

FROM BROKENNESS TO WHOLENESS, AND HOPEFULLY, HOLINESS

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5781, what a year! For the past 18 months, we have had the most remarkable reality check. Our world has been transformed. COVID has shown us just how fragile our reality was.

For some of us, that 'reality' was borne of privilege – not that people weren't hard-working or deserving of good things, but in many ways, the uncertainty of global wars, hunger, economic depression and mass migration on the backs of these hardships, has largely bypassed us. We are still the lucky country and a perception of safety is part of that luck.

COVID has not just revealed the fragility of our perception of stability and control but also the brokenness within our communities – exacerbating some of the pre-existing fault lines that divide people.

Unless you happen to be an online retailer, a producer of hand sanitiser, toilet paper, or PPE, most of us struggled in various ways as well. Not just in our work, play, families or in ourselves, but just as much in the experience of lockdown, the social isolation, and our very real confrontation with mortality.

If we look for a silver lining, we can surely find it: The global effort towards finding both a vaccine and treatments against the virus largely transcended borders and other divisions. But the brokenness was too often on display.

When I speak of "brokenness," I mean any kind of loss, pain, struggle or disappointment. As Estelle Frankel, a Jewish therapist and author, says, the brokenness comes from the "times when our lives, as we have known them, are shattered by the intrusion of fate or disappointment." These could include

the loss of a loved one; whether recent or decades ago; strained relationships; the loss of a job, physical possessions, or of hope; rejection; divorce or separation; the burdens of attending to one's family and to aging parents; the pains and challenges of aging.

And often the most painful broken places are hidden ones, that only a small group of people know and hold in their hearts – pregnancy loss or infertility; struggles with mental illness or chronic disease. Heartbreak is not limited to our personal relationships. This year in particular, it has been hard to have a social, informal conversation with anyone that does not also touch on the brokenness of living in a once-in-a-century time of pandemic. It is also unique that practically the whole world has recognised this universal brokenness, and the need for *tikkun* or repair.

On my High Holy Day CD, the *Bruch Kol Nidrei* was played on the viola by a good friend of mine, Vincent Lioni. Vincent played for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for 33 years, and I would visit with him regularly throughout the seven years that I lived

in New York City. Vincent died of Coronavirus complications at just 61 years old. When we look around the world – the US, India, Brazil, Italy, the UK, we know that we have been extraordinarily fortunate in the way Australia has managed the pandemic and taken advantage of our island status and distance. But in such an interconnected world, our confrontation with mortality is all too real.

We struggle individually and collectively – ultimately asking ourselves the same questions: "When we feel so broken, what do we do with all of this pain? How can we get to a place of healing and wholeness?"

These questions are not new, they're universal. They arise from the human experience of living, loving and caring, which is why the opposite of love is indifference rather than hate. During the month of Elul, culminating in Yom Kippur, we especially long for wholeness, or at least for some healing of our brokenness. And in the past year, many people have experienced brokenness. Every time there is a new outbreak, we hold our collective breaths and wait to see what will happen.

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Even those of us who consider ourselves lucky or blessed, come into *Kol Nidrei* aware of our frailty and our failings. As the poet Merle Feld wrote, on *Kol Nidrei* we stand before God "naked," "without disguise, without embellishment." The introspection of the month of Elul enables us to arrive at Yom Kippur in a place where we engage in self-examination, truth telling and can be honest about hurt or brokenness in our lives.

It is acknowledging and allowing this vulnerability that is the first step to moving towards 'tikkun', repair. If we break something we love, our instinct is to fix it. We glue the parts back together and try to paste over the parts that are damaged. But the first step is to sit and see the brokenness. We look at how it was broken and then look to repairing it and even if we're successful, the break becomes part of the story of this item. We may be able to make it whole again with the right amount of care and attention but the fragility will remain – superglue can only do so much.

Every person we pass in the street or interact with is like a repaired cup – they might look 'whole' but there are cracks, and for some people, their life experiences were shattering, making it harder to piece themselves together and they are forever more fragile. Our traditions tell us that brokenness has always been a part of each person and community.

There is a midrash about the broken Ten Commandments: Moses broke the tablets in a fit of anger after the Israelites, who Moses had just freed from slavery, engaged in idolatry and disregarded the instructions given to them. According to the midrash, when the new tablets were made, both the broken and the replacement tablets were placed in the Ark – a place of honour.

There must have been a strong impetus to bury or hide the broken tablets, but the choice to honour both the whole and the broken shows us that we should do the same. How often have we buried our own feelings of pain or hurt, not allowing ourselves to feel, accept or acknowledge our feelings? The midrash teaches us that the parts of us that are broken are not to be hidden away or buried but accepted as part of the whole person and treated with care and compassion.

The 16th century kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria posited a now-famous theory of creation called 'Shevirat ha'keylim', in which God creates the world by pouring the Divine light into vessels, which ultimately cannot contain the light, and shatter, scattering throughout creation. Lurianic kabbalah teaches that while we may not see or be aware of these divine sparks within and around us, we may bring them out through the *mitzvot*, which results in a form of *tikkun olam*.

Brokenness is woven into the fabric of life and all human experience. Like the Kubler-Ross five stages of grieving (denial, anger, depression, negotiation and acceptance), until we acknowledge the hurt or brokenness, we cannot progress and begin to heal.

In a world which seeks balance in all things, this means the possibility of tikkun (healing) is also present every day. During these Days of Awe, the potential for healing is amplified, as we take the opportunity for introspection, reflection and redirection.

On Rosh HaShanah, we will sound the moving blasts of the shofar. One of those blasts is *shevarim* and we blast them – whole, broken, whole, broken, and so on.

On *Kol Nidrei*, we enter into the quiet. Time to allow ourselves to feel and honour whatever is in our hearts and seek ways to repair ourselves and our relationships with those around us and God, in essence, wholeness before holiness. Judaism is specific in its requirement that we repair our human relationships before we seek to repair our relationship with God.

Then, when we meet back together at the very end of *Neilah*, we sound only one shofar blast: the *tekiah gedolah*, the sound of ultimate wholeness, a call for us to heal and be whole.

Wishing you a year of health and happiness, of wholeness and holiness.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah