That Which Is Broken Is Whole

By

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*There is nothing so whole as a broken heart*

- R’ Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

Adam and Eve’s terrible punishment was that, by eating of the fruit of the tree, their eyes were opened and once opened they could not help but see the world around them as no longer perfect but fractured and broken.

Such an understanding of Adam and Eve suggests that their willfulness did not *cause* the perfect world to become imperfect. Instead, their act made the deep truth of their world, that it was always in need of perfecting, clear to them. Wholeness is a goal to be striven towards; and it is one that cannot even be imagined until one’s eyes are opened to his own flaws and shortcomings.

*It happened as he drew near the camp and saw the Calf and the dancing, that Moshe’s anger flared up. He threw down the Tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain*. (Shemot 32:19)

What must Moshe have thought when he came down that great mountainside? After encountering God face to face, after receiving the Law and then to encounter… *this*! What choice did he have? There was none. The situation demanded only one response, the breaking of the *Luchot*!

So soon after the most dramatic and majestic event in human history, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, he had no choice but to shatter the sacred *Luchot*. The people were obstinate and “stiff-necked,” an am keshei oref, rebellious and unworthy of receiving the Law and incapable of honoring it.

Rabbi Norman Lamm does not mince words in characterizing them, “The calamities that followed the Golden Calf were due more to bad character than bad theology.... A stiff-necked people cannot raise its head above the Golden Calf.”  That being the case, keeping the Tablets was futile. Moshe’s “…anger flared up…” and he broke the Tablets. According to the Yalkut, even more than his anger, holiness itself demanded the *Luchot* be broken. When Moshe came within sight of the sinful revelry that was all around him, the letters of the Tablets floated back to the heavens, and the stone without the sanctity of God’s word, became unbearably heavy. “This was a clear sign to Moshe that they must be broken.” (Yalkut 393)

But wait! While Moshe’s reaction makes perfect sense, there is something about the timeline that should bother us. Why is it that Moshe broke the *Luchot* only upon drawing near to the camp and seeing “the calf and the dancing”? He had known what was happening well before that. Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky cites the Abarbanel questioning why Moshe had to even bring the *Luchot* down mountain before shattering them. He could have smashed them before descending the mountain. Abarbanel answered that Moshe wanted them to witness with their own eyes the tragedy of the moment so they could perhaps confront their grievous sin.

Rav Yaakov *zt’l* notes that if that is the case then the verse is not precise in its language. Va’yehi ka’asher karav - “as he drew near” vayichar af Moshe “and Moshe’s anger flared up.”  The language indicates that Moshe’s reaction was sequential. He drew near *and then* his anger flared up. That would not have been the case had Moshe already known about the Calf. But, we know that Moshe did know about the Calf.

Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky articulates a very human and true understanding to reconcile these things. Truth be told, he explains, when Moshe first hears of the Jews making the Golden Calf, he sought every means possible to explain away their behavior and to give them the benefit of the doubt. Certainly, one could understand how a mass of people, only days from slavery, stranded in the desert, not knowing how their children would be fed the next morning or how they might survive could become desperate. Certainly, it is possible to understand how, in their desperation and fear, they sought *something* to give them comfort, something they could hold on to. After all, we all know instances when people, good people, when confronting difficult circumstances, show poor judgment, make mistakes, go off the *derech* and end up in trouble.

None of this is to excuse the people’s behavior or actions. Such bad judgment for whatever reason has consequences, severe consequences, but at least there are exculpable reasons. Moshe, the great defender of his People, may well have thought along similar lines. The People, *these* People, were frightened, despondent, desperate…

So, he held the *Luchot* and he came down the mountainside. But, when he saw them *dancing –* they were dancing! – then he realized this was not simply an act of desperation; this was an expression of joy. This People had embraced their idol!

For such a People, there could be no understanding and certainly no *Luchot*. As Rav Yitzchak Karo made clear, such People, “have no need for Luchot”.  So, it was, when Moshe saw them dancing, that he thrust the *Luchot* to the ground and shatters them.

The *Luchot* are thrown to the ground and the stone splinters. What became of those shards and splinters? Should we care? It is true, even had the letters removed themselves back to heaven, those stones had held the word of God. But their very splintering was testimony to the tragedy of the Golden Calf, an episode we would do well to put behind us, no?

The Talmud (Bava Batra 14b) teaches that the broken pieces of the *Luchot* were placed in the *Aron* side-by-side with the second tablets, luchot v’shivrey luchot munachim b’Aron. Not hidden. Not buried. Not forgotten. Instead, they were restored to a place of honor, in the Holy Ark alongside the new, restored Tablets.

Why? Why keep, let alone honor, the remnants of a shameful manifestation of rebellion, of going off the *derech*? Better to hide them, deny them, say *kaddish* for them. Better that they never had been… But if we did that, then what would we have learned? More importantly, what would we have merited.

Brokenness is not something that can be held at arm’s length or denied. It is integral to life, to the human experience. Life is loss as well as growth; hurt as well as healing. No one who has ever lost a loved one is unbroken. Quite the opposite, they are tzebrochen, broken, devastated. And that break is never forgotten. It is never hidden. There can never be any pretense that it does not exist.

That brokenness itself becomes essential to the person we become going forward. Of course, as we learn, time “heals” but that healing does not suggest being able to go forward as though the break never happened, the healing of time allows us to go forward *with* that break, not in spite of it or as if it never happened. Like a bone that has been fractured, the mended part of the bone is often the *strongest* part of the bone, so too when time heals our own wounds, it is that mended where we are strongest.

Forgetfulness is not healing.

As Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider writes on “Aish.com”, “After a painful loss, life continues, but now differently than before. We move through life now with two sets of tablets. There are times of joy; there are very happy times. They are encased in the same box; in the same heart.”

The broken and the whole, side by side, always. Last year, during our *Tishrei* stay in Israel, a gentleman of 90 whose father was shot during a death march in the last days of the war, and who was never found to be buried in kever yisrael, told me with deep emotion that “There has not been a day, never a day in my life that I don’t see and think of my father’s bitter end.”

His heart was, is and will be forever broken. It would be a desecration to imagine that his brokenness should be ignored or forgotten. He had come to what was then Palestine as a teenager. He “recouped. He got married, had a child, and spent his adult life serving in *Tzahal*. He lived a meaningful, thoughtful and full life. But, “there is never a day...”

There are so many, all around us, who have suffered such losses and who live their lives with two compartments – side by side, touching – luchot v’shivrey luchot munachim b’aron.

Forget, never. Rather, seek a healthy way to merge the broken with the whole, the painful with the hopeful.   There can be no future without a past. As painful as a past may have been, it must be sensitively soothed to embrace a more hopeful and promising future. It is often those who try to bury the past that suffer the most. Those who come to grips with their past, no matter how painful, no matter how shameful, are best able to regain the humanity they need to build toward a healthy and productive future.

On the day in our liturgical year when we seek to “turn the page”, to turn away from how far we had fallen short in the previous year and turn our attention to doing better in the next, we sound the Shofar. And on this *Yom Teruah* two of the three sounds we hear are *shevarim* and *teruah* – broken sounds.

Broken sounds for broken people. For who amongst us is not broken? Who amongst us on Rosh Hashanah or any other day can look in the mirror and not feel broken, shattered, and laid low?

Our tradition, our hope, our truth teaches us not to hide from or discard that which is broken. Those pieces of broken rock may well be the stepping stones to your future greatness. The broken and the whole belong together. That was Moshe’s message for a people who may otherwise have been wiped out for good. Neither God nor Moshe gave up on that “stiff-necked people.” The broken was placed alongside the whole *inside the holy Ark*.

The Kabbalah teaches us that the Ark is symbolic of the human heart.

We would be wise to remember that when we turn away from the hurt and the pain we feel in our own hearts. God lives there, touching the very thing we feel is most broken.