

Holding the Broken and the Whole

We are on a journey – sometimes alone, sometimes walking alongside others – from brokenness to repair and, if history is to be trusted, back to brokenness again. Our calendar reminds us: From the year's darkest day, the 9th of the month of Av, we traverse seven weeks of consolation before arriving at Rosh Hashanah and its triumphant call for renewal. We know that when we arrive, no matter how much repentance, prayer, and charity have marked these transitional days, entering the New Year with the gravity it deserves means submitting ourselves to our Creator in our fullness, striving for wholeness yet both faulty and flawed.

We can only imagine how God sees us in moments of triumph or despair, but I like to think that God's view of us is only the clearest version of how we see ourselves, the face in the glass unshrouded by self-deception, a face that carries the burdens of all it has seen and which shines as well with the honor and regard it has absorbed from the ones we love.

We are broken and whole, compete as the handiwork of the Eternal yet always in need of repair. It can be no other way.

Look no further than this week's Torah reading. Moses recalls the incident of the Golden Calf, during which he had shattered the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, and recites God's promise of renewal: "I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall deposit them in the ark" (Deuteronomy 10:2). You shall deposit *them* in the ark – not the new tablets alone but, according to midrashic tradition, the *broken* tablets as well. As we read in the Talmud (Berachot 8b, Menachot 99a), לוחות וְשִׁבְרֵי לוחות מונחות בְּאֶרֶן, "The Tablets *and* the Shards of the Tablets were laid inside the ark." Indeed, according to Rashi's commentary (on Bava Batra 14b), the broken tablets were preserved תחת הלוחות, "underneath the Tablets," suggesting that they served as the literal foundation of the newly fashioned Ten Commandments.

The ark, we learn through clues scattered throughout the Torah, actually contains a few other keepsakes as well. They include the *eidut*, some kind of physical testament to the encounter on Sinai (Exodus 25:16); a piece of manna, the food which sustained the Hebrews in the wilderness (Ex. 16:33-34); and the staff of Aaron, which miraculously bore almond blossoms after the rebellion of Korach and his followers (Numbers 17:25). Along with the newly-fashioned Ten Commandments, the broken shards count among the People of Israel's five most precious treasures.¹

¹ According to Deut. 31:26, the Sefer Torah (סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה) was kept beside the ark.

But why? Why keep the shattered remnants of the past? Rodger Kamenetz, best known for his book *The Jew in the Lotus* offers one answer in his poem "The Broken Tablets."²

The broken tablets were also carried in an ark.
Insofar as they represented everything shattered,
everything lost, they were the law of broken things,
the leaf torn from the stem in a storm, a cheek touched
in fondness once but now the name forgotten.
How they must have rumbled, clattered on the way
even carried so carefully through the waste land,
how they must have rattled around until the pieces
broke into pieces, the edges softened
crumbling, dust collected at the bottom of the ark
ghosts of old letters, old laws. Insofar
as a law broken is still remembered
these laws were obeyed. And insofar as memory
preserves the pattern of broken things,
these bits of stone were preserved
through many journeys and ruined days
even, they say, into the promised land.

The broken and the whole, carried together in the sacred center of the camp, reminders that we, too, are vessels that contain broken promises and vows most carefully kept. Even as we commit ourselves to the difficult work of repentance, we strive to remember not to bury or ignore the brokenness of which we are ashamed. It a part of us, an irreplaceable treasure, even as it represents what we wish to leave behind.

Estelle Frankel, author, spiritual director, and psychotherapist, offers a therapeutic view of the value of past mistakes in her book *Sacred Therapy*.

The myth of the two tablets suggests that mistakes and even failures are a natural, inevitable part of our development. In fact, failure is often a gateway through which we must pass in order to receive our greatest gifts. ... [If] we are lucky enough to be given a second chance with the wisdom we have acquired through our experience of failure, we learn how to cherish and hold on to what we are given.³

From this we learn that the takeaway from this week's Torah portion, the central image of God's rewriting of the Ten Commandments is neither the renewed tablets nor the broken ones. Rather, we see ourselves in the symbol of the ark that contains them

² In *The Lowercase Jew*, p. 40.

³ *Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness*, p. 42.

both – and plenty more besides. Our journey to the High Holy Days, like the Hebrews' journey through the wilderness, demands many inner resources and relies on many treasures of the heart. Brokenness and wholeness, along with sustenance like manna and growth like Aaron's staff and honest witnessing like the *eidut* from Sinai's peak. Of course we strive for renewal, and of course we seek to mend what was broken. But our Torah reminds us to carry the past with us, to honor where we've been so we can appreciate where we're going, and to treasure the miraculous keepsakes we gather along the way.

To do so may mean forgiving ourselves. It may mean forgiving others as well. It means accepting ourselves for who we are as we hope God accepts us, and it means pushing ourselves – perhaps even just a little bit – to bring our most authentic selves forward when walking alongside others. As we see richness in one another, let us see richness in ourselves – and as we insist that our broken shards do not define us, so do we remember that others are more than their worst moments as well. The *aron kodesh*, the holy ark of our lives, shines with an eternal light because we are always holy – even as we strive to be more holy day by day.

May our journey through these waning days of summer be made with steps of purpose and hope. And may the tablets we carry inside, both broken and remade, bring us meaning along the way.