Broken Tables & Broken Hearts

Rosh Hashanah - First Night (5785-2024)

According to Rabbi Sacks, above all else, we Jews are storytellers. These stories, as Rabbi Nachman would say, are not meant to lull us to sleep but to awaken us. So, I want to start this new year by sharing a story. It's a brief tale from a Hasidic book called *Perach Shoshan* by Rabbi Shlomo HaCohen Rabinowicz of Radomsk (1801-1866).

"It is said that once, a Hasidic master lent two books to two of his students. After some time, one returned the book 'as new.' The master became angry with him because this was a sign that he had not studied much. The second student returned the book worn out and broken. The master was delighted because this was a sign that he had studied it so much that it became worn."

I loved this story from the first time I read it. I must confess that I loved it because I'm one of those people who don't 'take great care' of their books. I like to take them to the beach and let their covers bend. I don't mind eating over them and letting them get dirty. And I especially like writing them. Marking them. Underlining. Folding their pages, telling future Uri, 'Here's something interesting, don't forget.'

I love books. A lot. You know that. This year has been one of the hardest years of my life. For some things that everyone knows about, and for others that no one does. And I found refuge in books. I've always liked reading, and I consider myself a good reader, but this year, I read frenetically. I read as a refuge.

We are called "the People of the Book," but how do we treat our books? Like that Hasidic student who returns them as new, unread? Or like the one who read so much that the book became worn? We are the People of the Book not only because we gave the Bible to the world, but because we use the metaphor of the book to begin our years.

Tonight, according to the Talmud, three books are opened in the heavenly gates. The book of the *Tzaddikim Gemurim*, the completely righteous. In that book, those who have committed no transgressions this year will be inscribed and sealed immediately. There is also the book of the *Reshaim Gemurim*, the completely wicked, those who have not committed a single act of goodness or kindness this year. And there is the book of the *Beinonim*, the intermediates, those who have both errors and merits, acts of kindness but also transgressions. Jewish tradition invites us to think that God has three books before Him at this moment. We should all be asking ourselves these days: **In which book will my name be inscribed?**

I want to invite you tonight to think about the book as a metaphor for our own lives. Each of you is a book. Every year of your life is a chapter. How will you hand over your book when the time comes, hopefully many years from now, to God? God is that Hasidic master who gives each of us a

book when we are born. God will be disappointed if we return the book—composed of our body (the cover) and our soul (the content)—looking brand new, as if it were never used, for He will ask what we really did with our lives. God will rejoice if, when our time comes, our book is a little worn, with bent corners, covered in crumbs, stains, notes, and underlining. That will mean that we have lived.

"There is nothing more whole than a broken heart."

This phrase is attributed to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. I've always liked it, but I think I only truly understood it at some point this year. Maybe I grasped it while visiting Israel in February on our solidarity mission. I was broken, literally. Inside and out. Three weeks earlier, I had broken my leg while skiing. I was in a wheelchair. And since October 7th, I haven't stopped crying. I cry easily, but not this much. There are four moments in my life when I cried without finding solace: when my grandmother Iaia died, when my rabbi died, the week after October 7th, and one other time I prefer to keep to myself. I was emotionally shattered, thinking about all the murdered and kidnapped. I was physically broken, unable to move freely for the first time in my life. I was intellectually broken, unable to comprehend how much of the world's "progressive" community aligned with Hamas terrorists. And yet, in Israel, I felt whole. "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart." Visiting those streets again, feeling the energy of the people, hearing the stories of survivors, visiting the graves of fallen soldiers, singing with the members of our mission in the garden of a kibbutz ravaged by terrorists. There, I felt complete. Whole. Not because all my pains had been soothed or because I found answers, but because I allowed them to live within me without silencing them, without trying to control them, without despising them. Only when we allow ourselves to live with the pain—our broken hearts, minds, bodies, and souls—can we find completeness. I felt whole because I could cry with others, because I could be moved with others, because I realized that everyone around me was broken too.

"The tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the Ark."

This idea is found in the Talmud (*Brachot 8a*). Moses was angry about Israel's transgression and broke the first set of tablets. Apparently, he didn't leave those stones on the ground, forgotten, but later placed them in the Ark of the Covenant along with the second, whole set of tablets. Once again, the broken and the whole. Now it's not the broken that makes the whole, but both coexisting side by side.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in his book *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, uses this metaphor to teach us three truths that we often forget: (1) The fragility and value of the broken: Experiences of breaking, failure, or imperfection also hold a sacred place in our lives because they are an integral part of the spiritual journey. There is a place for both the achievements and the failures, both being part of the same journey. (2) We not only must give space to and accept our breaks, but it is through them that we can grow. Those who make mistakes, suffer breaks, pains, and losses become knots in a rope and thus are stronger. From that strength, they can keep growing, something many who haven't faced such experiences can't even imagine. (3) Steinsaltz argues that in Jewish tradition, not only is

perfection valued, but also the struggle, the imperfection, and the search for wholeness through brokenness.

We are broken tablets, and this year, more than ever, many of our tablets have shattered even more. Yet our broken hearts also have a place in God's sacred Ark. God does not demand that we be whole and perfect like the second tablets. In fact, the first tablets were holier because they were written by God, and it was of those first ones that God said to Moses: "Yashar Koach sheShibarta - Well done for breaking them."

We are part of a spiritual and intellectual tradition that does not cancel or hide pain. We are who we are because of our imperfection, because of our mistakes (those we talk so much about these days), because of our pains. We are Jacob trying to become Israel. We are the one who walk crookedly, attempting to straighten ourselves. Jacob was born morally crooked, and after wrestling with the angel, he began to act morally, but it left him with a consequence: he began to limp. We are the children of Jacob as much as the children of Israel, but we grow more when we become aware of the Jacob within us. And this brings us to Freud.

"Where id was, there ego shall be."

Or in other words, "We must make the unconscious conscious," or make the invisible visible. Freud had a complex (!) relationship with Judaism, but he could not have been anything other than Jewish. The Nazis, disparagingly, called psychoanalysis "Jewish science." Freud hated that label, but in part, they were right. The work of therapy is to make the invisible visible. Isn't that also what the Torah tried to do? To find an invisible God where others saw idols? Isn't that what we try to do with prayer every day, to put into words our desires and fears? Isn't that what we try to do when studying Torah, finding *chidushim*, novel interpretations of an ancient text? Aren't we trying to make the invisible visible?

We live in a society that is sick, not so much in body but in mind. We are taught to mask our feelings. We are recommended pills to calm our anxieties, magic and instant solutions to heal bodily and soul pain. We are taught to hide, under masks, clothes, purchases, social media posts, what we truly feel and think. In the society we inhabit, there is no place for broken tablets. The task of therapy is to help us make the invisible visible, to recognize our shadows, our dark places, our crevices. Sometimes we'll be able to mend them, to channel them, but other times we won't, and we must then accept them as part of who we are. Our shadows define us as much as our light. We are also our transgressions and our mistakes and the dark side we all have. That part of us we don't want others to know. That part we are ashamed of.

"If someone repents out of love, their past transgressions are transformed into merits." (*b. Yomah 86b*)

There are certain mistakes, parts of our personality, traumas, and pains that we cannot heal or amend. We must accept them. Make them conscious and learn to live with them. That is accepting

the broken tablets that dwell within us. But we also have the capacity to write the second tablets, the whole and complete ones. We have the ability to do *Teshuvah*, and this experience is so transformative that the sages teach us that if we do it out of love, not out of fear of God or what society will say, if we change because there's something about our personality that we don't like and are ashamed of, then our past transgressions will be taken as merits.

The second tablets, the ones that were never broken, don't reach the holiness of the first. Those who never had to overcome pains, traumas, their shadows, tragedies, often can't reach the sanctity of those who had to undergo a transformation in their lives. Being born with a gift or achieving it through effort is not the same. Transformation is the experience that propels us to a place of understanding of ourselves, the world, and experiences that those who haven't lived through it cannot even comprehend. Only then can we understand the words of the sages: **"In the place where penitents stand, even the perfectly righteous cannot stand."** (*b. Brachot 34b*)

"We bury books with songs and joy"

I began my words with a story from Rabbi Shlomo HaCohen Rabinowicz of Radomsk about the two Hasidim and how they returned their books to their master. I found this story in an unexpected place: a *Teshuvah* (rabbinic responsa) by Rabbi Yosef Mesas (1892-1974, Morocco-Israel), who responds to a question about a custom in some places where sacred books and texts that can no longer be read are buried in a *Genizah*, but with a curious detail: "people carry them in procession with songs and a spirit of joy." This is not a widespread custom among our people. Yes, the custom of burying books like we bury our dead, but not with songs or processions. Our *Chacham*, wise one, explains that the reason is that when we bury them due to their wear, we realize how much we've used them, how much we've enjoyed them, how much we've learned from them. We don't cry because they're worn out; we smile because we've used them and lived.

These days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur connect us to our own mortality. How will we return our souls to God: pristine or worn out? How will we continue writing the story of our lives? What will we do with our own broken tablets? Will we give them a place in our hearts? Will we leave blank the pages of our shadows, of what we don't like about ourselves, or will we make the invisible visible and give them a chapter in the book of our lives? Will we have the strength to transform our past transgressions into future merits?

Yehi Ratzon Mil'fanecha, Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei Avoteinu,
May it be Your will, O God,
That we find the strength to embrace both our wholeness and our brokenness,
To see the value in our worn-out pages and our broken tablets,
And to honor the journeys we have taken through pain, healing, and transformation.

Grant us the wisdom to make the invisible visible,
To accept our shadows as part of who we are,

And to let our past mistakes become seeds of growth,
Transforming our broken hearts into vessels of compassion and understanding.

Help us, O God, to live fully,
To write the chapters of our lives with boldness, vulnerability, and love,
So that when we return our book to You,
It is worn, well-read, and filled with the marks of a life lived with purpose and depth.

May we always remember that there is nothing more whole than a broken heart,
And may our brokenness serve as the foundation upon which we build our greatest strength,
Guided by Your compassion,
And surrounded by the love of our community.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah,

Rabbi Uri