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Yom Kippur Sermon
Congregation Betenu
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Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

My friend first taught me these words to a Lenoard Cohen song four years ago at a week-long Talmud summer program in Wisconsin. She sang them to a soulful beat adding her own take to Lenoard's solemn tone. Since then, these lyrics have woven in and out of my days. They pop into my head every time a piece of pottery I've made cracks in the kiln, or a housemate accidentally breaks a bowl in the kitchen. During two different chaplaincy training programs, supervisors quoted these words while leading my fellow interns and me in Kintsugi workshops. Kintsugi is a Japanese art form that transforms broken pottery into new works of art. The artist reattaches the broken pieces and then highlights the cracks in gold. The gold lines create a random, glimmering web across the bowl or vase. Rather than trying to hide the cracks, these gilded fissures call attention to them and remind us to embrace our flaws and imperfections.

As a kid, I remember playing for hours on the handwoven rugs in my parent's bedroom. I once pointed out to my mom that they had made a mistake in the weaving, the pattern was not perfectly symmetrical. She told me that the weaver had created this aberration intentionally so that everyone would know the rug had been hand-made. The cracks, the breaks, the imperfections, are all essential parts of what it means to be human, to be a part of a flawed and broken world.

It is hard for me to look out at the world and not see its brokenness. It is hard for me to not despair when I talk to my friend about all that she lost when her apartment flooded in Queens a couple of weeks ago, when I read about so many people who tried to flee Afghanistan but who are now stuck there. I imagine each one of us here carries our own stories of the brokenness we see and experience in the world, stories that might break us a bit too. The cracks can let the light in, but sometimes, being broken just hurts.

For me, Yom Kippur acknowledges both of these states of brokenness - the pain of the present, and hope that the light that will enter. But, Yom Kippur resists the hasty rush to find that light. Throughout the day, we continually recite our wrongdoings- Ashmanu--we have sinned, Bagadnu--we have betrayed, Gazelnu- we have stolen, and so on. We beat our hearts. We recognize the things we did wrong and we acknowledge them, to ourselves, our community, and God. We marinate in the brokenness, and it is exhausting. But, we do it because we hope that pausing now to name and tend to our broken pieces will hollow them into new containers ready to catch the light, containers made all the more beautiful because of their visible repairs. Poet Jane Hirshfield describes it like this:

And see how the flesh grows back
across a wound, with a great vehemence,
[stronger]
than the simple, untested surface before.
There's a name for it on horses,
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh
is proud of its wounds, wears them
as honors given out after battle,
small triumphs pinned to the chest—

Yom Kippur is a day of giving time and attention to our open wounds so that the scabs can form, and eventually scar over. And this pausing with the pain is part of the teshuvah process. Teshuvah can be translated as return, a re-orientating, to our most grounded and compassionate selves. The icky-ness of just being with the brokenness, of recognizing the pain of the open wound, is how we make it to the next step of rejoining, of renewing, of returning. The process of teshuvah is not a circle, of brokenness to wholeness to brokenness and so on, but a spiral that moves down and in, helping us discover ever greater depths within ourselves.

The sages of the Talmud offer another image of brokenness. After Moses broke the first set of stone tablets inscribed with the ten commandments when he witnessed the sin of the golden calf, God helped Moses make a second set. God then instructed the Israelites to carry them in the ark, a special container made just for tablet-lugging. In the Talmud, Rabbi Meir claims that not only does the ark contain the new set of tablets, but also the shattered pieces of the first. We read:

From where does he (Rabbi Meir) derive that the broken pieces of the first set of tablets were placed in the Ark? The Gemara expounds: He derives this from that which Rav Yosef taught... The verses [in Deuteronomy] state: “At that time the Lord said to me: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first...and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke, and you shall put them in the Ark” (Deuteronomy 10:1–2). This teaches that both the second set of tablets and the broken pieces of the first set of tablets were placed in the Ark. (BT Bava Batra 14b:6)

Even when travelling for forty years through the hot desert, God, Moses and the Israelites all recognized the necessity to carry the weight of the broken pieces. These pieces were fragments of holiness, imperfect shards whose rightful place was nestled between the second set. The wholeness of the tablets was not the completed second set but all that the ark contained, the broken pieces, the new tablets, and all the spaces between them. The Israelites’ load was heavier for it, but there was no other way forward. Learning how to keep walking while carrying our broken pieces is teshuvah. Each step the Israelites took, balancing the loaded ark between them, was a decision to engage with teshuvah, and teshuvah was the thing that propelled them forward, that prevented them from sitting down in the burning sand because their load was too heavy to bear.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Fish understands our brokenness as part of God’s plan from day one. According to Fish, when God set out to create the world, God foresaw all of the mistakes humans would make. So before creating anything else, God created teshuvah in order to provide a mechanism for humans to find their way through their fumbling and missteps.

Fish continues to describe how each human is an עולם קטן, a little world. Each of us stems from the same divine blueprint as the first day of creation. This means that we too were created with teshuvah first. Along with our capacity to hurt others or to make mistakes, our ability to turn toward the broken parts of ourselves, face them, and learn how to walk with them, is an essentially human trait.

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, we read, איזה הוא עשיר--השמח בחלקו, typically translated as “Who is rich? The one who rejoices in their portion.” My teacher, Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld interprets the words this way: “Who is rich? The one who rejoices in their partiality.” Our sages urge us to recognize the ways in which being in pieces, being parts of ourselves and of the world, can enrich our lives. When we pause in the midst of the chaos of broken pieces strewn within and about us, we courageously invite in the unknown, the mystery,

the yet-to-be determined. Standing on this edge of our brokenness, facing the rivers of space between our pieces, this is where the healing begins. And this is just what Yom Kippur is, a day apart from our lives to step back and witness our partiality.

As we take an accounting of ourselves this Yom Kippur, even as we live into our brokenness, may we be supported by the teshuvah already embedded in us.

May we learn patience and presence with the heavy pieces of ourselves and the world even when we are utterly exhausted and trudging through desert sand.

And in due time, may we come to recognize the cracks opening wide before us, waiting to be filled with light.

Shanah tovah and may you be written into the Book of Life.