

Shana tova everyone, wishing you goodness and sweetness as we enter the first moments of 5782.

It's been a hard year.

And while there has been brightness and joy, for many of us there has also been heartache and struggle.

Each of us met with different kinds of challenges,
And tonight, I wanted share mine with you.

My family is very, very close,
my parents and my brother and I have always been a team of 4 against the world, extending our foursome
when my brother and I met the amazing people we married.
Our team has been deeply challenged this year, and through the challenges, strengthened and connected to an entirely new level.

In the first days of January of 2021, as the world said goodbye to the awfulness that was 2020 and rounded the corner into what we hoped and prayed would be a better year,

My family got a diagnosis.

My dad

HPV driven squamous cell carcinoma

Cancer.

I got the news at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon and was here on this bimah streaming Shabbat services into your homes at 6, purposefully and

consciously separating my role as a rabbi in this congregation and my role as my father's daughter who was struggling.

While we were reeling from a cancer diagnosis, they'd caught it early and the prognosis was excellent – his top in the country medical team at Mass General Hospital was even throwing around the word cure.

We were optimistic about outcome as we dreaded the path to get there.

A truly intensive course of treatment, so intense many cancer centers don't offer it.

7 weeks of brutal head and neck radiation 5 days a week and once a week chemo on top of that.

Most people who go through this kind of treatment, they warned, end up on a feeding tube and need to be admitted to in patient care for at least some period, which thank God he avoided as he fought his way through treatment with bravery and determination.

We were scared.

And sad.

And angry.

And shaken that this was happening to MY Dad,

MY Dad who is strong and capable and can do just about anything

So much so that I didn't know until I went to college that normal people, not just the ultra-wealthy, hired people like electricians and plumbers and painters and carpenters in their homes...

I just assumed everyone had someone like my Dad in their house who could just do it all.

But now MY dad had cancer,
we were walking head first into a nightmare
And all of this in a pre-vaccine pandemic world.

So I watched on FaceTime as my Dad got progressively sicker
As he dropped 40 plus pounds
As the beard he'd had my entire life faded away
As he slept more and more of the day.

I watched as my Mom settled into this new routine as a caretaker
Spending more hours alone as he slept
which meant more and more hours on the phone with me,
hoping to make her feel a little less alone.

It was really, really hard.

My dad finished treatment the week before Passover.
Talk about celebrating freedom and liberation.
He finished treatment and slowly turned the corner
towards the r'fuah shleimah, the healing we'd been praying for for months.

In May we got the best news we could have received –
an unexpectedly early result of “no evidence of disease”

There was joy

And a sense of victory

And gratitude

And mostly overwhelming relief.

And then 3 days later the other shoe dropped

Lymphoma

He had an entirely separate, unrelated second cancer growing in his body.

Stage 2 follicular lymphoma.

It was a massive blow,

the balloon we'd slowly been filling with optimism and positive energy had
been popped in an instant.

It felt like he and we by association had just fought this massive battle and
WON

We were beginning to put cancer behind us and look forward to what was
next

Only to hear that that wasn't the case

That wasn't our situation.

So there were 3 more weeks of radiation in July.

And more scans and tests

A bone marrow biopsy.

And there are more scans and tests
in the weeks and months and years to come.

A new normal of trying to embrace uncertainty as we continue to live our
lives.

There are many moments of the last eight plus months when my Dad,
MY Dad who prides himself on his strength, whose identity is intimately
entwined with being physically and intellectually and emotionally capable,
has felt broken.

And for our entire family, many moments when our souls have felt shattered,
splintered.

Just broken.

We all have things that make us feel broken...

So how do we reconcile this?

How can we be broken... and ok?

Can we still feel whole while cracking into pieces?

How can we see ourselves as created in God's image when we are full of
breaks?

Moses, Moses knew about brokenness.

Moses, we know, was a great leader of our people.

Moses had the most bilateral relationship with God in our history, they communicated – Moses spoke to God and God spoke back.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, out of slavery with a big dramatic scene – the sea parting, opening a runway to freedom, only to close back up as the Egyptian chariots were swallowed.

Out of Egypt, into freedom – surely compared to slavery under pharaoh this freedom would be a magical wonderland.

But that wonderland proved to be more of a wasteland, our people wandering for YEARS in the hot desert, generations dying out without having seen anything much better than what they'd known in Egypt.

Moses went up to Mount Sinai to speak to God.

And God gave Moses “shnei luchot ha'eidut” – two tablets of testimony, of law, the 10 commandments.

They were “luchot even k'tuvim b'etzbah Elohim” – stones written with the finger of God.

This was an incredible moment, one I'd imagine carried some relief for Moses.

It was a sign of God's continued commitment to God's people.

A reminder of why the Israelites had followed him out of Egypt.

A promise of what was promised,

But while Moses was on Mount Sinai,

The people were restless. Understandably.

They'd followed this man who the Torah tells us was a tentative leader and not a strong public speaker, into the desert with a promise of something better and they hadn't seen much evidence. They were frustrated and lost.

And those feelings bubbled and bubbled to the surface until they had really given up faith in God,
they built a golden calf – an idol for worshipping that rejected God and God’s centrality in their lives.

So Moses came back down the mountain, carrying with him proof of God’s commitment

Carrying with him proof of his own legitimacy
Only to find the people worshipping this idol.

Imagine the heartbreak for Moses

And the betrayal.

The anger

Maybe a feeling of his own failure.

He’d begrudgingly left his life of luxury as an Egyptian prince to accept this role,

to be God’s mouthpiece and lead an entire people

And here, in this tipping point in his leadership,

it all cracked into failure.

And so when he saw what was happening,

He threw the tablets out of his hands

Vayishabeir otam tachat hahar

And he broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Vayishabeir otam – Moses broke the tablets from God.

We would think perhaps that this was a terrible thing Moses had done...
he broke this incredible gift from God.
But Jewish tradition isn't so clear.

In the final three verses of the Torah, it says that never again did a prophet arise like Moses, who God singled out, face to face, to do the sacred work God set out for him and for all of the great might and power “asher asah Moshe l'eini kol Yisrael” – that Moses did before the eyes of all of Israel.

Our great commentator Rashi believed that the might and power that Moses showed before the people of Israel was in fact the moment he broke the tablets.

In speaking to Moses, God refers to those tablets as “haluchot harishonim asher shibarta’ – the first tablets you broke.

“ASHER shibarta” – that you broke.

At the end of Deuteronomy, repeating that word “asher” is evidence for the rabbis that this is the moment that Moses showed true strength.

In the Talmud¹, Reish Lakish, a rabbi of 3rd century Palestine, says that this word “asher” is related to the word “yasher,” which we use in the phrase “yasher koach” – meaning good for you! Good job! Congratulations!
Literally, “may your strength be true.”

¹ Shabbat 87a:5

In our times, we say yasher koach after someone has an Aliyah, saying the blessing over our Torah reading.

We say it after someone delivers a powerful sermon or shares a significant insight.

In the Talmud's discussion of the tablets Moses broke, Reish Lakish says "yasher kochacha sheshibarta" – good for you that you broke them. Good for you Moses that you broke the tablets.

The midrash² builds on this praise of Moses for breaking the tablets, It says that God rewarded him, saying that those first tablets only contained the ten commandments whereas the second set of tablets, the replacements for those that had been broken contained so much more with oral law and written law and midrash.

It is only through Moses' act of breaking the first tablets that the richness of our tradition came to be.

These broken tablets are not destroyed items to be disposed of, They stand for something and from their brokenness beautiful things arose. The broken tablets have value.

So much so, that the rabbis³ tells us that the broken tablets were housed in the ark, right beside the second set of intact, complete tablets.

The broken sitting alongside the whole, both preserved in a place of honor and holiness.

² Shmot Rabbat 46:1

³ Bava Batra 14b:3

Just in the way that in this ark right behind me sits a Torah that is broken,
a Torah that many of you have held and carried.

It is missing half of it's content – only what survived the undoubtedly long and
winding journey, we think through the Holocaust and WWII, that led it to us.

This Torah is not kosher and it is not whole. And yet here it sits in our ark in a
place of honor.

We look at brokenness as a problem,

As a less desirable condition

If you are broken in some way, you are “less than.”

But our tradition says maybe this isn't so.

Brokenness can be sacred. And holy. And worthy.

Fundamentally, Judaism believes that each of us was created b'tzelem Elohim
– in God's image.

Being created in God's image means each of us is created as sacred and
special,

And that we reflect the characteristics, the spirit of God.

And we don't lose our b'tzelem Elohim status,
our status of being created in God's image
when we feel broken.

So if we are broken and we are created in God's image...

Then this must mean

that God is somehow broken too.

Time and time again in the Torah we have moments where we see that God is not perfect, that God is not infallible, including in this story with Moses and the broken tablets – if God were perfect and all knowing... why would God be surprised by being abandoned by the Israelites in favor of the golden calf?

And if God were perfect

and God and perhaps by association God's world was without brokenness...

why would bad things happen?

We can see God as powerful and mighty and full of blessing

We can offer our gratitude to God for the good things in our lives

We can believe in God

And... we can believe in a God that is broken, just as we are.

We say in our morning prayers that God created us "b'chochma" – in wisdom.

So much goes right in our bodies and minds to allow us to continue to live this life.

We were absolutely created in wisdom.

But we were not created in perfection –

it's just not the goal

it's not who we are.

As the great songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote, inspired by Judaism and specifically Kabbalah

“there’s a crack, a crack in everything – that’s how the light gets in.”

My family was broken this year.

But just over a week ago as we gathered together in Exton, Pennsylvania for my brother’s wedding

As my dad danced with his two sons,
my brother and my husband,

at the center of the horah on the dance floor,
arms around each other’s shoulders,

gripping their tuxedo shirts to hold on to one another as they spun and spun
in circles

What I saw wasn’t brokenness.

It was light.

The immense, radiating, blinding light of blessing shining through the cracks.

We are not less than
or less worthy
or less blessed by God because we are broken.

And we are not even sacred in SPITE of our brokenness,

we are sacred
and we are holy
and we are special
and we are created in the image of God WITH our cracks
and we are created in the image of God WITH our splinters
and we are created in the image of God WITH our brokenness.