

Kol Nidrei 5784

Shana tova

When I was in my last year of rabbinic studies I was pregnant. I would show up everyday for class and I was so sick. I was nauseous and I was exhausted. But I did not reveal my situation to my chevruta. My study partner Shayna had been my friend since seminary when we were 18 years old. She was a New Yorker who had since made Jerusalem her home. She was a dear friend of mine but I did not share this part of my life with her because I knew that she was going through IVF at the time. She had been married for 5 years and had been struggling to bring a baby into her family.

Shayna has since been blessed with two beautiful baby boys, keneina hora.

She recently shared some of her reflections on the difficulties she went through bringing a child into her family.

She wrote:

I am more grateful than ever for my two boys. I am also at a place where I realise that my years of fertility challenges are still a part of who I am. I thought that when I became a mum, I would leave them behind. Then I thought that when I had a second child, I would leave them behind.

But I still feel them with me every day.

In the joy I have for my children

In the knowledge, even in challenging moments, that parenthood is the path that I truly chose

In the gratitude I have for the moments when both kids cry at once

In the pain I have knowing that so much of my family planning is beyond my control

In the mourning for what could have been

In the pang of longing when I think of having another child, the questions about the ifs and the hows and the whens of trying - knowing it might mean multiple rounds of IVF again.

I am beginning to realise that so much of my past is in the present.
There are days I look at my scars (literally) and think about how they made me stronger, happier, a person closer to who I want to be.
There are days I hate them and wish I never had this journey.
There are days I feel guilty: here I am, with my “happy ending” and what am I doing to pay it forward and help others?
During this 10 days of repentance, I am asking myself which parts of the past I want to carry with me into the new year, and which I want to leave behind, and how do I achieve that balance?

R' Alan Lew has an insight into the introduction to Kol Nidrei - the tefillah opens with

עַל דְּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דְּעַת הַקֹּהֵל. בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה. אָנוּ מִתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל
עִם הָעֹבְרִיִּים:

With the consent of the Almighty, and consent of this congregation, in a convocation of the heavenly court, and a convocation of the lower court, we hereby grant permission to pray with transgressors.

He notices this word - Avaryanim - an avaryan is a criminal or a sinner but within that word is Avar - passed. He says that when we come to Kol Nidrei we bring our past selves to the service. All parts of ourselves are brought here tonight. We cannot leave any of our experiences behind us - they walk alongside us throughout all our journeys.

In many ways life has broken its promise to us. We might have felt that we were promised health, that we were promised love, that we were promised trust. And life will break every one of those promises. Our lives have unfolded and will continue to unfold in unfathomable ways.

Tonight is the night of broken promises.

I first learned this Torah from the wise and indomitable Mark Baker *zichrono livracha*. And I just cannot stop thinking about this. This entire Tishrei season I cannot stop thinking about this.

He taught me, and many others in this room, that in the Aron Kodesh in the Temple both sets of tablets were stored. The second, complete set of tablets, are obviously kept, but so too, the initial set which were smashed by Moshe are also kept in that holy place. The broken pair were kept together with the whole ones.

The Zohar teaches that the human heart is an Aron Kodesh. Our hearts are the Holy of Holies where the divine presence rests. God is within us. There is always a part of our heart that is broken. We need this broken heart in order to create a home for Hashem within us. The Reshit Chochma teaches that the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, only dwells within broken vessels, those whose heart is a broken and lowly heart.

The Kotzker Rebbe taught - there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. The pain that we feel, if we let ourselves be vulnerable enough to embrace it, is the source of our humanity. There is nothing more whole than a broken heart. Perhaps then, the reverse of what he taught is also true, there is nothing more broken than a person with a whole heart. If we can't feel the pain of the suffering of the world, of those around us then we are profoundly lost. It is our sensitivity to the hurt in the world that is the healing of our hearts.

Rav Alexandri teaches a curious idea in the Mishna. He teaches that if a human being were to use broken items it would be shameful for them, "yet for Hashem all of their belongings are broken and it is a glory." We are Hashem's belongings and we are broken. That is exactly how we are loved.

Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that the lesson from the broken luchot is God saying, "I am a God of second chances. I understand that human beings can't be perfect... I am a God who helps people in difficulty, not by making their path smooth and easy but by holding their hand as they walk a difficult path, not by taking away their problems but by giving them qualities they didn't believe they were capable of so that they can deal with their problems themselves. **You yourself become the answer to your prayer.** ...The saga of the Golden Calf and the broken luchot raises an interesting question: when something breaks,

something that was precious to us, is it ever possible to put it together again so that it's as good as new? It would be nice to believe that a God of second chances would make that possible, but the reality seems to be No, you can't. If it's broken and repaired, it will never be the same. The crack will always show. That's the crack in the first set of tablets. The loss of the dream of perfection. Now the challenge facing you is can you replace that dream of perfection with one that will make allowance for human frailty? Can you give yourself and those around you permission to be human? On this date so many years ago, God forgave the people who built the Golden calf. He forgave us for being human beings, and hoped that we would learn to forgive each other for that as well."

Tonight and tomorrow we will sing the tefillah

כִּי אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

This tefillah sets out the relationship between us and Hashem. For we are Your people; and You are our God. We are Your children; and You are our Father. We are Your servants; and You are our Master. We are Your dear ones and You are our Beloved. We are Your treasure; and You are our God. We are Your people; and You are our King.

The final line of the tefillah goes

: אָנוּ מֵאֲמִירָךְ וְאַתָּה מֵאֲמִירָנוּ:

This is usually translated as "We are your statement, and you are our Speaker". However, Jeremy Tabick from Mechon Hadar offers a different approach. What exactly is a Maamar? And why do we finish the tefillah with this feature of our relationship with God?

A Maamar is an engagement. A time of joyful optimism for the loving home, life and family that the couple will build together. But it is a particular type of engagement. It is the engagement of a widow to her brother-in-law. The Torah teaches the laws of Yibbum, of levirate marriage. That if a husband dies before the couple could have children then the brother-in-law and the widow can decide to marry. The origin of this mitzvah is the Torah trying to ensure, in

ancient times, that a widowed and childless wife would not be left alone and uncared for in difficult economic and emotional circumstances. If the widow and brother-in-law decide to marry, this is called a Maamar. It is this bittersweet optimism that teaches us about ourselves and our relationships.

We are not starting off from a blank slate. We might be forgiven but it is never forgotten. Our difficult histories are a part of us. The pain in our lives, whether given or received is part of our story and part of who we are and we can never undo this.

Yet there is still love to be found out of the pain. The grieving widow and her brother-in-law are in so much pain. Neither of them would have chosen to be in their situation, yet here they are. And yet here we are. And they may choose to love again.

And so tonight, when we are taking back our promises, and tomorrow when we are regretting our actions, we can let ourselves truly sink into our pain and feel our remorse. But also know there was celebration when the widow chose to start her life again and there was in our Holy of Holies in the Temple and in our Hearts a broken set of tablets. As the Kotsker rebbe teaches we are more whole for having been broken. God loves us for our heartbreak. It is our capacity to fall that enables us to grow and change.

The challenge facing us is our capacity to be curious and open to how our hardships will contribute to our future selves.

That is the power of teshuva - we start out falling and end up flying.

Reb Leonard HaCohen has a wise poem on this. It goes:

In the eyes of men he falls, and in his own eyes too. He falls from his high place, he trips on his achievement. He falls to you, he falls to know you. It is sad, they say. See his disgrace, say the ones at his heel. But he falls radiantly toward the light to which he falls. They cannot see who lifts him as he falls, or how his falling changes, and he himself bewildered till his heart cried out to bless the one who holds him in his falling. And in his fall he hears his heart cry out, his heart explains why he is falling, why he had to fall and he gives over to the fall.

Blessed are you, clasp of the falling.

He falls into the sky, he falls into the light, none can hurt him as he falls.

Blessed are you, shield of the falling.

Wrapped in his fall, concealed within his fall, he finds the place, he is gathered in. While his hair streams back and his clothes tear in the wind, he is held up, comforted, he enters into the place of his fall.

Blessed are you, embrace of the falling, foundation of the light, master of the human accident.

בן יהי רצון