

The Art of Teshuvah

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There once was a king who had an exquisite collection of jewels. Of all his treasures, the King's most prized gem was a large perfect diamond. After a long day of seeing to the affairs of state, the king would retreat to his private chambers to meditate on the beauty and perfection of this diamond.

Gazing upon the diamond's perfectly smooth surface, down its precise facets, to a sharp culet where all the angles and lines converge in a singular point at the bottom, the king concluded that this diamond is proof that something perfect could exist in this world. Everything else in the world was compromised, flawed.¹

One night a tragic thing happened. The king was holding his perfect diamond up to the light, admiring its faultless radiance, when the gem slipped from his hands and dropped to the hard stone floor. With trepidation, the king scooped up the diamond and peered into its interior. To his horror, the king perceived a long, spindly crack running from the top of its crown all the way down to that precise culet –The tip of the diamond was chipped.

The king summoned every kind of expert to his royal palace to repair the diamond – jewelers, gem-cutters, scientists. All of them failed. The king was distraught – his beloved diamond was now flawed, like everything else in the world.

I can sympathize with the king in the story. All my life, I've been an artistic person. As an introverted kid who didn't excel at sports, I found an outlet in painting and drawing, ceramics and writing. I've worked in all kinds of artistic media over the years, and I'm particularly drawn to those that require precise, meticulous handiwork.

In rabbinical school, I had the great fortune to study Hebrew scribal art under the renowned calligrapher Izzy Pludwinski. I even learned how to cut my own feather quills. I love the exactitude of calligraphy. I love the slow, meditative feel of the pen stroke as I pull the humble little letter *yud*. It starts at the top with a sharp tip, widens as the flat edge of the quill pivots, and returns to a single point—like the culet of a diamond.

¹ Story from *Capturing the Moon*, by Rabbi Eddie Feinstein (Berhman House, 2008)

The rabbis of the Talmud imagined God as a scribe too, creating the universe out of the Hebrew alphabet.² I love the image of God hunched over the parchment of the universe with a feather quill, gently dipping the nib into ink made of pure energy, meticulously pulling the pigment to form the delicate crowns of the letters.³

I love that image of God as a scribe—until Rosh Hashanah, when it becomes a little more unsettling. On Rosh Hashanah, the divine scribe is not only writing the letters of creation. God is writing in the Book of Life.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* imagines us passing one by one before the Judge of heaven and earth. Nothing is forgotten. Nothing is overlooked. God sees every choice, every word, every failure of courage or compassion. The books are opened, and our deeds speak for us.

Which raises a rather frightening question: What do we have to do to get into the book? What exactly does God expect of us? Because if perfection is the standard, we are in trouble.

We have gathered here precisely because we know that we are not perfect. We have made mistakes. We have hurt people we love. We have failed to live up to promises we made to others and promises we made to ourselves. We have spoken when we should have remained silent and remained silent when we should have spoken. We have not always become the people we hoped we would become.

That is why we need *teshuvah*.

But if God really expects perfection, what would be the point of repentance at all? If a single crack rendered us worthless, there would be no reason to open the books, no reason to confess, no reason to begin again. So perhaps we need to reconsider our assumptions about God.

The first time we encounter God in the Torah, creation is already underway. God's primal impulse is to create. And how does God begin? Not with perfection. Not with a pristine, empty canvas.

The Torah tells us: *V'ha'aretz hayta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech al p'nei tehom*. "The earth was chaos and unformed, and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

² See BT [Berachot 55a](#)

³ Cf. BT Menachot 29b

The raw material of the universe is *tohu va-vohu*—chaos, disorder, darkness. God does not make the chaos disappear. God begins to work with it. God separates light from darkness, water from dry land, heaven from earth. The process of creation described in Genesis is less about creating something from nothing than about drawing order out of chaos—making distinctions, finding patterns and relationships, and gradually bringing beauty into being.

And after each stage of creation, God stops. God looks. God evaluates. And what does God say?

Ki tov. It is good.
Not perfect. Good.

And when God creates human beings—these strange creatures who will almost immediately disobey instructions, blame one another, become jealous, turn violent, and generally make a mess of things—God looks at the whole creation and says: *Tov me'od*. Very good.

I find that remarkable. God's artistic standard is goodness, not perfection. Perhaps we have been judging ourselves according to a standard that God never imposed upon us.

According to Maimonides, a created world cannot be perfect in the same way that God is perfect. Something truly perfect cannot change. It cannot grow. It cannot become anything other than what it already is, because any change would imply that something was lacking before.

And yet change is woven into the fabric of life. Everything alive changes. Children grow. Bodies age. Relationships deepen or fray. Communities evolve. We learn. We fail. We begin again.

Maybe our capacity for *teshuvah* depends upon our imperfection. Only an imperfect creature can change. Only an unfinished life can still become something new.

One of the prayers of Rosh Hashanah declares: *Hayom harat olam*. We commonly translate that phrase as, "Today is the birthday of the world." But the word *harat* comes from pregnancy. Today the world is pregnant. Today creation is still becoming. Pregnancy is not an image of completion. It is an image of possibility—of something taking shape whose future has not yet been determined.

And perhaps that is how God sees us on Rosh Hashanah: not as finished products being inspected for defects, but as human beings still becoming. Still capable of growth. Still capable of surprise. Still capable of *teshuvah*.

That is the spiritual possibility of Rosh Hashanah. *Teshuvah* is not an attempt to become flawless. It is the courage to look honestly at the unfinished life we have made—to take responsibility for what we have done, to repair what can still be repaired, and to continue creating with what cannot be undone. Our imperfections are not excuses. But neither are they verdicts. They are the place from which change begins.

The Jewish mystical tradition goes even further. Rabbi Isaac Luria imagined that, in the earliest moments of creation, vessels meant to contain the divine light shattered, scattering sparks of holiness throughout the world. The purpose of human existence, according to this tradition, is *tikkun*—repair. Brokenness is not evidence that creation has failed. Brokenness is the world in which the work takes place.

And that is important to remember on Rosh Hashanah, because we all have broken places. Some are the result of our own choices: things we have said, people we have hurt, promises we have broken. Other cracks were not of our choosing: losses, disappointments, betrayals, bodies that failed us, relationships that ended, turns our lives took that we never wanted them to take.

We should not confuse these things. When the crack is the result of harm we have caused, *teshuvah* demands responsibility. We must acknowledge what we have done, apologize, make restitution when possible, and change our behavior. Our imperfection is never an excuse for hurting someone else.

But there are also things we cannot repair because they cannot be undone. No amount of repentance can return us to the person we were before the mistake, before the loss, before the relationship fractured. We cannot go backward. The crack does not disappear.

There is a Japanese art form called *Kintsugi* in which broken pottery is repaired by filling the cracks with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. The artist does not try to disguise the fact that the vessel was broken. The fracture becomes part of the history and beauty of the object. What was damaged is not returned to what it was before. It becomes something different.

I want to be careful with that image. Not everything that breaks becomes better because it broke. Some things we would gladly undo if we could. Some losses remain losses. Some brokenness simply hurts. Judaism does not ask us to pretend otherwise. The wisdom of *Kintsugi* is not that every wound is a gift. It is that brokenness does not necessarily render something worthless.

And perhaps that is where perfectionism gets in the way of *teshuvah*.

Perfectionism says: If I am flawed, I am a failure.

Teshuvah says: Because I am flawed, I am capable of growth.

Perfectionism asks: Why aren't you already the person you should be?

Teshuvah asks: What can you do now? What is the best you can do with the materials you have?

I came to understand that question in a new way this year while as I start in this role as the rabbi of Kol Shalom. I have been delighted to discover that I am serving a congregation with an unusually large number of artists—painters, sculptors, ceramicists, glass blowers, photographers, writers, poets, knitters, and craftspeople. This October, Kol Shalom will host an art show celebrating the creativity within our community.

And as part of Kol Shalom's twenty-fifth anniversary, we commissioned artist Rena Fruchter to create a mosaic telling the story of the congregation. What I especially love about the project is that Rena did not simply make the mosaic for us. We made it with her. Children and adults were invited to choose pieces of glass and ceramic, cut them, arrange them and fit them together.

I had a chance to work on one of the panels. It enthralled me. But for an exacting perfectionist like me, it was also a challenging experience.

You see, glass does not always do what you want it to do. You score a line precisely where you want it to break. You hold the tool just so. You apply pressure. And then the glass cleaves where it wants to. You want a nice straight edge. You get a jagged one. You try to make one piece fit neatly against another, but the angles do not quite line up. You trim one piece and create another gap.

I found myself wanting the pieces to behave. But they wouldn't.

And yet, slowly, something beautiful began to emerge. The spaces between the pieces became part of the design. The irregular edges gave the mosaic texture and movement.

Pieces that seemed awkward on their own began to make sense when placed beside others.

A mosaic is an interesting artistic medium for a perfectionist. Its beauty does not depend upon every piece being flawless. The beauty comes from bringing imperfect, irregular pieces into relationship with one another until something larger begins to emerge.

A few years ago, I participated in the Jewish Studio Project, an organization that brings together Jewish spirituality, Torah and creative expression. Its co-founder, Rabbi Adina Allen, encourages participants to allow art to emerge from the materials and the process of making it rather than driving toward a predetermined finished product.

She writes: “The ways in which we miss the mark arise from those dark and unknown corners of ourselves, those places of chaos and void. But it is also within these very places that our own artist’s palette lies hidden. Like a half-finished painting that yearns to be fully realized, *teshuvah* is the work of re-engaging with all that yet remains unknown and unresolved so that a fuller, richer, more vibrant image may emerge.”

Not a perfect image. A fuller one. A richer one. A more honest one.

We do not get to choose all of the raw materials. We begin with the life we actually have. The history we actually lived. The family we actually came from. The body we inhabit. The choices we already made. The mistakes we cannot erase. The grief we carry. The strengths and weaknesses that are ours. We begin with the *tohu va-vohu*.

And then the question is: What will we make with it?

What is true for us individually is also true for us as a community. Perhaps there is something especially fitting about Kol Shalom marking twenty-five years with a mosaic. No community is built from perfect pieces either. We are different generations. Different stories. Different temperaments. Different ways of being Jewish. People who were here at the beginning and people who have only recently walked through the doors.

And somehow, over twenty-five years, those pieces have been placed alongside one another, and something has emerged that no single person could have made alone. Still unfinished. Still becoming.

Which brings us back to the king and his diamond.

The king searched his kingdom far and wide but could find no one who could restore his beloved diamond to its original perfection. He was about to give up when a wise old artist appeared at the castle.

The artist held the gem up to the light and examined it for a long time. Finally, she said, “Give me one week.”

“You can repair it?” asked the king.

“Give me one week,” she repeated, “and I will return it better than before.”

A week later, the artist returned and placed the diamond in the king’s hand. The king raised it to the light. The crack was still there.

“It is still broken!” he cried.

“Look again,” said the artist gently.

The king turned the diamond over. At the place where the crack began, the artist had carved a tiny rose. The long crack running through the diamond had become its stem.

The flaw had not disappeared. The diamond had not been restored to what it was before. It could not be. But the artist had worked with the crack. She had taken the diamond as it actually was and created something from it that had not existed before.

That is the work of *teshuvah*. Not to make ourselves flawless, but to look honestly at our lives. To acknowledge the cracks. To fix what can be repaired. To accept what cannot be undone. And then, with courage and imagination, to ask: Given the actual materials of my life, what goodness can I create now?

In these Ten Days of Repentance, perhaps that is enough. God looks upon an unfinished world and says: *Ki tov*. It is good.

May we learn to look upon our own unfinished lives with the same honesty and the same compassion. Not asking for perfection, but for *tikkun*—repair. Not pretending that the cracks are not there. Not believing that they render us worthless. But trusting that as long as we are alive, we are still becoming.

May we have the courage to fix what can be repaired. The humility to accept what cannot be undone. And the creativity to make from the lives we actually have something a little more whole, a little more loving, and a little more beautiful.
L’shanah tovah.