

August and Noah, I want to first just tell you that you both did a wonderful job this morning. You chanted your Torah and Haftarah beautifully and you both just taught some very important ideas.

Noah, you called out the nature of human beings to get excited about shiny things, and to have short attention spans, as we look for immediate gratification or the next trendy thing - even if truly, that thing is not only not serving us, but is actually dangerous for us.

And August, you raised the difference between punishment and complete destruction, countering the biblical God's whims toward destruction and warning against it. And you asked a question that feels particularly important for this time we are living in: can something get so bad, so ruined, that it is destroyed beyond repair, past the point of being fixable?

In fact, there's a moment in this week's Torah portion where everything does appear to be destroyed beyond repair and like we might, in fact, give up on the hard thing.

As you know, Moses had gone up the mountain to talk with God and receives the tablets of the covenant. But the people below grow afraid that Moses is never coming back. So they ask Aaron, Moses' brother, to build them a golden calf to worship - an idol to replace Moses and God - and Aaron does just this.

Moses and God catch wind of what they've done, Moses descends the mountain, and in a great rage, he takes the tablets, and he smashes them on the ground and they shatter to pieces.

Now, as you might imagine, our tradition has a lot to say about this moment. In the Torah, Moses goes back up the mountain, begs forgiveness, and brings down a second set of tablets with God's words. And some 1500 years later, the rabbis write that when the people set out on their journey toward the Promised Land, לוחות וְשִׁבְרֵי לוחות מוֹנְחוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ.

The whole tablets, alongside the broken tablets, were placed inside the ark, and both were carried with them on their journey. It's a stunning midrash, really.

But having read both of your divrei Torah and the questions you raised about humanity - how we seek to escape when something is very hard, and how much despair we feel when everything feels destroyed - I felt compelled to talk a little this morning about *this* moment in history in which we are living now. Where lots of things do feel utterly destroyed and it would be easy to give up. I mean, doesn't a lot today feel utterly broken and potentially beyond repair?

This week alone - Alabama's out there ruling that embryos are children. In Oklahoma, a sweet creative trans teenager named Nex, was bullied and ultimately murdered just for being who they were. By this Tuesday, we'll probably have a candidate for president who has promised to be a dictator on his first day, should he be elected. 134 Israeli hostages, including women and children are still being held by Hamas, and millions of Palestinians are suffering famine and disease in a devastating humanitarian crisis. There is alarming homelessness and rising hate in

our own city. And apparently the Atlantic Ocean currents are even closer to collapsing than scientists thought, a harbinger of climate catastrophe.

Friends . . . it would be easy to conclude that things are broken beyond repair and easier still to choose some shiny distraction to quell our grief. And so all this and your teachings made me want to ask a follow up question to the midrash that we took both the broken fragments of the first tablets and the whole new set with us on our journey.

See, there's a pretty big gap between when the tablets were smashed, and when their broken shards were placed inside the ark, leaving us with lots of questions. Like - how'd they get in there? Who gathered up the broken fragments? Literally, and I suppose also quite metaphorically, when all was broken, who picked up the pieces? Who had the capacity, the courage, to bend down and pick up the pieces of this broken people, this broken covenant, this broken hope, and place them into the Mishkan? So the people could heal and move forward?

And can that teaching help us face the brokenness we are experiencing now? Who will pick up the pieces today?

So I looked for an answer from our tradition and found that the rabbis didn't take up this question - it wasn't what their time needed to know. But it is what our time needs to know, which leaves **us** to figure it out.

So what if it went like this: picture the moment, Moses' hands are still hanging in the air and God's sacred words are now strewn about at the people's feet. The wilderness goes silent. Time goes on, days, weeks, months. The people gather every so often to figure out what to do with the pieces. Some say bury them so no one ever hears what we did. Some say, let's find a new god who doesn't get so angry. Some say: look, this is our lot now. We did this and there's no coming back.

But one night, someone wonders aloud - what if we picked up the pieces and took them with us? Some laughed. Pick up the pieces? Impossible. And anyway, who would do it?

Couldn't be Moses - he was far too angry, stomping around the grounds in a huff ever since this happened. Couldn't be Aaron, he was too consumed by his guilt - never even made eye contact anymore. What about Nachshon - that guy was brave enough to cross the sea first! But he was far too impatient, always wanting to "just get going already," without much of a plan. The meeting adjourned without an answer.

But the next morning, as the people woke up, they saw a shape moving around where the shattered fragments still were. As they got closer, they noticed it was Serach bat Asher. What was she doing?

See, I should tell you that Serach bat Asher, as Rabbi Timoner reminded me this week, is a woman from this time whose name is recorded in the Book of Genesis as going down to

Mitzrayim and slavery and is also named in the Book of Exodus among those who come out from Mitzrayim and slavery. She has lived, then for hundreds of years. And it is that lifespan that allows her now to bend down and pick up the first shattered piece. As the people gather around, she tells her story. She recounts every loss they experienced in slavery. Every humiliation. Every setback. Every time they were beaten into despair. Every grief and trauma. And then she told them of the hundreds of years she had lived to see how they had healed from each one. How they had grieved and wept, how they had held one another up and helped restore each other. To become strong again. She told every single story of how they survived every time it felt like their world was shattered beyond repair, how they picked up the pieces and pressed on.

And, listening, understanding, one by one, every brokenhearted person came forward, bent down, and picked up one of the broken pieces. It felt jagged in their hand, but familiar, and it reminded them of every time they despaired or grieved, and were able to heal and repair, and start again. Thousands came, and then hundreds of thousands. And they remembered that each of them were the brokenhearted, who knew how to do this, knew how to heal. And eventually Moses' anger gave way to remembering his own losses and how he survived them, and he picked up a piece. And Aaron's shame transformed into grief, and he picked up a piece. And Nachshon's impatience relaxed into the memory of his own wounds and healing, and he picked up a piece. And by the end of that day, there was not one person who had not picked up a shard of the shattered tablets and placed it into the Mishkan.

It will always be the brokenhearted who know how to pick up the pieces when everything feels destroyed beyond repair. It's us, we whose hearts break with the news, with ongoing war, who break when others' bodies are broken. We are not beyond repair and we do not need to escape into the next distraction. We just need to know that we have it in us to pick up the pieces and press on - for it's what we have been doing for thousands of years.

In fact, this is the story of creation. The Jewish mystics teach that when God created the world, God filled vessels with God's own light, but unable to contain the divine light, they shattered into millions of pieces. And our job together is to find the light attached to those shattered pieces and to restore it, and carry it forward with us, and be God's partners in repairing that which has been broken. The ARI teaches, in fact, that there are shards out there that can only be found and lifted up by the person who is meant to find them. So - you've got a shard to find. And you do, and you do. And if you didn't exist, then some shards would be left behind, so thank goodness you are here to pick up the pieces. We often call this work *tikkun olam* . . . repair of the world. Perhaps that term is familiar.

It will be the broken hearted who pick up the pieces so that trans kids are protected. So that women have control over their own bodies. So that Israel and Palestine can build something new and next. So that refugees can find shelter. So our democracy will be protected and our planet restored to health. It's not just a nice midrash, it is a map for how we go forward from here.

And August and Noah, it is the map that you began to draw with your words of Torah. Because our journeys must always begin with the right questions. So thank you for asking them today and mazal tov on this simchah and on taking on the mantle of Jewish tradition, so we might repair this world together.

Shabbat shalom.