

ROSH HASHANAH 5782

Some of you may know that I'm not particularly an artsy person. I did take art history in college and know Monet from Manet, but if given the chance I'd go to the science museum over of the National Gallery any day.

To my surprise, I've recently become intrigued by a particular type of art. I had never heard of it until this past year and now I seem to see articles and references to it everywhere. It's not that I have tapped some unrealized creative vein within me. Although beautiful, my connection is not to the colors or the shapes, rather I am drawn to the philosophy at the center of this artistic practice and its profound and prescient connection to the very moment in which we are living.

Perhaps you have heard of it. It's called *KINTSUGI* (*not a Hebrew word!*)

Kintsugi is an ancient tradition that comes from Japan. *Kin* means gold. *Tsugi* means stitching. Gold-stitching. According to legend, in the 15th century, a Japanese military commander named Ashikaya Yoshimasa dropped one of his most treasured tea bowls and found himself in a state of despair. He sent it off to a famous craftsman to be fixed but it was returned to him simply forced together with unsightly metal pins and it no longer resembled the bowl he loved. He turned to some local artisans and asked for help. They took his bowl and patiently filled each crack with a golden lacquer. It was returned restored, the broken pieces held together by luminous threads that meandered through the bowl - in a way, even more exquisite than before. Thus, a new art form was born. *Kintsugi* ensured that broken pots were no longer thrown away but made more beautiful and precious with each repair. Every chip, every crack illuminated a story - the chronicle of years of valued service.

We are emerging from a time of tremendous brokenness. We are still assessing the damage of the pandemic and the trauma of lives lost, jobs changed, loneliness, stresses on mental health - especially that of our children. Covid has and continues to wreak havoc on many members of this very congregation and, beyond us, millions, and millions of the members of the family we call humanity. Yes, some of us have embraced the many positive by-products of our quarantined lives, but there is no doubt in my mind that we are forever changed. It may

be impossible for us to return to our pre-covid lives but there is no need for despair. There is a path to wholeness, and this is the time, the season, the very day for us to move forward on that path.

I find myself returning again and again to *kintsugi* because within this art is a mindset that prescribes such a way forward and that way is aligned with the work that Judaism requires of us over our *Yamim Norai'm* – our High Holy days. While certainly timely as we try to find a path to our 'new normal' lives, this art can speak to us any year and every year. It is a metaphor for individuals, families, communities that have been wounded, ruptured, dislodged in some large or small way, and strive to move forward from their injury, their trauma – changed yet beautiful, vulnerable yet whole.

As I read more and more about *kintsugi*, I realized that another reason it resonates with me is because I grew up in a house where there was a tube of glue in every drawer. My dad believed he could fix anything from a cracked cup to broken barbeque. Walking down into our basement, where my dad liked to tinker, I could immediately discern the glue he was using – Elmer's, Duco Cement, epoxy, rubber glue – simply by the smell.

I admired how my dad could fix anything, but his goal was to hide the crack in the plate. He didn't want anyone to know that the picture frame broke when his kids were rough housing in the living room. Contrary to this approach, *kintsugi* doesn't disguise imperfections or flaws. Brokenness is accepted, repair is sacred work. Golden scars become the locus of beauty rather than the cause for shame.¹ For the most part, this is counter to our American Culture. Wearing your scars for all to see is not the common way. We see our flaws as unattractive, deficient, a sign of weakness. We don't show our imperfections, not as individuals, certainly not as a nation.

And one has to wonder what this does to us? As we disguise our broken parts, airbrush our lives on social media, those painful shards remain within us, poking at our insides, tearing at our hearts, exhausting our souls. How hard it must be to move freely! Can a person really grow or grow strong when she is filled with these fractures? I suspect we are all carrying remnants of injury, slivers of embarrassment, missteps, addictions, transgressions. Yet, when we look at the

public faces of those around us, we only see perfection. We pull back from these unattainable (and surely false) images and hide, more deeply, our own problems and faults... you... you look so perfect, so whole, I am not inclined to talk to you about my problems, my failings. We see each other as so intact, it's hard to imagine who might be hurting and in need of support or how we might help each other as we repair our lives. I keep my pain hidden and maybe that is why you have done the same.

Our Jewish tradition embraces the reality that within each of us are cracks and all of us, even at our best, spend our lives in the business of restoration. Judaism has its own story of essential brokenness that dates to very beginning of time. In Genesis we read the well-known story of the 7 days of creation, but our kabbalistic or mystical tradition imagines creation entirely differently. This lesser-known story of our beginning, penned by Rabbi Isaac Luria, goes like this.

In the beginning, God's presence filled the entire universe. And so, when God decided to create the world, God had to contract, to make space for human life. In God's absence, darkness filled the empty space. But God knew that light must be an essential part of the world, so God took the Divine light and poured it into 10 vessels. The light, however, was so intense, so powerfully sacred, that the vessels could not contain it, and they broke, scattering shards of Divine debris all over our world. According to this tradition, *tikkun olam* is the act of lifting up these shards and restoring them to their rightful holiness.

Of course, the big take away from this is that humanity and our world emerged not from perfection but from brokenness. As in *kintsugi*, these shattered vessels are essential to the creation of something new, even as they are a witness to destruction. And our task, our calling, is to find holiness in the broken and the imperfect, including that which is broken and imperfect within each one of us.

Stories of the journey from fragments to wholeness, from brokenness to beauty, go beyond this foundational myth. Jewish history is replete with people who are flawed and moments when we, as a community, were shattered. History has left us wounded and yet look

around; we are living a vibrant tradition in spite of – and because of - the many injuries we have endured.

Consider one of the most challenging times for our people – the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the spiritual, political, and social center of the life of the Jewish people. It was an anchor for our ancient ancestors, an affirmation of the presence of the Divine in their lives. And then it was gone! In a matter of days, it was burned to the ground! The people had not only lost the place around which their lives were centered, they themselves were physically uprooted and forcibly displaced to a foreign land. I imagine them, thousands and thousands of people, devastated, bereft, completely unmoored by this soul shattering experience.

And yet, out of this destruction came the dynamic Judaism that we practice today. Our ancestors slowly, patiently, deliberately stitched together a new tradition that included golden remembrances of their struggle. We have all experienced these! At every wedding we break a glass. Even in a time of great joy we connect to that past moment of our brokenness. Like lighting a *yahrzeit* candle, we ritualize our life changing losses. We don't sweep them under the rug. Our cracks have not been erased. Instead, they have been illuminated and embraced as an indispensable dimension of our changed yet beautiful, vulnerable yet whole existence as a people.

I once heard someone suggest that the Jews are a community that lives with PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder – because of all that we have endured: the Temple destroyed, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust. PTSD was initially associated with soldiers who came back from war deeply traumatized by what they experienced. Of course, it affects so many more including those who have experienced all kinds of traumas. It can touch an individual, a family and indeed even a people or nation. With *kintsugi* in mind, PTSD might be characterized as being stuck in the broken state, unable to locate dislodged parts or to stop hearing the shattering sounds.

But psychologists tell us that it is possible to move beyond PTSD. It is possible to take our brokenness and turn it into something else, something called PTG - Post Traumatic Growth.

Researchers Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun created the term “post traumatic growth” to speak about the way that difficult experiences can create fertile ground for emotional and spiritual change. Many of us know someone whose life, after some adversity or hardship, has been profoundly but positively changed. Perhaps this person embraced a new direction or purpose or even changed professions focusing on a new passion, tapping into some creative vein, reallocating personal resources for that thing we call *tikkun olam*. All proof that we can grow beyond adversity. I think of the late Senator John McCain – a prisoner of war in North Vietnam who was brutally tortured for five and half years. He came home to struggle with his disabilities, with his broken family life. Slowly and with great intention, he repurposed his gifts to serve in Congress, run for President and ended his career as a person with the strength to stretch beyond traditional expectations of his path and his position. This is post traumatic growth at its best. It is precisely when the foundational structure of the self is shaken, even broken, that we are in the best position to pursue new opportunities in our lives.ⁱⁱ

Each year our High Holy Days lovingly shake our foundations. The music and liturgy and rituals draw us out of our routines and summon us to ask often difficult and disruptive questions about our lives, our values and our futures. These days hold a mirror up before us and we can’t help but to see our cracks – some present from long ago, some fresh from this past year. As with *kintsugi* and our kabbalistic myth of creation, we are called to do the work of repair. Today is not for *tikkun olam*, that will come later, now is the time of *tikkun atzmo* – the repair of the self.

Perhaps the ritual that captures this most aptly is the shofar service, the highpoint of this sacred day. We begin with *tekiah*, a smooth whole sound which some say represents our earliest beginnings. The middle sound captures a more accurate picture of our lives. It is *shevarim*, which literally means shattered. The sound is disjointed, fragmented, echoing our brokenness, giving expression to the heartache from all that transpired over the past year, calling us to return to our fractured relationships, our grief, and our imperfections. And in this vulnerable place, to begin to unearth meaning and purpose and mine the gold needed for

restoration, for *Teshuva*. The repair we do over these next 10 days preserves the stories of our most challenging times marking the beauty of our imperfect lives.

At the end of these *Yamim Nora'im* the shofar will sound one more time in a drawn-out promising blast – *Tekiah Gedolah*. Repairing our fissures is an extensive process but as the sound of the shofar lengthens so does our hope grow – hope that we too will be whole again. And with time, we pray, we will. Our lives may have been disrupted, thrown off course, been redirected, but here we are, still standing. The world is a much less sure place than it was when we last stood here together, but not all is lost, and not all is bad.

Here in the safety of our community, surrounded by the golden threads of our tradition, we affirm that brokenness is accepted, that repair is sacred work, and our precious, hard-earned scars reveal a deeper and more transcendent beauty.

We are both the shattered tea bowl and the gifted artisan.

Gently, lovingly, slowly, carefully let us find the holiness in our fractures, weave golden seams into our painful cracks and walk the path from brokenness to beauty.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Temple Rodef Shalom

Falls Church Virginia

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ⁱ Adapted from the Velveteen Rabbi, Blog Nov 29,2016

ⁱⁱ Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman, [Transcend - the New Science of Self-Actualization](#) Tarcher Perigee (April 6, 2021)