

I want to begin with a story.

When God decided to create our world there was a problem. For human beings to have free will, there needed to be a space where God wasn't fully present. So God performed an act of contraction—*tzimtzum*. But this created another challenge: how could holiness return to that empty space?

God's solution was to create ten special vessels, *sephirot*, to carry the light of holiness into the world. But something unexpected happened—the divine light was so powerful that it shattered the vessels. As a result, sparks of sacred light scattered among the broken pieces throughout the entire universe.

This story comes to us from Rabbi Isaac Luria, a mystical teacher who lived in the 1500s. Just forty years before his birth, Jews had been expelled from Spain, ending thirteen centuries of Jewish life there. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish communities across Europe had been repeatedly "shattered" by expulsion and persecution.

In creating this story to help make sense of such devastating experiences, Luria drew on ancient Jewish imagery. The prophet Jeremiah had written: "Thus said Adonai...I will smash this people and this city, as one smashes a potter's vessel, which can never be mended" (Jeremiah 19:11). As Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove teaches, "A broken vessel is our people's most ancient and enduring symbol for the fragility of our nation, for impending disaster, and the irreversibility of God's judgment."¹

As we enter these Days of Awe it is important to acknowledge the sense of brokenness many of us carry with us. This feeling can be especially overwhelming because it is happening on so many levels at once.

¹ Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove, "Shattered Vessels," <https://pasyn.org/sermons/2024/shattered-vessels/>

There is a brokenness within families when what is happening in the larger world disrupts relationships. For many years there have been half joking stories of the uncle whose politics create havoc at the Thanksgiving table. But now those stories have taken on a more painful tone as they reflect serious divisions at our weekly Shabbat dinners and Passover seders. This dynamic has spread to our larger Jewish family too, where synagogues and other organizations sometimes refuse to welcome other Jews with whom they disagree.

Two thousand years ago, the talmudic rabbis warned us about such divisions. They taught that the destruction of the Second Temple happened because of *sinat chinam*, “gratuitous hatred.” In their time, this internal conflict prevented the community from uniting to defend themselves against the Romans. In our time, it is making it harder to address antisemitism and to reflect thoughtfully on our relationship to the State of Israel.

In our country, many American Jews are experiencing a sense of brokenness as we wonder whether the United States will continue to be a *goldene medina* — a golden land, where we can continue to live safely and flourish. The weight of reconsidering our place here is profound. (I will speak more about antisemitism on Kol Nidre but for now I want to acknowledge how unsettling this uncertainty feels.)

Our identity has also been challenged by the leadership of the government of Israel, who seem to value their political survival over the lives of their fellow Israelis. The views expressed by some members of the government are deeply troubling to anyone who values the foundational Jewish belief in the sacredness of all human life and a desire for peace. Nearly two years after the horrors of October 7th, we are confronted with devastating images of suffering and ask

ourselves whether this is the purpose of a Jewish State and what it now means to “stand with Israel.”

Clearly, something is broken in our American political family as well. What used to be polarization has become outright hostility, too often erupting in actual violence. We watch the dismantling of foundational freedoms and the rule of law with disbelief and a sense of powerlessness. Each day brings news that would have seemed unimaginable just months ago: military forces patrolling American streets; judicial decisions being ignored; the President single handedly dismantling Federal regulations and agencies. In our own community unidentified, masked individuals seize people off the street and take them away without warrants or a stated cause.

What are we to do?

Rabbi Avi Killip reminds us that our foundational story of revelation takes place in the midst of a terrifying storm. Exodus 19:16 relates, “...as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.” As Killip observes, “Revelation doesn’t come in a moment of peace and calm, but amidst chaos and fear and trembling. There is smoke and fire and loud crashing noises all around as we receive the word of God.”² How might we understand our own tempestuous moment as an opportunity for new insight?

In modern Hebrew the verb to break, *shavar*, is the root of the word *mashber*, which means “crisis.” But originally, *mashber* was the word for a birthing stool. Our ancestors

² Rabbi Avi Killip, “Hearing Amidst the Storm,” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hearing-amidst-the-storm/>

understood the powerful experience of birth as a breaking open, necessary for new life to be born. Reflecting on this connection, Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur says:

Resilience only comes from acknowledging that what is broken won't be repaired. It's always about knowing how you are going to bring together the shattered pieces of your life to create a stronger story for times of despair....We are in a time of *mashber*....It's a time of anger and hope, death and life. It's the birthing of something new and no one knows what that's going to be.³

Tomorrow morning I will be speaking about some of the new things I believe are being born as Jews break with aspects of the past. But now I want to return to the mystical story of creation with which I began.

The story doesn't end with the shattering of the vessels. Those broken pieces fell into our world, along with the sparks of divinity. They are present all around us. And according to Luria, our task is to recover those sparks through acts of repair, or *tikkun*.

The term *tikkun olam*, "repair of the world" was used in the Talmud, a thousand years before Luria. But the concept that this work of repair is both essential holy comes from Luria's mystical teaching. Understanding this concept its historical context makes it even more remarkable. As I mentioned earlier, Luria wrote at a time when established Jewish communities had been broken apart and scattered over the globe. It had been two thousand years since Jews had political autonomy. Yet he found a way to teach his community that through their daily lives, through the observance of *mitzvot*, they had the power to impact the fate of the entire cosmos.

So I return to the question, what are we to do?

³ Julia Lieblich, "French Feminist Rabbi Captivates Multifaith Crowds with Musings on Mortality," <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/world/europe/delphine-horvilleur-rabbi-judaism.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>

What Jews have always done — persist in our sacred task of raising the holy sparks. We may not control the powers of government but we do control the power of our own actions. These Days of Awe give us an opportunity to reflect on those actions and how they might impact those around us. Judaism does not demand that we be superhuman but it does ask that we take our humanity seriously, using the choices we make to repair and remake our world.

Let me finish with a poem and a prayer.

This brief poem by Israeli author Yehezkel Rahamim uses the imagery of the shattered vessels to address the relationship between brokenness and opening. It's called "What Might Come After Storm and Dissolution:"

I fell to my knees to gather
shards of a horizon shattered to bits. Only
then did I lift my head
to inhale into the depths of my heart the
entire canopy of the stars.⁴

And, finally, a prayerful retelling of our mystical creation story by Rabbi Rachel Adler:

The Kabbalists tell us that God
In creating the world
Took some of its fresh new light
And poured it into each of the vessels of the spheres of the universe.

But such powerful light was stronger than the vessels,
And so they weakened and cracked,
While the precious light spilled out, falling down and down

Through all the worlds
Until they reached into the lowest world,
Our own.

As the sparks of light fell down,
They took on forms, and embedded themselves

⁴ Translation by Levi Morrow. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/318785?lang=bi>

In physical things —
Wood and water,

Plants and paper and living creatures.
Always since that time
The sparks yearn to return to the source of all light,
The single, holy light from which they fell

As so
When we do a mitzvah with food or plants or paper or another human being,
When we thank the Creator for having formed this beautiful and strong and fragrant thing,
We awaken the spark of light within,
And suddenly its fire starts to grow,
And it rises, flaming higher and higher and higher,
Soon to be reunited with its source.

As we have the power, through each mitzvah we do,
To redeem the sparks of light from the tyranny of matter,
In just such a way
God redeems us.
Embedded by the tyranny of the Egyptians,
We awoke to Adonai long centuries ago
To rise to our higher destiny
Of reunion with the divine.

And as each generation
Is embedded in its time's own tyranny,
So do we look toward the redemption
Of the holy spark in each of us,
Ready, each of us,
When our redemption time shall come
To soar further upward to the light from which we sprang
And from which our beings draw their breath.

[W]e tune our mind, our body, our every sense to each song, each prayer, each gesture we form,
that we too may awaken every spark whose time it is to soar.⁵

May this be a year in which we join together to raise the holy sparks of repair and renewal —
Shanah Tovah.

⁵ Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler in Rabbi Richard N. Levy, ed., *On Wings of Awe*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc. 2011 (adapted)