# Sermon: "How the Light Gets In"

**Yom Kippur Morning 2022 * 5783**
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It is amongst the most dramatic moments in all of Torah. Following forty days atop Mount Sinai, Moses descends with the tablets of the commandments only to find the people - his people – worshipping the Golden Calf. Upon seeing the Israelites bowing down and dancing to their newly created idol, Moses casts the tablets to the ground, shattering them, ensuring that the people would be denied the blessing of God's holy words.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that Moses spent the next forty days pleading on behalf of the people, urging God to extend forgiveness. With a little 'outstretched-arm-twisting' by Moses, God agrees and commands Moses to return to the top of Sinai so that he might receive a second set of tablets. Our Sages say that Moses departed on the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul and returned forty days later, on the tenth day of the following month: Tishrei - on this day: Yom Kippur.

Soon after, Moses is described as placing these new tablets into the Holy Ark. However, the text leaves as a mystery: "What exactly happened to the broken tablets?" – the shattered remains of Moses's first covenantal contact with God? Our rabbis, not surprisingly, were not unified in their answers. A prevailing opinion, though, is expressed in the pages of the Talmud. Here, we read that, before departing for the Promised Land, Moses returned to the place where the stone fragments lay on the ground. He picked them up and he then carefully placed them in the Holy Ark alongside the second set of tablets. The inclusion of these broken pieces in the Ark, it is believed, would serve as a reminder that moments of brokenness - as well as moments of wholeness - would always be part of their journey.

Yom Kippur sends a similar message. This day, through our gathering, we acknowledge our fallibility and our vulnerability. We express our yearnings for goodness in the year ahead: good health for ourselves and for our loved ones. Healthy relationships with family members, friends, and colleagues. Positive experiences to be cherished. And, yet, as we look ahead, we also acknowledge our uncertainty. In our pause to consider our lives, we know that on any given day our lives can change unexpectedly.

No wonder the traditional text of the *U'ne'taneh Tokef* prayer refers to each of us as being: *Ma'shool k'cheres ha'neesh'bar* – "like a broken shard of clay." And no wonder one of our High Holy Day shofar blasts is named *Shevarim*, the Hebrew word for "broken pieces."

In Jewish tradition, no one is immune from life-fracture and pain. In one rabbinic story, the Messiah is described as not only tending to the wounds of the poor, but also to his own wounds. In Torah, it is worth noting that in the story of Jacob's famous wrestling match with an angel – the struggle that ultimately comes to define him as the patriarch worthy of the name, Israel –

Jacob's hip is wrenched from its hip socket and he emerges from the angelic encounter with a limp. If the Torah's central metaphor is journey and the Children of Israel represent the entirety of the Jewish people, this story sends a powerful message about all of our journeys including impairment and imperfection.

In their book, "The Spirituality of Imperfection," Dr. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, teach that it is, in fact, through our brokenness that we most deeply associate with others. They write: "Human beings connect with each other most healingly, most healthily, not on the basis of common strengths, but in the very reality of their shared weaknesses….At the most fundamental level of our very human-ness, it is our weakness that makes us alike; it is our strengths that make us different. Acknowledging shared weakness thus creates a rooted connectedness, a sense of common beginnings." They conclude: "We grow in our different directions with our different strengths, but our roots remain in the same soil as everyone else."

We see this meaningfully, by the way, in our Yom Kippur liturgy as we lift up our words of *Vidui* – of confessional – not in the singular, but rather in the plural. The message is clear. As we struggle and reach for meaning and fulfillment, we do so together.

Yet, despite the universal nature of weakness and pain, our rabbis tell us that brokenness is not intended to remain a fixed state. Instead, we are told, it is a call for our response. We see this beautifully represented in the joyful breaking of the glass at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony. Oftentimes, as I guide couples in preparation for their special day, they ask: "Rabbi, why do we break a glass during the ceremony?" I share with them the teaching that this gesture is intended to remind us of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem two-thousand years ago. Not surprisingly, their follow-up question tends to be: "Why on earth – on our wedding day - do we want to remember the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem two-thousand years ago?" I point out that it's a fair question. The answer is this: When the Temple stood, it represented the heart of the Jewish community and their connection to God. It's fall was disastrous. And so, according to one explanation, a glass is broken during a wedding as an acknowledgment by the couple that even during this moment of indescribable personal joy there is still brokenness and pain in the world. In shattering the glass, the couple pledges that the light of their shared love will not only be an inward-facing light. Rather, they promise that they will enable the light of their love to shine outward as a source of healing to those who need it.

To extend compassion to another is amongst the greatest blessings that we can offer. The English word is derived from the Latin: "com" - "pati" – literally: "to suffer with" or, more fully understood: "to endure something with another person." In Hebrew, the word for compassion is "*rachamim*." It comes from the Hebrew word: "*Rechem*," meaning "womb." And so, therefore - through a Jewish lens, compassion is the expression of a 'motherly concern.'

One example of how compassion makes a difference is found in a story in the Talmud. Here, we read of Rabbi Chiya bat Abba, a second century sage who, one day, became sick. Upon hearing of Chiya's illness, a friend, Rabbi Yochanan, went to visit him. Yochanan said, "Give me your

hand." After doing so, he and Chiya remained together. The text then tells us: "*V'oke'mayh*" – And Chiya was uplifted and strengthened.

Later, it was Rabbi Yochanan who became ill. When he did, someone else came to visit with him and the same thing occurred. The visitor asked for Yochanan's hand and, in doing so, uplifted him.

The text concludes by sharing that when some students in the town heard of what had happened with Rabbi Yochanan, they asked their teacher: "If Rabbi Yochanan had the ability to uplift another, why could he not then raise himself?" Their teacher responded: "A prisoner cannot free himself from jail."

The students, listened….then looked at their hands….and understood.

The power of compassion – our capacity to uplift those who are broken – is not only a matter of spiritual well-being. It also happens to be a growing field in medical science. Dr. Stephen Trzeciak and Dr. Anthony Mazzarelli are senior physicians and researchers at Cooper University Health Care. In 2019, they published a book entitled, "Compassionomics." In it, they share the results of their analysis of over 1,000 scientific abstracts and more than 250 research papers on the impact of compassion on healthcare. They conclude that when a physician extends compassion to their patient, the patient experiences substantive, measurable improvement not only in their emotional well-being, but in their physical well-being as well. As Trzeciak and Mazzarelli explain it: 'compassion is a strong buffer to stress-mediated diseases; it can be a modulate how much a patient experiences pain - greatly impacting their quality of life; and it serves as a strong motivator for patients to take their medicine. The authors are clear to state that compassion does not replace clinical excellence, but rather it is an essential addition – one, they write, that can lead to the best possible outcomes. The year that it was published, "Compassionomics" was recognized by Scientist Magazine as one that year's best neuroscience books.

Each of us, I am certain, is able to recall times when compassion has been extended to us – moments when comforting words, the holding of a hand, a hug, or just sitting together in silence made all the difference.

In July 1995, Boston Globe Magazine published a first-person article written by a man named Kenneth Schwartz. As Ken described himself, he was a forty year old health-care attorney, married, and the father of a two year old son. Devastatingly, nine months earlier, Ken had been diagnosed with advanced and, as he would later learn, terminal lung cancer. Through his writing, Ken wanted to share his experiences as a patient. He wrote:

Until last fall, I had spent a considerable part of my career as a health-care lawyer, first in state government and then in the private sector. I came to know a lot about health-care policy and management, government regulations and contracts. But I knew little about the delivery of care.

All that changed on November 7, 1994 when I was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. In the months that followed, I was subjected to chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, and news of all kinds - most of it bad. It has been a harrowing experience for me and for my family. And yet, the ordeal has been punctuated by moments of exquisite compassion.

During the period between my two chemotherapies, when I also received high- dose radiation twice a day, I came to know a most exceptional caregiver: the outpatient oncology nurse Mimi Bartholomay. An eight-year veteran who had experienced cancer in her own family, she was smart, upbeat, and compassionate. I had to receive fluids intravenously every day at the clinic, and while there we talked regularly about life, cancer, marriage, and children. …. (We spoke about) about my fear of dying or, even worse, my fear of not living out my life, of not biking through the hills of Concord and Weston on summer weekends with my brother, of not seeing my child grow up, of not holding my wife in my arms. And she took the risk of talking about her own father's recent bout with cancer. I cannot emphasize enough how meaningful it was to me when caregivers revealed something about themselves that made a personal connection to my plight. It made me feel much less lonely.

As I grappled to maintain my hope in the face of the advancing disease, I was referred to Dr. Ned Cassem, a senior MGH psychiatrist who not only had had vast experience with the seriously ill, but was himself a Jesuit priest. I had met with him once during my second hospitalization, and my memory through the haze was that he was the first person with whom I had discussed death.

I told him of the paradox that moments of great pleasure: playing with my son, snuggling with my wife, talking intensely with friends also caused me great pain and tears. Was I depressed? Was this something to worry about? He looked at me thoughtfully and said: "When you cry about your son, it's because he has touched you deeply. It's an affirmation of your love for him. When you weep about the joy you experience with your wife or close friends, that's an acknowledgment of your love for them. That's not a bad thing. Maybe," he said, "a day without tears has been a dull day." I could not help but ask: "Do you believe in the power of prayer?" Dr. Cassem nodded. "Absolutely," he said, "and your name is on my prayer list." I felt warmed in his presence, by his wisdom, his common sense, and his spirituality.

Ken concluded: I have been the recipient of an extraordinary array of human and humane responses to my plight. The deep caring and engagement of my caregivers have been a tonic for my soul. They have helped to take some of the sting from my tears. They have made the unbearable bearable.

Ken passed away two months after the article was published. But before he died, Ken established the Schwarz Center for Compassionate Healthcare. Its mission: to strengthen the human connection in healthcare by providing caregivers the tools necessary to foster deeper compassion in their practices.

Here, in our own community, I frequently witness the blessing of compassionate outreach. Our communal effort to strengthen and support, as many know, is called "Chesed" – which means loving kindness. (Yet another Hebrew word in our lexicon of care.) During moments of life-brokenness, we, both clergy and community, are here for one another. We reach out in ways that

are formally organized and in more spontaneous ways through gestures of concern expressed between friends that we have made through our community. It is important to say that Chesed is not a program. It is the culture of compassion that, together, we work to cultivate. It is a soul-value that we seek to deepen in our own lives. A special thank you to those lay leaders who help guide our efforts: Mindy Pasco-Anderson, Dana Cutter, Margie Glou, Stephen Staum, Wanda Camacho-Maron and Roberta Gerson. Together, in our community, our heartfelt outreach to one another oftentimes helps make the unbearable bearable.

On this Yom Kippur morning, we are reminded that to be broken is to be human. And, at the very same time, we are reminded that each of us holds the ability to uplift those in need. On this day of at-one-ment - a day of yearned-for wholeness - we recall the blessings that we have to offer each other and the blessings that we need from each other.

In 1992, singer, songwriter, and poet Leonard Cohen released his highly acclaimed album, "The Future." Many of its songs focus upon the turbulence that he observed in the world. Amongst the best known songs on the album – indeed, amongst all of Cohen's works - is a song entitled, "Anthem." It's lyrics movingly offer us sage counsel at this season.

They are:

*Ring the bells that still can ring.*
*Forget your perfect offering.*
*There is a crack, a crack in everything.*
*That's how the light gets in.*

In the year ahead, may we, in our brokenness, find the strength that we need.
May we be enwrapped in a loving care that assures us that we are not alone.
And may we be moved to deepen our own compassion for others – bringing light into their lives….into their hearts.

*Amen.*