

Our Broken Hearts
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God took Ezekiel and placed him in a valley. It was full of bones. The bones were spread over the entire valley, and they were very dry.

God asked Ezekiel: ‘Can these bones live again?’ Ezekiel replied: ‘O God, only You can know that.’ God commanded Ezekiel to speak to the bones, with the following prophecy: ‘I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinew upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again.’

Suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. There were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.¹

Sometimes, we feel like Ezekiel, walking through a valley of broken and dry bones, noticing the world and its rawness, saddened by the world around us, led by God to notice things we don’t always want to see.

Sometimes, we feel like God, trying to breathe life into the broken bones, trying to get the world to stand up again, providing a vision of hope to others.

And then there are the times we feel like the broken bones. And lying just underneath our broken bones are our broken hearts. Raw and exposed. Wounded by what life has thrown at us. Sickness, financial insecurity, loss of love, broken relationships, failures and imperfections. None of us are immune. We are all broken bones with broken hearts. Death’s possibility lives in each of us the specter of disease leaves no one untouched. All of us have pre-existing conditions.

A pop culture digression:

I love the reality show Top Chef. My favorite part of the show is when a contestant wins immunity in the quick fire challenge. They are so happy – because it means they can’t be eliminated from the show that week, even if they have a failing dish. They are safe for another week in the competition. When someone wins immunity, there is such joy in their face, and relief. And then, the look of sadness on their faces when, after a number of weeks, the prize of immunity is no longer offered. Elimination becomes a possibility for everyone.

¹ Ezekiel 37:1-14

The promise of immunity in life is such a fantasy. Sometimes we all wish we had immunity. Living without fear of being eliminated. Having the guarantee that we're still in the game, forever.... Wishing and hoping that we too could be brought back to life like Ezekiel's bones...

But none of us have immunity. And our lives are not one big cooking show, unless you are Julie Powell or Julia Child.

In America, we have a culture that doesn't like to admit to the truth of our brokenness. Because it means to admit failure. We don't like to believe in failure. We believe there is a solution to every violent conflict, to every economic collapse, to every epidemic and natural disaster. We are the country of Yes We Can!

In America, we may not want to believe that we can fail, but we do fail, all the time. I don't mean America; I mean all of us – you, me. We are all imperfect. We all make mistakes. We all miss the mark sometimes.

That's what this day is for – for removing the veil we hold over our blemishes and broken body parts the rest of the year. On this day we admit our failures, we admit our pre-existing conditions that exist in our soul. And on this day, we learn to recognize our imperfections, and rather than be held hostage to them, we embrace them and move forward. That is the definition of forgiveness. As the late Rabbi Alan Lew once wrote in his audaciously titled book, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*: “Forgiveness...means giving up our hopes for a better past.”²

If we never stop yearning for a better past,
we will never be able to live in a better present.

It is not our perfect past that God seeks
but our messy, broken, imperfect selves of today.

There is no word for perfection in the whole Torah. Nothing and No one is described as perfect; God never demands it. We often make the mistake of translating *shalem* – similar to *shalom*, peace, into perfection. But that's not what it means. *Shalem* means to be whole, complete. And to be complete means to embrace our broken and imperfect selves. Only when we forgive ourselves for our mistakes and broken past can we achieve at-one-ment.

Proof that God does not seek our perfection – a tale from the Book of Deuteronomy. In chapter 26, Moses instructs the Israelites that when they enter the Promised Land, they shall make God an offering of their first fruits of the soil.³

² Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, p. 50.

³ Deuteronomy 26:1-2

But why would God want our first fruits? As any first time gardener knows, our first attempts to produce ripe fruit can often fall very, very flat.

David Ebenbach, writer and author of the Torah commentary, *The Artists' Torah*, answers: "God wants to be worshipped not from a place of perfection but from somewhere humbler."⁴ That is why God asks for our first fruits.

He continues:

"Without a first fruit, without some rough thing to get things started and to show us how to do better, there will be no last fruit. Trying to perfect one's work before beginning is a creative dead end... Better to create and keep creating than to waste our energy on perfectionism."⁵

Fifteen years ago, Pulitzer Prize winning political cartoonist Jim Borgman gave a speech to a group of graduating high school students. He said: "Everybody in the world has about 10,000 bad drawings inside them. So the sooner you get them out of you and on paper, you will have only good drawings left. Keep drawing – draw all of your bad drawings and eventually, your pen will do exactly what you want it to."⁶

We are each artists, and our lives are the art we craft. Trying to perfect our lives before even living it is a creative dead end. Better to live and keep living than to waste our energy on perfectionism.

God wants our first drafts, our first offerings, with all the failings and the stumbling they include. God wants our 10,000 bad drawings.

But why does God embrace our errors?

Maybe it is because God knows that without them, success is impossible. For humanity's first mistake, that of eating of the Tree of Knowledge, led to our expulsion from the Garden, but also to the beginning of progress, history, and creativity.

It is through our past mistakes that we find our future successes. As Michael Jordan once famously said: "I have missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot...and

⁴ David Ebenbach, *The Artists' Torah*, Commentary on *Ki Tavo*, September 3, 2009; http://artiststorah.typepad.com/the_artists_torah/2009/09/index.html

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Thanks to Rabbi David Young for this reference.

missed. And I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”⁷

Or maybe, God is like the grandmother I once heard tell a child:
“We have to make mistakes. It’s how we learn compassion for others.”

Or maybe, God knows that the more we err, the closer we will come to God. There is a Hasidic teaching that says every human being is tied to God by a rope. If the rope breaks, and is later fixed with a knot, then that knot brings us even closer to God than if there never were a break in the rope in the first place. Errors, mistakes and failures have the potential of drawing us even closer to God. After a lifetime of mistakes, imagine how close we could get.

Or maybe, just as the bones of the valley were broken, so too is God broken. And we, being created in the image of God, we too are broken and imperfect. That is why God loves our shattered beings – because we remind God of Himself.

The Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement in the 18th century, taught: There are many halls in the King's palace, and intricate keys to all doors, but the master key is the broken heart.

The master key to God’s Palace is our broken heart. It is why we sound the Shofar at this season. The three sounds we heard on Rosh Hashanah have three different meanings:

Tekiyah – one whole blast.

Shevarim – three broken and sharp cries.

Teruah -- nine shattered blasts.

The order of the blasts is always the same –

Tekiyah, Shevarim-Teruah, either together or alone, followed by another *Tekiyah*.

We can only be complete once the broken and shattered blasts of our souls have been heard.

Are we ready to pierce the seal of heaven with our broken hearts?

Do we have the courage to live an imperfect life?

Will we love our broken bones?

Can we see the blessings of our cracked lives?

There was once a water carrier. He had a very long pole, which he would balance across his shoulders. He would take two bowls and hang one from each end of his long pole. Each day the man left his home with his empty bowls and his pole draped across his shoulders and walked to the local stream. Once at the stream, the man filled both bowls

⁷ Michael Jordan, “Failure” Nike Commercial <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45mMioJ5szc>

with water. Then he put the bowls back on his pole, balanced his pole across his shoulders, and walked back home. Now one of the man's bowls had a crack in it. And just as you'd expect, every time the man arrived home, the cracked bowl was only half full of water.

But that didn't change the man's routine: Every day he walked down to the stream, collected his water, and arrived home with one bowl full of water and the other bowl half full. This went on every day, week after week, month after month, year after year. The cracked bowl felt sad and ashamed. One day as the man was walking home, the cracked bowl mustered up the courage to speak to the man. "Excuse me, sir. I'm so sorry," said the bowl. "I really want to apologize and beg your forgiveness." "Why?" asked the man. "What do you have to apologize for?" "Over the years that I've helped you, I've never been able to deliver a full load of water for you. I've never been able to give you my fair share. You work so hard, but because I am cracked you never get the full amount of water. So your efforts are never completely rewarded, and it's all because of me."

Hearing this, the man felt sorry for the bowl. "Listen," he said. "It's okay. Really, it is. In fact, the next time we go to collect water, as we walk along, I want you to look out over your side of the path."

The bowl agreed. The next day, as was his routine, the water carrier walked to the stream with his pole and his empty bowls. Once at the stream, the man filled both bowls with water and placed one at each end of his pole, which he balanced across his shoulders. Then the man started for home. Instead of worrying about her crack and the water that was falling out, the bowl did as the man had instructed. The bowl looked out along the side of the path. And what he saw was amazing: fields of beautiful flowers! The man stopped. "Do you see all those flowers?" he asked the bowl. Before the bowl had time to respond, the man spoke again: "And have you noticed that these gorgeous flowers are only on your side of the path? It's because I knew that water leaked from your crack, so I planted seeds along the way. That way, every day when we walked back up to the house, you watered the seeds. It's thanks to you that we have these beautiful flowers growing along the path. Without your crack, we wouldn't have these colorful flowers to brighten my day and bring beauty to the world. So I need to thank you. Thank you for being a cracked bowl."

Each of us is a cracked bowl, our loads leaking, apologetic for our brokenness, unable to see the blessings that exist in our imperfections.

Each of us is a cracked bowl, whose tears water the earth and allow beauty to bud.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav taught that a broken heart is like a broken bowl.

Even though it is fractured, it still longs to receive and to hold.⁸

So it is with our broken hearts. We still long to receive life. We still long to hold love. We are not empty, but yearning...for God's breathe to be restored to us.

Tonight we will hear the shofar once last time.

The sound will be *Tekiyah G'dolah* – a long whole blast, the longest sound of all.

We always end with *Tekiyah*.

We can only be complete when we allow our broken hearts to be heard.

We have nothing to offer but our broken hearts.

And that will be enough.

That will be more than enough.

That will be more than enough.

⁸ I am thankful to Rabbi Zoe Klein for this teaching. See her novel, *Drawing in the Dust*, p. 43.