

YOM KIPPUR 5782
EVERYTHING IS BROKEN

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Of all of Bob Dylan's songs, the one that I think best captures what Judaism is all about is "Everything is Broken," from his 1989 album *Oh Mercy*. It goes like this:

*Broken lines, broken strings,
Broken threads, broken springs,
Broken idols, broken heads,
People sleeping in broken beds
Ain't no use jiving
Ain't no use joking
Everything is broken¹*

Seth Rogovoy, author of the excellent book, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* describes "Everything is Broken" as "swamp rock meets Lurianic Kabbalah,"² referring to that influential strain of

¹ © 1989 by Special Rider Music.

² "Bob Dylan's 10 Most Jewish Songs," *Forward*, May 24, 2020.
<https://forward.com/culture/447127/bob-dylans-10-most-jewish-songs/>

16th-century Jewish mysticism developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria, who re-imagined the Jewish doctrines of Creation, God's role in the world, and the relationship between humankind and God. His postulates continue to shape Jewish thought to this day.

Born in Jerusalem in 1534, and raised by a rich uncle from Cairo after his father died, young Isaac Luria showed early promise as a student of rabbinic literature. Before long, Luria began to dabble in mysticism—the secret wisdom that spiritual seekers consult as they yearn to experience God—and immersed himself in studying the *Zohar*, the 13th century cornerstone of the Jewish mystical canon.

It is even believed that Luria may have secluded himself in private meditation for seven years in a cottage on the banks of the Nile. Returning to *Eretz Yizrael* in 1569, Luria migrated to the mountaintop city of Tzefat and filled a vacancy as the Jewish community's chief teacher and spiritual guide.

Although Luria himself wrote next to nothing, and died at age 38, he still managed to transmit his ideas through lectures to a dozen or so disciples, who in turn taught them to their select disciples, and so on.

Put simply, Lurianic Kabbalah starts with the premise that “everything is broken” and argues outward from there. It is significant that Luria’s ideas entered Jewish thought a little over 75 years—or about three generations—after the greatest trauma in Jewish history since the destruction of the ancient temple: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

Luria and his followers devised a spiritual ideology that responded directly to the suffering of Jewish people at the time. Luria’s premise, that “brokenness” is baked into the fabric of existence, centered hardship, tragedy, pain, and evil in the world—an evil made manifest to the hundreds of thousands of Jews forced, under the eye of the Inquisition, to convert to Christianity at swordpoint, or who were killed on the spot, or driven, with little more than the clothes on their backs, into permanent exile.

Ultimately, Rabbi Luria’s revolutionary vision of Creation serves to explain the prevalence of human suffering, and also points the way to how we live so as to affirm the potential—despite the brokenness around us and within us—for goodness, meaning, and for God’s loving presence to enter our lives and enter the world.

I assume that Luria's teachings are best known to us through the term *Tikkun Olam*, the “repair of the world,” the word “repair” implying that the world is broken. Since the Holocaust, *Tikkun Olam* has grown to become a prominent theme in Jewish life, particularly in Reform Judaism, where it is associated with social action and social justice.

But for Luria, *Tikkun Olam* happens at the *cosmic* level, affecting all time and space.

Luria's core teaching—and this is a metaphor for all of existence, so bear with me—goes like this:

In the beginning, everything was God; there was (and is) nothing that is not God.

And yet, in order to allow for Creation, God had to perform an act of self-contraction. If you've ever sucked in your lungs in order to let someone else pass by you in a narrow corridor (as I admit to having done several times, especially during Covid), that's the idea.

Or there's the lovely metaphor offered by Anna Calamaro, a Reform rabbi-in-training who is also a doula, assisting women in pregnancy and childbirth and infusing their journeys with Jewish

spirituality. She observes that the Kabbalistic term for divine contraction is “*tzimtzum*,” a word that “conjures images of women having contractions as they give birth.... [C]ontractions prepare us for more.”³ God *contracted* a part of the Eternal Being in order to make room for all that was yet to be, in order to *give birth*. So the Creation of the world was not only positive; it was also negative: in creating the world, something of God *contracted*, went into exile.

The Torah tells us that in the beginning, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”⁴ In Luria’s version, Divine light began to flow from the now-contracted source, into the empty space, filling vessels God had made to contain the light; but the light proved too strong, the vessels too fragile, and they shattered. The vessels and their light scattered across Creation. Through the violence of the shattering, darkness and evil entered the world.

Instead of light filling Creation from end to end, we now walk about a world mottled with light and dark, good and evil, the whole and the broken: signs of God’s Presence sometimes evident, sometimes obscured, often hiding in plain sight.

³ “14 Days of Silence” (blog post), *At The Well*, <https://www.atthewellproject.com/blog/14-days-of-silence>.

⁴ Genesis 1:3.

And here we are, a little more than 75 years—or about three generations—after the greatest trauma in Jewish history since the expulsion from Spain, that is, of course, the *Shoah*, and Luria's vision still offers a powerful lens for understanding the world and our role in it: to be God's partners in the work of *Tikkun*, or repair.

But Luria in fact spoke of *two* kinds of brokenness and thus two kinds of repair: *Tikkun Ha-Olam*, the repair of the world outside us, and *Tikkun Ha-Nefesh*, the repair of the soul inside us. The two are inextricably intertwined: we cannot do one without affecting the other.

After all, if, as Luria proposes, everything is the unfolding of Divinity, then Divinity exists both outside us and within us. Even more, God's presence is accessible to us not only through that which is beautiful and whole but also through all that is fractured and hurting.

*Broken bodies, broken bones,
Broken voices on broken phones
Take a deep breath, feel like you're choking
Everything is broken*

What Dylan is driving at, what Luria means, is that not one of us is whole, none of us unbroken, in this battered and beat-up world.

And yet we, human beings, unique among the wonders of Creation, retain a marvelous capacity to dream, to hope, to imagine—something better, for our world, for ourselves.

Judaism capitalizes on this capacity in its insistence that history must move from degradation to exaltation⁵, misery to redemption; that moral progress is not only possible but essential; that what we experience as broken we also can mend; that we were put on this earth in order to leave it better.

The human ability to visualize perfection, and the Jewish demand to pursue perfection, is both a blessing and a curse.

A blessing, in that it provides direction, purpose, forward motion; in that it insists that we not succumb to despair no matter how bleak the circumstances—and we Jews have known more than a few bleak circumstances.

⁵ See *Mishnah, Pesachim* 10:4, which rules that in relating the story of the Exodus on Passover, the narrator is required to “begin with degradation and end with exaltation” (“מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח”).

A curse, in that the pursuit of perfection depletes us, sets us up for unrealistic expectations, prevents us from accepting the brokenness of the world, and, especially, the brokenness within us, as innate features, as part of God's design—the whole and the broken woven throughout the fabric of Creation like the primordial light threaded through the darkness.

“The Thai Buddhist master Ajahn Chah was so revered that when he died, about a million people came to pay their respect to his work and his legacy. Even the Thai royal family came,” reports Anam Thubten, a Tibetan monk and one of Ajahn Chah's many admirers.

“One time, when he was alive, somebody brought him a gift of an expensive antique cup. It was supposed to have been made in China during the Ming dynasty. He picked up the cup in front of everybody and said, ‘This cup is already broken.’ Because it is already broken, we can let go of our attachment to it in case someday it breaks, which it will. At the same time, we can enjoy it, and we can enjoy drinking from it.”

“In many ways, everything is already broken. We are all broken,” the monk concludes, before adding, with a wry smile, “unbroken too.”⁶

This Zen paradox also lies at the heart of the Lurianic vision of the world and our place in it. For the Buddhist, though, the way through the brokenness, the path to enlightenment, begins and ends with awareness and acceptance. The idea is to let go of attachment.

For the Jew, an additional challenge must be negotiated: not only to see the brokenness without and within, not only to acknowledge and accept and affirm, but also to mend, to heal, to change. For the Jew, our work in cultivating awareness of the brokenness in the world and, especially, the brokenness in our selves, in our souls, is the catalyst for change.

Acknowledging our failings, accepting our limitations, affirming our soul-brokenness: these are the first steps on the road to a more compassionate life, for ourselves and for the world.

⁶ Anam Thubten, *Choosing Compassion: How to be of Benefit in a World that Needs our Love*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2019. p. 125.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, better known as the *Chofetz Chayim* after his magnum opus, an influential work of Jewish ethical wisdom published in 1873, came to the same realization:

“I set out to try to change the world, but I failed,” he said. “So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community in my hometown, but I achieved no greater success. Then I gave... all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that’s how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.”⁷

Just days before going into lockdown, in March of 2020, Rabbi Levy and I traveled with our eighth grade students and parents to the Deep South on WRT’s annual Civil Rights Journey. Stopping for a while in Montgomery, Alabama, we made a heartrending visit to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice which is America’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, and African Americans humiliated by racial segregation.

⁷ As quoted in Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2008, p. 16.

Set on a six-acre site, the memorial features over 800 steel monuments engraved with the names of lynching victims, one massive column for each county where a lynching took place. There are more than 4,400 names. Like visiting Yad Va-Shem in Jerusalem, or the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, you leave such a place transformed—not just aghast but *awake*, aware that you share in a shameful legacy; that you have inherited a profound responsibility; that you cannot just go back to “business as usual.”

The poet Rilke described such a moment of transformation: “...[H]ere,” he wrote, “there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life.”⁸

The work of addressing the world’s brokenness begins by seeing the brokenness within.

It begins with “You must change your life.”

Bryan Stevenson, the acclaimed public interest lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative which houses the Museum

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo” (1908), translated by Stephen Mitchell. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York: Random House, 1982.

and Memorial, has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

He observes:

I guess I'd always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.

We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our humanity.⁹

⁹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: a Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014. p. 289.

This, my friends, is the most Yom Kippur message I know: we are all broken people in a broken world.

Not one of us gets through this life without being hurt—scarred, even—by living. Not one of us has come through even these eighteen months without something getting broken along the way: A plan. A hope. An agreement. A friendship. An engagement. A heart. A reputation for being patient with our families. A sense of being in charge of our own lives.

And if, on this Yom Kippur, you are saying a *Yizkor* memorial prayer for a person you have loved, and who has died, then you know: that hurt never really goes away; the wound never really closes—not all the way, maybe not at all. The brokenness just finds a way to become integrated into the complex whole that is *you*.

Acknowledging our brokenness is not an invitation to self-flagellation. Our brokenness does not make us “less than,” any more than God’s *tzimtzum* or self-contraction made God any less God.

We are still worthy of love—from others, from God, and yes, perhaps most of all, from ourselves.

And to say we are all broken is also not to negate the innumerable signs of life and beauty and progress all around us, and within us. This world is so magnificent and so heartbreaking. We live amid intermingled light and shadow, majesty and pain, and our souls are internal mirrors of this external reality.

“We are all broken, unbroken too,” as the monk teaches.

Our souls are like the blasts of the shofar: *Tekiah*, which is what we call in music a “whole note,” followed immediately by three short notes interrupted by silence, called *Shevarim*, whose name literally means “broken,” followed by *Teruah*, a discharge of jagged staccato blasts, followed at last by *Tekiah Gedolah*, a great whole note, a great healing note.

They say these shofar blasts were first sounded at Sinai.¹⁰ When Moses came down from the mountain—tablets of stone in his hand, words inscribed thereon by the very finger of God—so they say—before he could even share the good news with the Israelites,

¹⁰ See Exodus 19:13, 19:16, 20:15.

his eye caught sight of his people frolicking around a golden calf, bowing down and worshipping an unholy idol. Enraged, Moses hurled the tablets to the ground where they shattered at the foot of the mountain.¹¹

After the calamity subsided, Moses went back up the mountain, to try again, to earn a second chance for his people. The Rabbis say that this happened on Yom Kippur, day of second chances.¹²

And so Moses went up, and carved two tablets anew, and returned to his people, and the story of our Jewish journey went on.

But what became of the broken pieces? After all, they were, still, holy writ—inscribed, as we have said, by the very finger of God. Surely, Moses could not have just left them scattered on the ground?

The Rabbis then teach that Moses gathered up all the broken fragments and placed them in the Holy Ark, together with the whole tablets¹³, and there—if you choose to believe it—they

¹¹ Exodus 32:19.

¹² See RaSHI to Exodus 32:1 and 33:11.

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 14b. cf. also Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 8b.

remain, to this day: the whole and the broken, side by side, all of the pieces holy.

And how very much like the human soul is that holy Ark. That vessel with its whole and broken pieces all jumbled together.

And how very much like the world—this wonderful and worrisome world, with all its beauty and all its baseness, all its splendor and all its suffering, and all of it, the ever-unfolding mystery of God.