chambers of the Divine palace… That master key is a broken heart."

Why is the master key to God a broken heart? Well, it unlocks truth, humanity, and humility. This sense of brokenness encourages us to reach out to one another. We learn from Kabbalah, that from the broken vessels in the world, a new world can be created. This idea gave rise to the concept of ‘tikkun olam’ our Hebrew term for social action. For, Kabbalah requires every human being to liberate God’s sparks of light and repair or heal – tikkun – by performing righteous deeds. As the saying goes, from the cracks of a broken vessel, light can shine through.

When we are sensitive, living in a broken world gives us a broken heart. A broken heart often moves us to take action and to reach out. A broken heart moves us to
live and act with the purest intention of loving-kindness. In our tradition we call this extraordinary act of outreach, chesed.

This summer, I read “Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion,” written by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest. Father Boyle responded to the brokenness in his community by reaching out with chesed, loving-kindness. In his Los Angeles neighborhood he began to mentor gang members so they could work their way out of the vicious cycle of gang violence. In 1992, Father Boyle launched his organization, Homeboy Industries and the first Homeboy business: Homeboy Bakery, with a mission to create an environment that provides training, work experience, and above all, the opportunity for rival gang members to work side by side. Today Homeboy Industries’ includes a Bakery and diner, a silkscreen and merchandise shop, a farmer’s market and a cafe.

In his book, he shares moving stories about his “homeboys,” as he calls them - and how reaching out to them with compassion has helped to heal their feelings of brokenness.

“[One night,] the phone rang at three o’clock in the morning. It was Cesar. He said what every homie says when they call in the middle of the night, ‘Did I wake you?’ I think, ‘Why no, I was waiting and hoping that you’d call.’ Cesar is sober and it’s urgent that he talk to me.

‘I got to ask you a question. You know how I’ve always seen you as my father…’ Now Cesar pauses, and the [significance] of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, ‘Have I…been…your son?’

‘…Yeah,’ I say.

Cesar exhales, (whew) ‘I thought so.’ Now his voice becomes enmeshed in gentle sobbing. ‘Then I will be your son. And you will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?’ ‘That’s right.’
In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having.” A gesture of *chesed*, of love, kindness, and understanding has changed Cesar’s outlook. Perhaps life doesn’t feel so broken anymore.

Father Boyle understands that we are in the hands of a God who has stepped back, so that we may reach out to one another in this world. Compassion and *chesed* are not just about feeling the pain of others. We must bring others in toward ourselves.

How often do we go through life neglecting those who are broken? Yet, we have so much *chesed*, compassion, to offer. Even offering *chesed* to those in our immediate circle takes effort. It is even harder to show the one who is not like us that she is worthy of our love and concern. Compassion is about standing with someone even if they are radically different from us. In a Talmudic story Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asks the prophet Elijah when the Messiah will come. Elijah responds, “Why don’t you ask him yourself? He is sitting among the beggars and lepers at the gates of Rome, untying and retying his bandages, ready for when the world will need him.” How often do we refrain from offering *chesed* to someone who is within our reach?

With all the brokenness that surrounds us, it seems to me that the world is in great need of the Messiah now. When we meet a congregant who has suffered a great loss, or hear of someone struggling with illness, or pass a homeless person in the street, we might think about giving them something that might help, but we do not always see that this person could be us. An act of *chesed* can be more than a handout. It can be a hand that draws someone closer, a gesture that makes someone feel more whole.

This Rosh Hashanah we will stand before the open Ark, the Torahs adorned in their pure, white mantles and we will sing the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer. “God be gracious and answer us for we have little merit. Treat us with justice and compassion and save us.” I always feel small in this moment, small in the face of life, small as I ask the Soul of the Universe
to help heal my soul, to renew my life in the year ahead, and to have compassion on me in spite of my shortcomings. Tonight, as we welcome 5773, we understand this prayer in a different light. Not only do we ask God to treat us with chesed, but we pray that we might join with God as the Source of Chesed in this world. That some of God’s chesed might flow through us, as we bring healing to our broken world.

Ken y’hi ratzon. May this be God’s will.
Shanah tovah.

Anthem -
Tikkun Olam magnet – announcement

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www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishFeatures/Article.aspx?id=285165


iv The Voices of Poverty in America. Sasha Abramsky December 19, 2011 http://www.soros.org/voices/voices-poverty-america

v Numbers 29:1

vi Talmud Bavli: Rosh HaShana 33b

vii Rabbi Art Green in Michael Strassfeld’s The Jewish Holidays

viii Tattoos on the Heart – The Power of Boundless Compassion, Gregory Boyle. P.31

ix Talmud Bavli: Sanhedrin 98a