Picking Up The Shards of Brokeness

Brooklyn Jews Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 5785

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In the beginning, there was nothing. The universe was filled with תוהו ובוהו, it was unformed, empty, and void. The voice of the Divine called out, "Let there be light", and ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, came forth to fill the expanse with light.[1] Had each of these vessels arrived intact, the world would have been absolutely perfect. But the vessels were much too fragile to contain such a stunningly divine light. So they broke. And all the holy sparks, along with the shards from the vessels, were scattered across the universe. God continued their creation process, crafting all the intricacies of the earth. And then, God created human beings, and tasked us with a lifelong journey: To find the shards, put the vessels back together again, and gather up those holy sparks to restore the light of the universe. And when those holy sparks have been gathered, when the vessels have been restored, this is tikkun olam, this is the repair of the world that God, and our ancestors, and us, have been seeking since the very beginning of time.[2]

This story from the mystical Jewish tradition has been passed down for hundreds of years. It is a story that speaks of light, encouraging us to bring more light, more goodness into the world. But now I see this story differently. I understand this story through the lens of the past year, a year filled with pain, tragedy, and heartache. Now, when I hear this story, I think more explicitly about the broken shards from those ten vessels that, along with the holy sparks, also scattered themselves across the universe. Those broken shards, of all sizes, some with jagged edges, others with smooth curves; some out in the open for all to see, others barely glinting in the moonlight. And that in order for us to gather those holy sparks, for us to restore the light of the universe and repair the world, we have to also gather up those shards of the vessels, the shards of brokenness.

We are quite familiar with those shards of brokenness: 1,200 Israelis killed on October 7th; 42,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza, at the very least; 101 Israeli hostages being held captive

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[1] Genesis 1:1-2

[2] https://www.tikkun.org/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism/.

by Hamas; raging attacks, both from settlers and the government, in the West Bank; almost the entire population of Gaza hungry and homeless; Israelis in the north and south still stranded from their homes because of Hamas and Hezbollah; thousands killed in Lebanon because of Israeli strikes, with a million displaced; the ongoing war in Ukraine; civil war in Sudan; a current climate crisis, with even more disastrous results coming in the future; and in our own country, horror stories of women being refused abortion care; the devastation of Hurricanes Helene and Milton in the south; demonization of Haitian immigrants in Ohio; a sharp uptick in antisemitic incidents; widespread homelessness and poverty; an increase in violent and deadly actions by the police; continued gun violence in schools; and perhaps one of the most consequential elections in United States on the horizon. We know, too well, the shards of brokenness that exist in our world. **And the question for us right now, at the start of 5785, a pivotal moment in our Jewish community, country and world, is how do we gather up these shards of brokenness and restore the light of the holy sparks to the universe?**

This sacred task requires much of us, especially during these unprecedented times. And I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being in unprecedented times! The suffering just feels immense. The challenging political conversations in our lives can leave us feeling so stuck and confused. Our bodies, minds, and souls just can't navigate it all. It sometimes feels like nothing we do will actually matter in the long run.

In my own stuckness over the past year, I've found great wisdom from another story in our tradition: In Jewish antiquity, a great debate was held: "What is the most important verse in the Torah?" One rabbi came forth, sure that they had the right answer: "Shema Yisrael, Hear Oh Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one." The core theological principle of Judaism, a prayer that we chanted together this morning, seems like a pretty good answer. "No", another rabbi responded, and shared their idea: "V'ahavta l'reecha kamocha, love your neighbor as yourself." Again, a pretty good answer, the commandment to treat others with care and compassion. "Nope", yet another rabbi responded. "Both of these verses are incredibly wise and important, helping us show our love for God and for other people. But they are not the most important verse in the Torah." The other rabbis, feeling dismissed, asked this rabbi what the answer could be. What's the most important verse in the Torah?

The third rabbi rose to share their idea: "The most important verse in Torah comes to us from Exodus, and it reads: 'The one lamb you shall offer in the morning; and the other lamb you shall offer at evening.'" The other rabbis were stunned. How could an insignificant verse about sacrifices be more important than the oneness of God, or treating other people well? The third rabbi explains: "My mundane verse is really a verse saying that every day do a little bit that is required of you. 'Do the morning task in the morning and the evening task in the evening.' The tallest mountain is climbed one step at a time, a hungry community is fed one mouth at a time, a good life is lived one day at a time."[3] Silence filled the study hall. The other rabbis raised no objections for the answer was clear. This was the most important verse in all the Torah.

From our ancestors, we receive this wisdom: When the world feels too big and too impossible, focus on the small and do the possible. When everything feels like it's too much, put effort into one thing that will lead to another. Every great journey starts somewhere. We must focus on the small and we must do the possible.

This is, of course, easier said than done. When we think about all the shards of brokenness that exist in our world, we might think that it's going to take heroic efforts to actually address them and restore the holy sparks of light to the universe. But we must not let our fear of these challenges keep us from taking action. In her article, "Why I Changed My Mind About Volunteering", Rachel M. Cohen notes that during the 2010's, the rise of the Occupy movement, growing climate crisis, rising economic inequality, and even Bernie Sanders' campaign for president taught an entire generation that their focus should be on tearing down the entire system and not taking individual actions. Cohen writes that, "Volunteering, donating, and modifying one's personal behavior were, at best, unproductive; at worst, they were harmful distractions from the change we really need."[4] There are, of course, critiques to be made of relying exclusively on volunteering and non-profits to correct the injustices of the world. But this argument, that we should only focus on wide-ranging systemic change, risks individuals feeling so overwhelmed by the massive challenges that we just get stuck. We give up our power and

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[3] Rabbi Danny Zemel. A Time To Speak, Pg. 121.
[4] Rachel M. Cohen. Why I Changed My Mind About Volunteering. https://www.vox.com/culture/368201/volunteer-charity-donations-systemic-change-activism-nonprofits-loneliness-philanthropy?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR0IPpOF41eqPtAQ6AFy1H8ZgaCod3od0aAT7_MEiz3K_RUQSs1chkJwNy0_aem__MpT502GWmubzqw95cZWHQ.

agency to act in the world. I'd like to argue that instead of getting stuck while trying to figure everything out, let's start small with meaningful actions that can build toward something much, much bigger than ourselves.

This morning, I'd like for us to think about two incredibly difficult issues through which we can start small: the upcoming election in the United States, and the ongoing war in Israel, Gaza, and the Middle East. First, the 2024 election.

Last April, I made my way to West Philadelphia with Changing the Conversation, an organization founded by a member of Congregation Beth Elohim, Adam Barbanel-Fried. Their strategy is focused on deep canvassing, having 5, 10, 15 minute conversations with community members in hopes of increasing their likelihood of voting. As I made my way from door to door in this mostly low-income and black neighborhood, I had several conversations that have stayed with me six months later: The black mother who was concerned that she didn't know her neighbors anymore because of gentrification; the associate pastor at a church who wanted her members to vote because their voices matter; the young white guy who thought that his work would schedule him on Election Day, so he filled out an absentee ballot form. The interactions weren't numerous; perhaps 10-15 over the course of an afternoon. But each and every conversation was real. There was a real person in the doorway or on the porch, a person with family and friends and things that they care about in the world. Looking each of them in the eye, I was hopefully reminding them of their own power and agency to do something small, but significant - to vote.

Now, 10-15 conversations with potential voters is not a lot compared to the tens of millions that will vote across the United States in November, or the 1.5 million people in Philadelphia alone. But studies have shown deep canvassing has led to dramatically increasing the likelihood that someone chooses to vote. And so while it was a small action, it was much more meaningful and concrete action than how I engage with politics on a daily basis - by listening to podcasts, reading the New York Times, scrolling social media, and attempting to not freak out about the polls. This is the trap of political hobbyism, a term coined by Tufts University professor Eitan Hirsh. In this trap, we view politics as a hobby instead of actively engaging in the real work of politics - attending meetings, joining organizations, and having real conversations

with community members. Each of these are small, concrete ways to avoid the trap of political hobbyism, and truly engage in the work of democracy. And with Election Day less than a month away, we have no time to wait.

And now - the war, a war that has been raging for 12 months now, but is rooted in more than a century of conflict, bloodshed, oppression, and heartache. Amongst all the literal and figurative shards of brokenness throughout Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon, I have found solace and inspiration in the peacemakers. For one of them, Osama Iliwat, a Palestinian from Jericho, it took one life-changing conversation in a friend's living room to start his journey. In that conversation, Osama heard, for the first time in his life, an Israeli actually demonstrating compassion for the treatment of Palestiniains. This broke him open, and one conversation led to another and another. Now Osama is a leader in Combatants for Peace, an organization made up of former combatants - former Israeli soldiers from elite units, and Palestinian fighters, including some who were imprisoned for their actions - who now work together to seek justice and peace for all Israelis and Palestinians. Combatants for Peace now has thousands of activists in Israel and Palestine, and they continue to challenge the viciousness of occupation and oppression, even in the most impossible of years.

I first met Osama five years ago, when I spent four days in the West Bank engaging with Palestinians through Encounter, an educational organization that is committed to courageous leadership on the Israeli-Palestinian reality in order to bring dignity, justice, and peace for all people. As we shared stories over dinner, Osama's passion, drive, and hopeful demeanor continue to inspire me years later. For him, it was a conversation that led him into this work. What will it be for us? We can rally, like hundreds of people did at Union Square earlier this week. Or donate to any number of organizations on the ground in Israel/Palestine, including Combatants for Peace, but also Standing Together, Women Wage Peace and Women of the Sun, Anera, and others. We can speak the names of the dead, the thousands we have lost. But we must also continue to fight for a future for the living. We must not let the bigness of this issue, the pain of this issue, the physical distance of this issue, keep us from engaging in any small way possible that can bring more justice, more hope, more peace to the peoples between the river and sea, and all the Middle East.

When the world feels too big and too impossible, focus on the small and do the possible. Find your people. Form communities. Use your skills. Donate money. Give of your time. And once you find the thing that is meaningful, don't let it be a one time thing. As our tradition reminds us, each and every day, we must do something. And we here at Brooklyn Jews are going to help. When you registered for High Holiday tickets, there were a myriad of opportunities to engage in community this year. So in the coming weeks, watch your email for those opportunities. Whether it's engaging in the election, or supporting immigrants, or addressing the climate crisis, it's time for each of us to do something small, something concrete in this new year that over time can lead to something big.

We live in a time in which our world is filled with scary issues and challenges. The shards of brokenness that are scattered throughout the world are real, and they're tough, and they're sharp. We need each and every one of us to pick up one shard, ever so carefully, one shard at a time, one day at a time. Each of us is not responsible for picking up all the shards of brokenness, but we do have an obligation to ourselves, our communities, and our world to never cease from the work itself. Only then will we repair the world, only then will those shards of brokenness be brought together and the holy sparks of light be restored to the universe. I will close this morning with the words of the poet Adrienne Rich:

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world."

May this year, 5785, be the year of tikkun, the year of repair, the year of reconstituting the world. One shard, one holy spark, at a time. Amen.