

## Embracing Brokenness

Many of you will remember Rabbi Lionel Blue, a wonderful broadcaster, comedian, theologian, rabbi and human being. He was a friend and teacher to so many, including Rabbi Silverman and myself. You may remember his thoughts for the day on radio 4. Here is an extract from one:



*Dear Listeners, When I was ordained, I was so proud that I rushed to the synagogue and sat at my new desk in my new office waiting for my first clients. There was no great rush, but just as I was about to shut up shop a man knocked at the door. He was about to commit suicide, he said belligerently, and ‘what was I going to do about it?’ I was startled and blurted out the first question in my mind, ‘how are you going to do it?’ He stared at me in disbelief, ‘what a question to ask!’ ‘Well, what am I supposed to ask?’ I replied sulkily. ‘You gotta tell me how wrong it is, see,’ he said patiently. ‘I can’t very well’, I said, ‘because when I tried it once, I bungled it.’ ‘I always do’, he said compassionately. We looked at each other and rocked with laughter. I made tea and we spent a cosy evening together in conversation. At two in the morning he said he would have to go, as he was on an early shift that day – that’s life. But he had enjoyed himself, and I had done him a power of good.*

Lionel continued to speak about the power of listening and being with people. But for us, here today, I think it speaks to something significant about the spirit of Yom Kippur. One of the reasons Lionel became Britain’s best-known and loved Rabbi, and was known as the rabbi’s rabbi, was because he allowed his humanity to shine out. He often said that people never wanted to hear from him his intricate rabbinic knowledge of Aramaic verbs but loved to hear the story of when he fell into a grave when officiating at a funeral! Lionel allowed people to see him as he was – warts and all. He spoke about his suicide attempt, his low points, his weaknesses (particularly for all sweet things!) – and by doing this, his light shone through and he gave us permission to understand ourselves as human, not superhuman.

Another example of someone who has opened up about issues we usually keep hidden and only for either ourselves or close friends and family is Ruth Davidson MP, the leader of the Conservative Party in Scotland. You may have seen she was interviewed by The Sunday Times last week where she revealed her mental health issues, showing the interviewing journalist scars of when she self-harmed as a teenager. Her voice is refreshing in a world where we increasingly hide our broken parts. We have spoken here, many times over the last year, about the stigma of mental health. Ruth Davidson’s bravery in talking again gives us permission to recognize that we all have a mental health, as we do a physical health. And her testimony helps us recognize how important it is to protect our mental wellbeing.

I’ve had many conversations with some of you over the past few months as we’ve been studying together for the High Holy Days and we’ve been struggling with the terms and concepts of sinning and repenting. For many of us, we are well-tuned to self-criticism and berating ourselves. Perhaps for some of us we’ve had abusive relationships in the past, we’ve been harmed by others, had toxic relationships, lost jobs, lost friends, suffered with depression and anxiety, or are in a process of mourning. Approaching Yom Kippur can feel

intimidating and we wonder how helpful it is to point to our sins and confess when we are really in need of healing and apologies from others.

Yet Yom Kippur, rather than being an exercise in self-criticism, is actually a powerful tool in mental wellbeing. The day enables us to embrace our brokenness and accept it which in turn allows us to begin to love ourselves. Alongside the stories of Rabbi Lionel Blue and Ruth Davidson MP, we stand side by side with our community and recognize that we all miss the mark and make mistakes. Our main communal confessional prayer, *ashamnu*, is in the plural – we have sinned. We learn that there is nothing exceptional or terrible about us when we sometimes we get it wrong. One of our main confessional prayers, *al cheit*, points us in this direction as the word *cheit* is one of the words for sin and means ‘missing the mark’. And the interesting thing about committing a *cheit* is often that we do it thinking we are acting in our best interests. Over the years we’ve created protection mechanisms to help us when we encounter pain or fear. Maybe you withdraw when you’re feeling upset, or you lash out when you’re fearful. Maybe you distance yourself from others or turn to material things for comfort – drink, food etc. We’ve learnt over time that these actions and material things can numb and deflect what it really going on for us. We do it as a poor protection mechanism – thinking we are doing the best for ourselves but actually being with our emotions is the best protection mechanism of all.

In this way Yom Kippur is an exercise in mindfulness. We are forced to stand without distraction – no food, no drink, immersed in prayer our smartphones remain in our pockets or bags, no entertainment, no exercise – just prayer, words, Torah, an expanse of time. The Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, the Piaszeczner Rebbe, spoke about certain techniques to quiet the mind which we can apply here today. There are three steps. Firstly, we have the chance to **notice** what we are feeling, what emotions are arising, what thoughts are swirling in our heads. And, in fact, our obligation is to notice these emotions and thoughts – not to judge them but to notice them. ‘Ah, I’m thinking about work again’, ‘Ah, I keep worrying about my son, my relationship with that person, my weight’ – whatever it might be. ‘Ah, I’m remembering that time I lost my temper in the car and swore and gestured at another driver.’

After noticing what thoughts are coming up for us during the day, it’s at that point we can **reflect** – What thoughts are causing me harm? What are my recurring thoughts? Then, finally, we can **name** these emotions and thoughts. We realise, in the naming that we have power over them and not them over us. We are not our thoughts. We name them, take responsibility and they lose their power. We point, without guilt or shame, where we have missed the mark, where we want to improve, and what we can celebrate.

This is our challenge today – to be mindful of ourselves. To recognize our humanity – warts and all. And to do so without flogging ourselves. We do so by understanding, following our Jewish tradition, that we are essentially good. We don’t distance ourselves from the dark and broken bits because we understand that they are part of us. As we say in the morning blessing before the *Shema*:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ,  
עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא אֶת הַכֹּל.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
Creator of light and darkness, who makes peace and fashions all things.

‘Creator of light and darkness.’ Through recognizing our darkness, we recognize our full created selves, created in the divine image. As we say time and time again in our machzor – ‘Before a person finds light they must know their own darkness.’

You may have heard of the centuries-old Japanese art form of *Kintsugi* (which means “golden repair”) where broken pottery is fixed with a special lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. This repair method celebrates each artifact's unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. This is our task today – to emphasize our fractures and breaks and to paint them with gold – bringing new life to ourselves in the process.

As the Kabbalists would say, we are making *tikkun*, healing, by finding broken shards and redeeming divine sparks. In so doing we get closer to God (or whatever or whoever we understand to be our higher power) – as a Hasidic teaching says: *Every human being is tied to God by a rope. If the rope breaks, and is later fixed with a knot, that individual is connected ever closer to God than if there never were a break in the rope. Thus, errors, mistakes, and failures have the potential of drawing us even closer to God.*

Today we are challenged to understand that it is a sin not to love our entire selves. Our sacred, spiritual, individual mission as Jews is to realize that we are loved, that we are not sinners, but all of us humans who are essentially good with broken parts in need of healing. By recognizing this and using Yom Kippur as a practice in mindfulness we can, not only bring peace to ourselves, but bring peace, reflection and understanding to our family and friends and even out to the world where we know there is much darkness and much that is broken. We begin with ourselves in order that we impact upon the world around us.

For this Yom Kippur may you notice your thoughts, reflect upon them without judgment and name those thoughts that do you harm. May you find *shalom*, complete peace and *tikkun*, healing, so that you can love yourself and those around you. May you remember Rabbi Lionel Blue’s teaching and enter this new year without fear of loving your whole selves and doing so with humour and humility.

*Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen  
Yom Kippur morning, 5779/2018*