Carrying Our Wholeness and Our Brokenness
Yom Kippur 2024, 5785
Rabbi Judy Kummer

My friends, in the book of Deuteronomy (10:2) we read a curious passage. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai holding the two tablets that had the 10 Commandments engraved upon them, he found that the Israelites, who were waiting anxiously for his return, had lost hope and had melted down their jewelry and had made a golden calf. We all know this story: in fury, Moses hurled the stone tablets to the ground, where they smashed into many broken shards.

Later in our tale, we learn that the pieces of these broken tablets were not discarded. How amazing – even though they were broken, they were still considered sacred!

Moses went back up the mountain and received a second set of tablets, and when he brought them back down the mountain, both the intact second tablets and the broken first set of tablets were placed in the ark of the covenant *together*. Wholeness and brokenness, held in the same holy space, with great reverence.

There's a 16th century Kabbalistic text, the *Reshit chochma*, which teaches that the ark of the covenant is a symbol of the human heart. And in our hearts we carry wholeness and brokenness within us, as we move through our lives.

So I'm thinking about this year. This has been an especially difficult year for our Jewish community. The attacks on October 7 and the brutal murders and rapes and hostage-takings have all left us with palpable grief. Then the subsequent battles in Gaza and in the north of Israel and the endless acts of antisemitism around the world have us feeling more than a little broken. And

yet, we can't stand still; we have needed to move forward in our lives.

In a strange way, we've needed to learn to live in the "and" – – that is, in that liminal state in between the state of "we've had these terrible losses" and the state of "our lives will go on." And we are carrying our brokenness with us as we go.

I was gifted this year with a beautiful book, Rabbi Sharon Brous's "The Amen Effect." This is a relatively brief book, but it's beautifully written, and it's very moving. I recommend it to all of you. Rabbi Brous writes of the power of having others be there for us when we need community and connection, and of the power of our showing up to be there for others as well. Go to the funeral and the shiva, she encourages, and go to the joyous wedding too. She writes of the importance of our being able to say "Amen" to each other's prayers, serving as witnesses both to each other's pain and to each other's celebrations.

The author of the Amen Effect writes of having taken a backpacking trip with her husband and having laughed when a friend had asked if she would be tearing out pages of her novel to leave behind after reading them while on this backpacking trip. What an absurd-sounding suggestion! And then she and her husband set out, and she experienced the full weight of her pack on her back, the shoulder straps digging more and more deeply into her shoulders, and she understood the power of being very selective about what one carries, and leaving behind what is no longer important.

And there in our Torah text, we see our Israelite ancestors, marching through the desert on foot for 40 years. We can imagine them trudging forward, schlepping their possessions, all of that stuff feeling heavier and heavier with each step they would take. Like anyone who has traveled with a backpack, the

Israelites needed to be very selective about what they were going to be schlepping with them as they walked.

So we can think then about the those two sets of tablets – the whole ones *and* the broken ones -- that they were carrying together in the ark of the covenant. Those broken tablets must have been very important to our Israelite ancestors, or they would not have made the effort to schlep them along as they traveled on their 40-year journey.

Later in our people's history, once they had settled in the land of Israel and had become farmers, three times a year -- on Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot -- the Israelites would bring the best of their crops or their flocks to offer up in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Now this may sound odd. I want to tell you about a powerful ritual that these pilgrims would participate in when they arrived in Jerusalem. As they would enter into the Temple courtyard, most of the population would turn to the right to travel together *en mass* counterclockwise as they circled the area. That is most, but not everyone, would head to the right.

People who had had serious losses would not travel counterclockwise together with everyone else. Instead they would turn left and travel clockwise, and as they would figuratively swim against this tide of humanity, it was the task of those in the mainstream to ask the people that were coming towards them, *"Ma l'cha?* What is going on for you? Who have you lost?"

What a powerful image this is from those long-ago days when the Temple stood, to know that when others would see that we have had a loss, they would be there to ask us, *"Ma l'cha?,* what is going on for you? What is in your heart?" And it would be incumbent upon them to listen as we would tell our tale of woe.

Each of us experiences losses of our lives. There is a truism that grief is the price that we pay for love. We carry our brokenness in our hearts as we move forward in our lives.

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Our torah reading today came from the book of Leviticus. The reading begins after the death of Aaron's two sons. In the portion just before this, we read of the Israelites offering the very first sacrifice to God. They set the sacrifice on the altar and prepared to offer it up to God. And out of the heavens, says the Torah, a great fire came forth and consumed the sacrifice. To the Israelites it must have been a powerful image of God having accepted their offering.

And then, says the Torah text, along came Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, and they too offered a sacrifice. But in this instance, something went wrong. Aaron's sons had set their sacrifice up on the altar and prepared to offer it up to God. But, says the text, this time, when the fire came out of the heavens, it consumed not only the sacrifice but also the 2 young men. Gone, in an instant. And the torah says *"Vayidom Aharon,"* their father Aaron stood silent, shocked and speechless.

This is a text from the Bible that is shrouded in some mystery. Why did such a terrible thing happen? Had these two young men done something wrong, something that would have earned them this sudden brutal death? Would *anyone* deserve such a brutal fate?

In the face of this loss, Aaron's response, being struck dumb, seems to me to make a lot of sense! In that terrible moment of shock, being frozen in place, in disbelief and in grief, seems like a very understandable response indeed. Being paralyzed in the

face of sudden trauma is a common response to shock and loss and grief.

We might hear an echo here of what many experienced on October 7. Though we weren't physically there at the sites of the attacks, our hearts too were broken, and we too felt shocked. Sudden brutality shatters our basic assumptions about our safety in this world.

So this all made me wonder, what could help to get us to a place of seeing beyond the paralysis, beyond the horizon of our losses?

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We see themes of brokenness in other places in our Jewish tradition. We all know of the custom at the conclusion of a Jewish wedding of breaking a glass, symbolic of our grief over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Why at a time of great joy are we instructed to remember this national tragedy? For several reasons. The Romans had thought that, with destroying the Temple in Jerusalem and with carrying Jews off in chains to be sold as slaves throughout the Roman empire, they were signaling an end to Judaism and the Jewish people. And yet, with a wedding, we are celebrating the founding of yet another Jewish family and home, with hopes that yet another generation may flow from it. So as we smash the glass at a wedding, we are figuratively thumbing our noses at the Romans and at any other nation that has sought to destroy us, proclaiming "we are here, we are still here!"

There is at least one other reason for why we break a glass at a wedding. It comes to teach us that life is shot through, with joy and sadness mixed. At a time of great joy, we are to remember pain and loss – and our tradition reminds us too that when dark times will come, those times will also be mixed; even in the

darkest of moments in our lives, there will be glimmers of joy as well.

Our tradition holds hope for us that even after a loss, we too will one day be able to rejoin the masses traveling in the right direction around the Temple courtyard, exulting in our feelings of wholeness and serving as support to others who had recently felt the brokenness of a loss.

So it seems that whether we are traveling clockwise or counterclockwise in our lives, sooner or later we will experience that powerful mixture of sadness and joy, brokenness and wholeness. And we can carry both together as we move forward through life.

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We return to Aaron, just having lost his beloved sons, and to our moments this year of remembering October 7, when the burden of loss seems too weighty to think of it ever lifting.

Again, what could help to get us to a place of seeing beyond the horizon of our loss? Is there a mechanism that could help us get there?

I want to offer a suggestion, and it begins with a question:

Have you ever had the experience of feeling really and profoundly heard? While some people may experience this in their prayers to God, for many of us it was another human being who gave us the sense of really feeling heard.

The feminist theologian Carter Hayward speaks of God as the "cosmic ear that hears us into speech." I love this image! There is something holy that happens when we feel like we have really

been heard – and there is something holy that may happen when we have gone out of our way to listen carefully to someone else. The heart may open, and the connection we forge may feel profound, may even feel holy. Says the Talmud, "*dvarim she-yotz'im min ha-lev nich'nisim la-lev*," those things that come out of our hearts have a powerful chance of touching someone else's heart.

We can think back to the Temple ritual of turning left when we had had a loss, of going the wrong way round and facing the majority in the procession and having them ask us *"mah l'cha?* what is going on for you? Tell me about your loss." There is something sacred in our pausing to listen, in our really feeling like we have heard someone speaking from their heart, and in our having been heard in return.

We will be moving shortly to our congregational Yizkor memorial service. We are here today to give voice to our sorrow. While our sorrow is ours alone, we are not alone.

We are here together with the community around us, and in some ways we are present with the loved ones whose memories we will be honoring shortly with the yizkor service. While Jews throughout the ages have differed in their beliefs about life after death, we know that the memories of our deceased loved ones live on in our hearts, and the qualities of their lives can live on in us as well.

We are living with the reality that with each loss, something has shattered -- and yet, there are things that are whole in our lives.

We carry the hurt and the pain with us, our brokenness, and we carry the wholeness too, as we move forward in life.

May the wholeness and the brokenness too find a safe space in our hearts. May we support others and feel the power of their support. And may we be blessed as we move into this New Year.

And let us say Amen.

Weave in shevarim brokenness of the shofar blasts?
Or enough already??

E, this is plenty long, no?

Outtakes

It's OK not to be OK – – Divine's book(?) This year and the week of 10/7, we are all not OK!

When bad things happen to people, how do we go on?
In the book of Ruth – – in the wake of all of those initial deaths, Naomi is looking at the world through “loss- colored glasses.”

At the end of the book of Ruth, Naomi’s situation has not changed (— still widowed and mother of 2 deceased sons, not remarried)

But now she has a grandchild – – and she chooses to look beyond the horizon of her losses

From: Natasha Nataniela Shabat <tashishabat@gmail.com>
Date: September 28, 2024 at 4:57:32 PM EDT
To: Rabbi Judith Kummer <ravjkummer@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Sermon notes YK. Living in the “And”

Quick overview comments, while I take a little break:

1. Aaron's silence - I think this is a fine topic. People responded to Oct. 7 in different ways; not everyone reacted with silence. Same with reactions to loved ones passing.

2. From a recent meditation with IJS, a quote from, I think, Victor Frankl (!): "Between stimulus and response there is space."

3. Story of Ruth - I think this is a fine topic, too; doesn't matter if it's usually for Shavu'ot.

4. I was surprised in Daf Yomi recently, when they said that Naomi was being punished for leaving the Land -- even in a time

of famine. And/or, her husband and sons were punished for leaving the Land.

5. Rabbi David taught us that the story of Ruth is unusual in that it is a story with no bad guys.

Back to work,

Natasha

On Sat, Sep 28, 2024 at 4:19 PM Rabbi Judith Kummer <ravjkummer@gmail.com> wrote:
This was from a lovely sermon I heard on Shavuot —pls read notes below before looking at the rest of these preface comment!

…so the Ruth reference makes sense there (and it's a fav text of mine, so there's stuff in these notes that I have added)
— but do u think that would be an appropriate story to bring up for YK?
Can you think of a better story to reference?

Do you think I shd talk re Aaron losing his sons, fairly senselessly , and of "vayidom Aharon" — his response was to freeze and go silent?
I cd elaborate on what the possibilities were for why he went silent, all of which parallel our responses to 10/7…
And they parallel responses to losses that folks might want to be honoring with yizkor