

## TEXT STUDY

# NOTHING MORE WHOLE THAN A BROKEN HEART

## HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND BROKENNESS?

### TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Buchdahl uses the Kabbalists' account of creation as a jumping off point to her discussion of how we perceive and understand brokenness in our lives:

In the beginning—God's presence filled the universe. Because God was everywhere, there was no room for anything else. So God had to contract, like a deep inhale, in order to make space in which to create the world. The mystics called this divine contraction *tsimtsum*. In that newfound space, God created darkness. God then poured a stream of Divine Light into ten vessels. But these vessels could not withstand such awesome, primordial energy. They shattered, showering holy sparks everywhere. Human beings were created to find these splinters of divine light, to make a *tikkun*—a repair—by helping God gather them together and lifting up these broken pieces, to restore and re-create the world... With this story of creation as our guide, our task is not to search in vain for some lost paradise, but to seek out tiny sparks of light in the divine debris that is all around us. To find holiness in the broken and imperfect.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think of this conception of creation?
- (b) How would you describe God as portrayed here? How does it compare to the vision of God we see in the creation story in Genesis?
- (c) Do you think God knew the vessels would break? If so, what would that suggest about the role of brokenness in the world? And why would God break the vessels only to have us gather them again?
- (d) The idea that we are all *b'tzelem Elohim* -- created in God's image -- reminds us that each person is holy, because each person is like God. What would it mean to be like God, as depicted in this story?

Later, Rabbi Buchdahl makes the following assertion:

Many have said that religion's goal is 'To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.' I would put it somewhat differently, though: Judaism's goal is "To make whole what is broken, and to break what feels whole."

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you agree with Rabbi Buchdahl? Is there one aspect of this – making whole what is broken, or breaking what feels whole – that seems more central to Judaism, as you understand it? Do you experience either or both as part of this community?
- (b) Rabbi Buchdahl observed that it is often in moments of brokenness that we seek out Judaism and our Jewish community. What brought you to this community? What continues to bring you here?

The word “broken” has no positive definitions in the dictionary. “Crack,” on the other hand, has a number of positive connotations, as we see in the following story told by Rabbi Buchdahl:

A water carrier had two large pots, each hung on an end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots was perfect and sound, while the other pot was cracked and leaked, arriving only half full at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master’s house.

For a full two years this went on daily. The perfect pot was naturally proud of itself and its superior water-carrying capability. But the leaking pot felt miserable and dejected, and one day by the stream it spoke to the water bearer: ‘I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you.’

‘Why?’ asked the water bearer. ‘What are you ashamed of?’

‘Look at me! I am defective!’ the pot said. ‘I have ONE JOB. But with this crack in my side, I’m only able to deliver half my load at best.’

The water bearer smiled and said, ‘As we return to the master’s house, I want you to show you something.’ He pointed to the well-worn path they took each day, and for the first time the pot stopped looking inward and instead looked outside itself. Only then, did the pot notice a ribbon of color edging its side of the path. ‘I’ve always known you leaked,’ the water carrier said. ‘And so I planted seeds under you, and thanks to you, these flowers have been nourished to full bloom.’

Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" expresses a similarly positive understanding of the positive potential of what some might call broken or cracked. He writes,

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.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How are we to understand brokenness in these texts?
- (b) These texts seem to suggest that we should find holiness in the brokenness, as opposed to seeking its repair (as suggested in the Kabbalistic creation story, above). Does one of these ideas speak to you more? Why?

In this story, we never learn how the pot came to be cracked. We only know that the water bearer saw the crack's leaky predisposition, and chose to take advantage of that fact. What is powerful about this story is that the "solution" is not to fix the pot. The brokenness in this story is found in the pot's perspective on its crack, not in the crack itself.

Rabbi Buchdahl notes:

Moses never discards the broken fragments of the first set of tablets he had smashed, but carries them alongside the finished tablets in the Mishkan, the portable tabernacle. The ark could not be complete without both.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) In the story of the pot, the pot thinks it is broken but the water carrier does not. Who determines brokenness, in your experience? Who should?
- (b) How might these stories affect the way we view other people?
- (c) Over the course of the sermon, in addition to the above examples, language of brokenness is applied to individual people in the community and to ourselves. What is your reaction to being presented with the potentially challenging idea of seeing people as broken?
- (d) How comfortable are you with the idea that we are all "broken" in some way? Is this different than saying we are all imperfect?