

Not Whole, But Holy
Yom Kippur 5779, Temple Beth-El, Hillsborough, NJ
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Many of you may know the beautiful prayer for healing called “Heal Us Now.” We sing it often at Temple Beth-El. When we sang it at our “Shabbat Under the Stars” service a couple of weeks ago, I was struck by a particular line:

We pray for healing of the body
We pray for healing of the soul
For strength of flesh and mind and spirit
We pray to once again be whole—

“*Once again be whole*”... But when have we ever been whole?

We as individuals and we as a human family are frail. We suffer every kind of malady of body, mind, and spirit. And Yom Kippur is quick to point out our weaknesses. Earlier this evening, as on every Yom Kippur, we began our worship with a wordy Aramaic text called *kol nidrei*. What is this prayer about? Is it even a prayer?

Not so much. It’s closer to a legal declaration:

“All of our vows and oaths, commitments and obligations — everything we have promised, sworn and accepted — are null and void.” We regret making them and declare them invalid. Our vows are not vows; our oaths are not oaths.¹

Our liturgists wisely understood and acknowledged that we are all merely human. Hard as we may try, even on this day when we devote ourselves wholeheartedly to restoring the best version of ourselves, we are not likely to achieve this goal.

Kol Nidrei asserts the notion that we are not completely whole — that we are not perfect — and affirms that this is *okay*.

But brokenness is not only a human condition. According to our own tradition, even God is not whole. This is the message of one of the most audacious texts in the entire Jewish canon, *Idra Rabba*, a story from the Zohar, a 13th-century compendium of Kabbalah.

In this story, the great sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai gathers his disciples and declares that they must save the world by healing God.

Can you believe the chutzpah? *They* are going to heal *God*??

¹ *Kol Nidrei*, Yom Kippur liturgy

It's my belief that this is the best kind of chutzpah. Not presumptuous, not a delusion of grandeur, but a pious, faithful desire to connect with God and set things right. The characters and writers of this text were deeply reverent and aware of God's holiness. They *knew* with perfect faith that even if God was not whole, God was still holy.

This is not a new idea, nor was it new in the 13th century. In the Book of Exodus, the Israelites receive the Commandments in the form of two stone tablets inscribed with God's teachings and laws.²

But while Moses is on the mountain receiving the Torah, the Israelites lose faith in God and build a Golden Calf to worship instead. No sooner does God hand Moses the tablets, then Moses smashes them in anger at the faithless Israelites.

Some time later, the people repent and God forgives them. Moses ascends the mountain once again and remains for forty days. According to the commentator Rashi, it is on the tenth of Tishrei³ — today — that Moses returns to the Israelites with a new set of tablets.⁴

And what became of the first set of tablets — the broken ones? The Talmud teaches that the *aron*, the Ark, carried both sets.⁵

The new, unbroken set was placed alongside the broken stones — not whole, but still of value and still holy. On this Yom Kippur, let us be like the tablets and let us be like God, striving not for an unrealistic wholeness but instead for holiness.

We can become holy precisely by being open about the ways in which we are not whole — by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with one another, by sharing our hurts and our hopes.

This is no small thing. It can be frightening to reveal our inner selves, a risk to share what we may perceive as weaknesses. In the *Idra Rabba*, Rabbi Shimon feels this same fear. “*Vai im agaleh* — woe if I reveal!” he says. And then he says, “*vai im lo agaleh* — woe if I do *not* reveal.”⁶ Rabbi Shimon knows that if he reveals, there is a chance of being misunderstood. But he also knows that if he does *not* reveal, there is no way to make a change, no way to grow.

A rabbinic colleague struggled with this same question, and shared her story.⁷

She is a recovering alcoholic, and one day she had lost track of a book she had been looking at with her sponsor. She was terrified that a congregant might find the book and discover her secret. She eventually found the book and her secret remained just that, but in the process of searching, she

² Exodus 31:18

³ *Matan Torah according to Rashi*, prepared by Rabbi G. Rubin, *Ohr Somayach* <http://www.ohr.edu/991>

⁴ Exodus 34:29

⁵ Bava Batra 14a-b and Berakhot 8b

⁶ Zohar III, 127b

⁷ <http://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2018/08/leaving-shame-behind-sharing-story-recovering-alcoholic/>

came to a realization. She writes: “I had to come clean. I couldn’t continue to feel this way. I ripped up the sermon I was going to give on Yom Kippur and wrote a different one.”

In that sermon, she shared her struggles with substance abuse — how deep her need to drink was, and how toxic it had become in her life. She also shared how she reached out for help and found it; how she worked, day by day, to find “solid ground.”

She feared that revealing herself as an alcoholic would be the end of her career in the rabbinate, but instead it was a turning point. In her own words, it opened the floodgates and her congregants came to her in droves to share their own struggles and those of their loved ones.

She writes: “I was no longer afraid and ashamed. I had become a real person to my congregants, and my relationships with them improved. I gained the trust of my community. Today, I do not have shame about being found out. And I’m here to help you.”

By revealing her struggle — what she had perceived as her brokenness — this rabbi was able to find a new kind of wholeness by being honest and open about her whole self and using it to connect deeply with others.

This is the same approach that Rabbi Shimon and his students took when they decided to heal God. The lengthy text of *Idra Rabba* is almost entirely a deep, focused meditation on God’s face. Entire chapters are devoted to God’s eyes, God’s ears, God’s lips.

You might be wondering, how could they do this? Doesn’t our tradition firmly maintain that God does not have a human form? You’re right; it does. And it was precisely *this* that the mystics of the Zohar were reacting to. They felt that God had become too abstract.

The philosophical language that prevailed in the medieval Jewish world describes God as beyond human imagination. But if God is completely unknowable, how can we possibly form a relationship with God? This was the question that led the mystics to devote themselves to giving God a face. Ears to hear and a mouth to be heard; eyes to see and be seen.

The Kabbalists were wise. They understood that healing comes in relationship, when we turn toward one another with open eyes, open ears, and open hearts. Intimacy creates empathy; healing can come when we allow our brokenness to be a bridge.

There are many ways that we can be holy together even when we are not whole on our own. Empathy is one way: by seeing each other, listening to each other and offering love and compassion.

Accompaniment is another way: being with someone in a moment of hardship. When a person we care about is sick or has lost someone they love, we cannot be expected to cure their illness or bring back their loved one. Too often we agonize over the right thing to say to alleviate pain, without realizing that comfort comes not from the absence of pain but from being able to express it.

In his song “Anthem,” Leonard Cohen sings, “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Expressing our fear, our pain, our grief allows us to express the fullness of ourselves, and in this way we can become whole. As Parker Palmer writes: “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.”⁸

Just as the Israelites carried the broken Tablets, so may we lovingly carry our broken pieces with us, because they are part of who we are. May we find healing by expressing the fullness of our humanity and receiving the fullness of others. May we look deeply into each other’s faces and there see holiness.

⁸ Parker Palmer. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, p. 5.