

“Beauty in the Brokenness”

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Five thousand, seven hundred, seventy nine years ago the world was created. “Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. (Genesis 1:2, The Message).” And then, out of that soup of nothingness, God spoke and the world came into being. Light and dark, starry heavens, earth teeming with life. Plants bursting into blossom. Birds soaring through the skies. The seas overflowing with fish. And, after each and every creation, God sees that it is good. Creation is beautiful and whole and perfect.

Except...In Bereshit Rabbah Rabbi Berechiah teaches that the lower waters did not separate from the upper sphere without weeping. They weep and sob as they are separated. We do not want to be apart from our Creator. We do not want this to happen to us. Creation contains pain and separation and loss and oh, what incredibly beauty.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

We are many generations removed from the first imperfect creation of *adam harishon*, the first being. We ourselves are imperfect, and the lives we lead are imperfect. We have endured real trauma in the past year--the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, struggles with mental health challenges or addictions, being unmoored from things we knew to be true. And, even if we have not experienced big or public difficulties, we have our inner brokenness--the voice saying we are not enough--

Not a loving enough friend or parent or spouse.

Not a good enough co-worker.

Not doing enough to make the world better.

Not eating enough healthy foods.

Not exercising enough.

Not spending enough time on what is important.

Not enough.

Never enough.

We all feel broken.

And yet...*there is a beauty in our brokenness.*

An ancient story tells of a water-bearer who carried two large pots hung on each side of a pole which she rested on her shoulders. One pot was slightly cracked, while the other was perfect. Each day, the water-bearer would take the long walk to the stream, fill up the two pots, and trudge back home. Each day, the cracked pot leaked out some of its water, so it arrived at the house only half full. This went on for months.

One day, as the water-bearer was filling up the pots, the cracked pot spoke. “I’m so sorry. I want to apologize to you.” “What do you have to be sorry for?” the water-bearer asked. The pot, feeling guilty and imperfect and broken said, “I’m so ashamed. I can’t deliver a full load of water; I leak all the way back to the house. You do so much work carrying me, but I only return with half my water. What good am I?” The water-bearer replied, “Let me walk back along the path and tell me what you see along the way.” As they walked, the pot saw beautiful flowers--yellow daisies, orange morning glories, pink and purple asters. “Did you think I didn’t know you had a crack?” asked the water bearer. “I planted seeds and as I walked along the path, your water helped them to grow. Each spring I can pick beautiful flowers to put on

my table. You do have a crack, but that crack has helped to create more beauty in the world and in my life.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

Our patriarch Jacob lives a life of brokenness. He struggles with his brother. He leaves his family. He marries two sisters both fighting for his love. He struggles with an *ish*, a mysterious being and he emerges from the encounter limping, wounded. It is only after this incident that we read, “*Va-yavo yaakov shalem ir shechem*, Jacob came *shalem* to the city of Shechem.” He came to the city *shalem*, complete. Only after these series of divisions--from his family, from himself, from God, does he become *shalem*, whole, complete. Only then does he get his new name, *Yisrael*, one who struggles with God. Only then does he truly become a Patriarch.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

In the 15th century in Japan, military commander Ashikaga Yoshimasa broke one of his beautiful Chinese tea bowls. He sent it back to China for repairs. Disappointed with the shoddy repair job, some say it was put together with metal staples, Yoshimasa challenged Japanese craftsmen to look for a more beautiful method of repair. The craftsmen examined the bowl and decided not to hide the cracks. Instead, they highlighted them, using gold seams to repair the broken bowl. The art of Kintsugi was born.

Kintsugi turns brokenness into art, making cracks and blemishes beautiful. It is an extension of the Japanese value of wabi-sabi, finding beauty in that which is damaged or imperfect. With this method of repair, the service of an object does not end when it is broken. Instead, the break becomes an essential — and beautiful — part of the life and story of the object.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

Later in his life, our ancestor Jacob, traveled south to Egypt with his sons to be reunited with Joseph. The midrash says that there was *shever*, brokenness, in Egypt. That was the famine. There as was also *sever*, hope, that was the plenty. There was brokenness, *shever*, when his son Joseph was taken down to Egypt as a slave. There was *sever*, hope, when Joseph became the ruler. There was *shever*, when the Egyptians enslaved and afflicted the Israelites. There was *sever*, because in the end we went free. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, a contemporary Torah scholar, teaches that the relationship between *shever* and *sever* is not sequential. We do not move from brokenness to hope. “What Jacob sees is a dialectical vision of *shever/sever*,” Zornberg writes. “When things fall apart the opportunity for *sever* arises. Before such a crisis, in a condition of wholeness and security, hope is irrelevant. After it, some plausible reconstruction of the shards becomes essential.” (Zornberg, *Origins of Desire*, pp.301-302).

There is beauty in the brokenness.

American author Terry Tempest Williams writes in her book, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, about the ancient art of making mosaics. She travels to Ravenna, Italy, where she spends days breaking tiles and then painstakingly piecing them back together to form an image. This image is not of her own imagination, but a copy of a mosaic that is hundreds of years old. She writes, “Shards of glass can cut and wound or magnify a vision...A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken.” As she works to finish her mosaic her teacher says, “Enough; now it is time to see the beauty, the imperfect beauty.”

There is beauty in the brokenness.

“Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in,” writes Leonard Cohen.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

There once was a king who owned a beautiful ruby. Every day he would take it out of its box and look at its magnificent, shimmering beauty. One day, the King dropped the precious stone and it thudded onto the floor. Picking it up, he noticed a long, jagged scratch down one side of the stone. The King called everyone he could think of, but none of them could repair the ruby. Finally a poor woman appeared at the palace gates claiming she could repair the precious stone. The King, figuring he had nothing to lose, let her try. After a week of working in the castle she handed the King back his ruby. The King opened the box and saw that the woman had not removed the jagged line. Rather, she had etched an image of a rose at one end, leaving the long, jagged scar as the flower.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

Just down the road at the University of Maine, Augusta, artist and Temple member Bob Katz worked with his students to create a steel, granite and concrete sculpture called “The Imperfection of Man.” Through this piece of art, the students explored the place of art in an industrial and now increasingly digital age. Their work was inspired by Ernst Fischer who wrote in his 1963 book, “The Necessity of Art,” “As machines become more and more efficient and perfect, so it will become clear that imperfection is the greatness of man.”

There is beauty in the brokenness.

Moses comes down the mountain, sees the Israelites worshiping the Golden Calves, and smashes the tablets to the ground. What happened to those broken shards? The Israelites bent to the ground, and searched for each broken piece. They picked them all up, each and everyone one, and put them into the ark. On Yom Kippur, that very first day of Atonement, Moses came down with the second set of tablets. That whole set of tablets was also placed in the ark. The Israelites carried them both--the broken and the whole, together.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

A Hebrew School class has been studying the V’ahavtah. A student approaches the rabbi. Rabbi, she asks, ‘Why are we told to ‘place these words *upon* our hearts’? Why doesn’t the Torah tell us to put them ‘in’ our hearts. The rabbi answers her: “As we are, our hearts are closed. We can not put the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts, and there they stay until one day, our heart breaks, and the words fall in.” Rabbi Jessica Oleon Kirshner teaches, “The broken Torah, it lives in our hearts, which being broken, are now large enough to offer it a fitting home.”

There is beauty in the brokenness.

Contemporary Jewish composer, Dan Nichols, wrote these words and set it to this melody:

I thank you for my life, body and soul.
Help me realize I’m beautiful and whole.
I’m perfect the way I am and a little broken too.
I will live each day, as a gift I give to you.

There is beauty in the brokenness.

There is beauty in our brokenness.