

God is close to the brokenhearted, wrote the psalmist. *Karov H' l'nishberei lev.* The same book of Psalms celebrates wholeheartedness – I give thanks to God with my whole heart! *O'de'cha b'chol libi.* Broken and whole: seemingly opposite states of being that can bring us close to the divine. Sometimes our spiritual lives feel full when we are in a place of wholeness – when we celebrate a simcha, or when everything in life is going right, and we are filled with gratitude and a sense of completeness. Then there are the times we feel God's presence through brokenness, such as during illness, loss or other life crises. We feel vulnerable, and more open to a power greater than ourselves. Our spiritual journeys take us on paths through both brokenness and wholeness.

God knows, this past year has been one in which the very world seems shattered. The pandemic, with all of its attendant loss and fear; shocking political upheaval; hateful speech and violent behavior; attacks on the very notions of truth and reality...And this Shabbat, we remember another broken piece of our world: the estimated 80 million people – *80 million people!* – who are displaced from their homes, as refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. These are people who are literally, physically on an unimaginable journey from a shattered life to one of wholeness.

Our Torah portion, Ki-Tissa, takes us through a profound experience of brokenness and repair. After it, things will never be the same. As the parsha opens, Moshe has been up on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights receiving God's Torah. What a moment, which looks like a high point of achievement: liberation from slavery; the birth of a new people, who are building a sacred space, the *mishkan*, and who are given a spectacular set of teachings for creating a new society and a new religion. Moshe is ready to lead them to the promised land. Up on the mountain, all is right with the world! But down below, at the foot of the mountain, it is a different story. The Children of Israel are afraid. Their faith, still fragile, is now fractured. They build the Golden Calf, a stark symbol of the rift between the people and God, a symbol that their brand new covenant with God is now broken. God and Moshe must descend from their lofty place atop Mt Sinai and face that brokenness.

Moshe, in his deep disappointment and rage, literally breaks the physical contract between God and the people, as he smashes the stone tablets inscribed by God. God and Moshe engage in a dizzying dynamic of punishment and forgiveness: each of them has a moment of fury and despair, while the other advocates for repairing the rift.

Moshe reminds God of God's earlier, unconditional covenant with the patriarchs. Recalling that covenant, which evokes the unconditional, unbreakable love of a parent, God comes to forgiveness. And when Moshe asks to know more about God's essence, God introduces, for the first time, God's attributes of compassion,

patience, slowness to anger, what we know and chant as the “13 attributes.” God lets Moshe know that there are responses to brokenness – paths of repair – which are: grace and lovingkindness. *Chesed*. Finally, God helps repair those shattered tablets by producing a new set, created together with Moshe.

From brokenness to wholeness. Rupture to resolution. But things are not the same as before. Our tradition holds that the broken fragments of the first tablets were carried in the ark together with the intact tablets. Think of it: those fragments, those pieces that evoke such deep pain and rupture, are preserved and kept in the holiest place, the ark which holds the revealed word of God. Our sages seem to be saying that the broken pieces of ourselves and of the world are not only to be tolerated, but that those parts of ourselves are precious, just like the unbroken parts. The broken parts may even be an essential component of reaching wholeness.

The events around the Golden Calf are radical, not only because they tell of an terrible sin, but because they lead to a whole new understanding on the part of God and the Torah. An understanding that people, and the world, will never be perfect. An understanding that therefore, God, and all of us, will always need those attributes of patience, compassion and forgiveness.

At the end of today’s parasha, God reiterates the terms of the covenant, and the second set of tablets is engraved by Moshe. This scene is very different from that familiar powerful Sinai scene of the first set of tablets. This time, there is no thunder and lightning, no smoke or shofar blasts. This time the writing is done by a man not by God. This second, more low-key scene of the giving of Torah may feel anti-climactic, with an undertone of disappointment or even failure.

Or, maybe this second version is in fact a better, “new improved” model. It is less spectacular, but it emerges from a more nuanced understanding of people and of the world, an understanding which embraces humanity with all of its messiness and imperfection. And this model comes with new qualities for us to emulate, patience and grace. We would not want to live in a world without those qualities.

We note that the grand spectacle and glorious, high expectations of the first Sinai moments led to rupture and crisis. It was the tablets that emerged from that brokenness, and the resulting need for forgiveness, which in the end remained whole.

The many ways in which our world feels broken right now should not lead us to despair. True wholeness is always accompanied by the shards of brokenness. The fragments of our world in 2020 and 2021 will always be carried with us. But we can move towards wholeness and repair by drawing on our qualities of compassion, *chesed* and grace, as we embrace ourselves, one another, and our world in all of our broken places.