

Yom Kippur Morning
Congregation Beth Israel
2007/5768
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Chemistry changed my life. From the age of eight, I knew that I wanted to be a doctor. They carry charts around, have stethoscopes around their necks, and of course, they wear cool white lab coats. All through grade school and high school my dream was in-tact. And, even through my first three years of college, when I studied pre-med, I knew that the University of Miami School of Medicine was in my future. And then it happened: chemistry. I could handle biology and anatomy, and even physics was manageable. But, chemistry was the beginning of the end for my dream. The breakdown began during inorganic chemistry, when I started to notice that everyone in my study group was earning 99s and 100s on their exams, but I was getting 85s. But, the dream didn't *totally shatter* until I took organic chemistry the following semester. In that class my grades were no longer 85s...we'll just say it wasn't my strongest subject. In my Jewish studies classes, however, I consistently earned good grades

and was fascinated by the topics. But, I was so blinded by my goal of becoming a doctor, that I couldn't see that my true passion in life was Judaism. Now, looking back at my dream, I cannot see myself with any other profession. True, I don't get to carry charts around, or wear a stethoscope around my neck, but, at least once a year, I get to wear a cool white lab coat.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes in his book Floating Takes Faith. "One can learn the truth about spiritual growth from a ram's horn. The shofar call begins with a tekiah, a long unbroken blast; progresses to shevarim, three separate blasts; and finally reaches the staccato truah, nine short blasts, but the shofar always returns to the tekiah. That is the growth of spirit: first wholeness; then brokenness, shattering: and finally a new stronger wholeness."

Rabbi Wolpe's quote answers the question- why do we sound the shofar on Yom Kippur? Many of our spiritual paths mirror the blasts of the ram's horn, we move from being whole, to being broken, then shattered, and finally aspire to become whole once

again. Perhaps these blasts are symbolic of our professional path, or our personal life, or our closest relationships.

We all share these similar experiences as we navigate our way. Psychotherapist Estelle Frankel compares the shattering of the Ten Commandments to our journeys: “The first tablet, like our initial visions for our lives, frequently shatter, especially when they are naïve or idealistic. Yet if we learn from our mistakes and find ways to pick up the broken pieces of shattered dreams, we can go on to recreate our lives out of our initial failures.”

Typically, and thankfully life runs rather smoothly. But perhaps more often than we expect, life has its disappointments. We are often disappointed about something. We may be disappointed in ourselves, how we’re performing at work, or how our life has turned out. We may be disappointed in our spouse or loved one. We may be disappointed in our children. Maybe we are not as happy as we’d dreamed, maybe we’d like to be wealthier, and this is disappointing as well. Ultimately we are all faced with broken-ness.

Like the shofar blasts, our dreams once whole, can become broken when faced with the realities of life. The challenge is to collect the broken pieces and reassemble our dreams into a renewed wholeness, a tekiah. But how do we do this? How do we pick up the pieces of our disappointments and failures?

When faced with challenges about how to cope amidst our greatest frustrations, our rabbis and scholars often turn to Moses...whose life was filled with numerous disappointments. Even as our greatest leader and prophet, boy did that guy have tsurus!

His problems began at birth when Pharaoh decreed that all first-born males should be killed. Next, his mother put him in the Nile River and hoped for the best. After escaping possible death, Moses finds peace as a shepherd in the desert, but just then, God appears in the form of a burning bush; Moses is given the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Who wants that job? Moses then frees the people, only to be trapped by the Red Sea. Later, Moses schleps up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments

from God, but returns to find the golden calf. Lastly, after almost 40 years of wandering in the desert, Moses' only dream is crushed when God tells him that he can not enter the Promised Land.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book Overcoming Life's Disappointments: "Moses' triumphs were spectacular, but his frustrations and disappointments must have been searing. How did he do what he did? What depth of faith enabled him to cope with the disappointments? What can we learn from his story so that we too can do meaningful things in our own lives? And will we, like Moses, have the devotion to pick up the broken pieces of our dreams and carry them into our future?" (25)

Without great disappointments we can't experience great triumphs, without failure, our successes wouldn't be as sweet, and without adversity, our perseverance would seem meaningless. We must first recognize the broken pieces shattered within us and then prepare to rebuild an even stronger self. "Is it possible to be like Moses in our ability to overcome disappointments, frustration, and the denial of our dreams? Can Moses teach us how to be

ourselves, our best selves, even when life doesn't turn out as we had hoped?" (26) Moses provides us with the blueprint to overcome our disappointments, to realize that sometimes set-backs are the necessary catalysts that ultimately strengthen our convictions.

Our disappointments come in all shapes and sizes: ones that may disturb our day, challenges that can ruin a week, a month, or a year, and even greater issues that completely alter our lives. What do we do with the brokenness? A holocaust survivor once said, *what happens to you, no matter how hurtful or unfair, is ultimately less important than what **you do** about what happens to you.*" (53)

Kushner writes, "If you have been brave enough to love, and sometimes you won and sometimes you lost; if you have cared enough to try, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, if you have been bold enough to dream and found yourself with some dreams that came true and a lot of broken pieces of dreams that didn't, that fell to earth and shattered, then you like Moses can

look back at your life and realize how full your life has been and how richly you are blessed.” (174)

Failure is almost a prerequisite for success; because only by reaching a point of failure can you define the limits of possibility. Describing the painstaking trial-and-error process that eventually led to the creation of the light bulb-- inventor Thomas Edison said "I have not failed. I have merely found 10,000 ways that won't work."

As Wolpe wrote, “One can learn the truth about spiritual growth from a ram’s horn. The shofar call begins with a tekiah, a long unbroken blast; progresses to shevarim, three separate blasts; and finally reaches the staccato truah, nine short blasts, but the shofar always returns to the tekiah. That is the growth of spirit: first wholeness; then brokenness, shattering; and finally a new stronger wholeness.”

Upon hearing the blast of the shofar, we are reminded that Yom Kippur is a day of reflection, and often these reflections lead us down a difficult path, we realize that we haven’t been the best

people we can be, we've failed in our relationships, and life has not turned out as we anticipated. It may be overwhelming to discover our disappointments, our failures, and our organic chemistries.

Although Yom Kippur is a day to recall these disappointments, it's not meant to be a day of sadness. Listening to the shofar we are reminded of our brokenness but the blasts always return to tekiah, wholeness. These holidays are called the High Holidays, where we're given the opportunity to collect the pieces of ourselves and rise up higher and stronger. Even amidst his numerous disappointments, Moses became the greatest leader of the Jewish people. In elevating ourselves this day, we are given the same opportunity: to overcome our life's disappointments. This year may we strive to surpass the wholeness of tekiah and achieve an even greater self, a self that is stronger, fuller, and more powerful; --a tekiah gedola.

The High Holidays offer an opportunity for a new beginning, not for a sad ending; to begin our new year with a clean slate and rededicated to reaching new dreams. Only when we unify our brokenness into a tekiah, into a tekiah gedola, can we redefine our disappointments into renewed successes!

It's easy for us to sit here this morning and contemplate our lives and reflect on the disappointments that have blocked our way. But it is far more challenging to do something Life's disappointments When life offers us a challenge, we must decide which direction to follow. Will our path be clear? Will we have the courage and energy to carry on? Or was chemistry a blessing, because it shattered the mask that blinded me throughout my young life? Perhaps our decisions are not as simple as choosing our college major? Maybe we're faced with greater disappointments...Health issues, frustrating personal relationships, or financial difficulties? When these disappointments block our path, do we see them as blessings or curses?

הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֹת נִתְּמָי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָּ בַחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְיִרְעֶךָ

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that both you and your offspring may live. (Deut. 30:19)” Choose to live...God says! Not just physically, but within all aspects of our life. “Atem Nitzavim Hayom, kulchem lifnei Adonai Elohechem. You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God. (Deut 29:9)” We stand here today, all of us, on this Day of Atonement. Throughout our High

Holiday services we stand, both physically and figuratively. This Yom Kippur morning we examine our lives. Like our Torah portion speaks of blessings and curses, we realize that we too have both blessings and curses in our lives. Moses had both in his life as well, but he turned the curses into blessings and found ways to cope?

We stand for certain prayers, we stand for one another, as a community, and we stand for the sound of the shofar.

Our Torah portion this morning asks the same question? Our future provides us with a choice, especially when faced with life's challenges...to choose a life filled with blessings or a life peppered with curses.

“On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the day of becoming one, becoming whole instead of being broken, we pray for the ability to knit our broken souls together so that we will be able to do what we said we would do and become the people we swore we would be.” (110)

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist living in Vienna when the Nazi's invaded Austria. He was taken to Auschwitz but survived. In his book, Man's Search for Meaning, he writes “Everything can be taken from a man but the last of human freedoms, the right to choose one's attitude in any given set or circumstances-In other words, *what*

happens to you, no matter how hurtful or unfair, is ultimately less important than what you do about what happens to you.” (53)

Moses remains to this day the greatest leader and prophet that ever lived. With God’s help, he freed the Israelites from Egypt, led those slaves around the desert for forty years, taught them, cared for them, and finally made them into a nation, finally made us into a nation. However, his life throughout this process was greatly affected. The Israelites complained at every step of the journey and consistently disappointed both Moses and God.

“Moses’ dream of forging a nation of former slaves into a people who would unhesitatingly follow God’s laws has been shattered. But he holds on to the broken pieces of the dream, to remind himself of the lessons he learned when he found out that his dream would not be realized. Moses trades in that dream for a less ambitious but more realistic one. (23)”

What can we learn to enable us to cope with the inevitable failures we encounter so that we too will be able to come through them with our vision unclouded and our faith intact? Will we, like Moses, be able to hear the commanding voice of God in the bleakest of surroundings, summoning us to be more than we ever thought we could be and promising to be with us as we try to do that?

“In the late eighteenth century, there lived a sage named Rabbi Zusya. On his death bed, his students asked him why he was afraid to die, especially because he was such a righteous man throughout his whole life. He replied, I am not nervous if God asks

me why I was not Moses, or King Solomon, because I will simply say ‘God you did not create me with the greatness of soul that these men possessed.’ Zusya continued, ‘I am afraid that God will ask me why I was not Zusya? Why were you not the person I gave you the ability to be?’”

“It may be that instead of giving us a friendly world that would never challenge us and therefore make us strong, God gave us a world that would inevitably break our hearts, and compensated for that by planting in our souls the gift of resilience.” (55)

“His forty years of wandering, like his forty days on the mountaintop, will end in frustration rather than fulfillment.” (155)

“and you return to Adonai your God, and you and your children heed God’s command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then Adonai your God will restore your fortunes.” (Deut. 30:2-3)

, directly prior to receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites built a golden calf, devastating Moses and all his dreams prompting him to throw the newly minted tablets to the ground. But, Moses receives the honor of being our greatest leader, not

because he just coped his way through the desert, he is elevated to a prophet because of how he coped can be the blueprint for our lives.

Last week I took our car into the shop for a routine oil-change. The car seemed to be running ok. Shortly after I returned home however, I received a call from the mechanic asking for my approval on several other jobs.

In 1963, ABC aired a television show that quickly soared in popularity. With host Monty Hall at the helm, *Let's Make a Deal* became one of the most innovative and exciting game shows on TV. Each episode of *Let's Make a Deal* consisted of several "deals" between the host and a member or members of the audience as contestants. The "deals" were mini-games within the show that took several formats. In the simplest format, a contestant was given a prize, and the host offered them the opportunity to trade for another concealed prize. It might be concealed on the stage behind one of three curtains, or behind big "box" onstage. Prizes were either legitimate, like cash, appliances, or furniture, or they were 'zonks'. Zonks were unwanted prizes like large animals, large quantities of random food items or oversized clothing.

The contestants were often dressed-up in costumes and the general feeling of the show was light, funny, and uplifting. The biggest decision for the contestants was to make a choice between the prize they were awarded originally, and the other option Monty offered them. They had to make a choice, and ultimately their choice resulted in a great prize or a zonk.

Now, we sit here this morning, on Yom Kippur and we are faced with a choice. We sit here, as if on a live game of Let's Make a Deal, and we need to make a decision.

“ I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life-if you and your offspring would live-by loving Adonai your God, heeding God's commandments, and holding fast to them (Deut. 30:19-20). I'm sure that I speak for all of us...when faced with a decision to choose between life and death, that choice is quite simple. However, in choosing life, we are forced to choose two other things simultaneously. We are also forced to heed God's commandments and we forced to love Adonai our God. Again, this may seem like an easy proposition, but heeding God's commandments is very challenging and we rarely do that perfectly. And, it may be easy to love God at certain times, but to love God all the time, even in our lows and frustrations seems almost impossible.