

The Brokenness
Parashat Tetzaveh
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I think the writer of the Ecclesiastes was bummed out about a lot of things. But, if I had to guess, I think he agree that he is totally fabisina – bitter about everything. So bitter is he that he begins his book by saying, “Utter futility! -- said Koheleth -- Utter futility! All is futile!” That’s encouraging, isn’t it? But he was on to something and if you ever drove past a scrap yard, you may very well find yourself quoting him!

In fact, every single car you see on the road is never going to make it. The sheen will dull, and rust will creep and corrode. Even old favorites like BMWs from the '80s. Their first owners paid big bucks, expecting the cars to last a lifetime, but by the new millennium they are burning quarts of rich OPEC oil and eating lots of good green cash to keep rolling in replacement parts and labor. Costs rise. The cars are doomed. Infused with obsolescence, the end quickly approaches.

Taken in tow they will go, hauled behind tow trucks or riding piggyback on car carriers. Off on their final ride to the old cars home, the junkyard - now renamed "The Auto Recycling Center" - to be stripped of usable, salable doors and headlamps, bumpers and windows, taillights and floor mats.

Ford, General Motors and others have been building automobiles for 100 years now, and back in the golden days of college jalopies and flirtatious flappers - as early as 1927 - it was becoming clear that old-fashioned rusting and ruined Model T's and others were making a heaping pile - numbered at a million autos and growing. The automobile industry needed a solution for the increasing problem of the discarded consumer products slowly oxidizing in stacks in salvage yards. And they found one, called the "Carbeque" (rhymes with barbeque), which put a car on a spit and roasted it until it melted into a ferrous blob .

Today, a new device literally chews and shreds your used SUV into fist-sized pieces while working in a manner similar to a humble common paper shredder. The full-sized car shredder spreads over a thousand feet, weighs several tons and costs millions of dollars to construct - but when installed, it can chew through dozens of cars an hour. Your clunker goes through a feed roll, right into heavy, pounding shredder hammers which turn it into metal meal, then on to scrubbers, then through forced-air currents and magnets which separate precious ferrous material from the remains, which it sloughs off. The ferrous shreds and fragments are conveyed by whirring belts to waiting rail cars which take them off to the steel mill.

Most of the car is recycled, the rest is thrown away.

Which means that the SUV you are driving today may have been a Yugo yesterday.ⁱ

So what does this have to do with Torah? A lot, actually. You see, everything has a story and everything that falls apart is both the beginning and end of a story and our Rabbis loved stories.

In this week's parasha, there is the famous story of Moses going up the mountain a second and some say third time to get another copy of the tablets of the Ten Commandments replaced. And why did he have to replace them? Because he threw them down on the ground in anger and disappointment when he saw the Jews dancing around the Golden Calf. He lost his head and probably for a moment wondered why he bothered to lead this people.

But though he brought down the Ten Commandments 2.0, there is a questions hanging in the air. Namely, whatever happened to the pieces of the first tablets? In a most famous midrash, our rabbis teach us that Moses collected the pieces and placed them in the Ark with new Tablets. But they don't tell us why. Maybe it was to remind Moses that we all do stupid things sometimes. Maybe it was to remind the people that they all do thoughtless things sometimes. Or maybe there is another reason.

You see, those shards represent something else and our teachers were trying to tell us. A contemporary Rabbi said it wonderfully when she said, "So Moses comes down the mountain again, with a second set of stone tablets, this time written with the knowledge of human weakness... The first tablets were fashioned by God alone, but these were the work of Moses and God together. The first time they were perfect; this time they reflected the reality of human frailty, the disappointment of broken promises, and tarnished hopes.

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We are still carrying both sets of those stone tablets with us on our journey. The hope for wholeness and the truth of brokenness exist together in each of us. None of us is perfect. Each

of us struggles with limitations and weakness; each of us has broken promises and betrayed what we have loved.”ⁱⁱ

The broken pieces we carry are simply a part of us. They are the mistakes we have made and the dumb things we have done. They do not make us evil. They only represent our humanness and that is something that our tradition truly embraces.

It is like the story in the book the Life of Pi. The young man becomes a castaway on a lifeboat and his only companion is the 450 tiger underneath the tent. Pi had to work out some kind of arrangement if they were to live. He knew the tiger could kill him but he could not kill the tiger.

And though he was starving, he knew he could not overpower the animal and eat it. In fact, the only way he would live is if he actually fed the tiger and that is what he did. He caught fish and purified water and kept himself and the tiger alive.

Somehow they lived in this fragile relationship and as soon as their little boat landed ashore, the tiger ran into the jungle. Pi’s reaction is puzzling. He started to cry. And do you know why? It is because Pi, like all of us, have tigers under our tarpaulins. These are the mistakes the bad decisions we have made and we have tried to throw the pieces overboard, but we can’t. The rabbis are teaching us that those broken pieces are part of us and that they make us the kind of people we are. They may represent bad things we have done, but our Sages are telling us that they do not make us bad people. When the midrash is teaching us that Moses picked the up the pieces which resulted from his anger and depositing them with the

new Tablets of the Law, he was carrying with him all who he was and recognizing that, despite the brokenness, we can carry it along with wholeness wherever we go and, since it can never leave us, we should turn to it, recognize it and understand that it, too, is a part of who we are.

I have met with people who have told me about their regrets and their pain and their guilt. They have tried to ignore their mistakes and their bad decisions, their hurtful words or their physical lashing out but somehow it always comes back to them. It is their shadow, their tiger, their shards of broken holiness.

But our Torah text does not say that God simply gave Moses the second set of Tablets and that Moses brought them down as if nothing happened. God taught Moses what God was really all about with the famous words, "The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness ⁷ extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin..." It is not about theology or trying to understand God. It is simply a statement that says that God understands us. When Moses carried those broken pieces it was a revelation, not from God, but to God that God is beginning to understand His people.

There is comfort in knowing that God understands who we are and what we have done. We need not be afraid of being human for if Moses can break the holiest things in the universe at that moment, the first set of Tablets inscribed with the words of God, and then carry that around with him as a constant reminder of what he has done, then I imagine that we, too, have the capacity to carry our broken holiness with us.

A story is told in the talmud about Rabbi Shimon who saw nothing good in Roman civilization. He and his son Eleazar fled from that world and lived in a cave for a dozen years where they prayed and studied. Once they left the cave and came upon men who were plowing a field and they said to each other, "People forsake life eternal for the business of this temporal life." Aghast at the sign of what they took to be a misuse of time and energy, the scorned everything about society and whatever they looked at was suddenly consumed by fire. At that moment the voice of God rang out and said, "Have you come to destroy my world? Get back into the cave."ⁱⁱⁱ

Being Jewish is not about destroying the world because it is not as we would like it to be but more importantly, it is not about destroying ourselves because we have made mistakes and that we are carrying the broken pieces of life. It is like the Zen story of the young student who is suffering from guilt and self-loathing. He asks his master for help and the master tells him to put some salt in a glass and drink it. He does and it tastes awful. "Now," the teacher continued, "take the same amount of salt and put it into the lake and drink it." The student does and can hardly taste the salt. "The problem is not the salt," said the master. "The problem is the container. You have to make the container bigger."

We need to remember to make the container bigger. We must remind ourselves that our broken pieces are not who we are. We are so much more than that. Our broken pieces are simply things that we have done. They are things that may be embarrassing or they may have been bad choices. They may have been hurtful but, God willing, hurt that we can heal. Still, they are faulty choices made by faulty humans, and our tradition teaches us that our bad

choices are not what define us if we recognize them and remember them and carry them with us, not as a burden, but as a reminder. Indeed they serve as a reminder to us, but they also serve as a reminder to God to remember that we are but human and that these broken pieces are part of the whole which God created.

May God remember that we are but flesh and blood and may our broken pieces remind Him that if He seeks perfection, He has yet to find it. It will be then that God will remind Himself of attribute of compassion and that compassion will comfort us and give us strength to continue on our journeys.

Shabbat Shalom

ⁱ http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=3030&item_id=40884

ⁱⁱ http://urj.org/learning/torah/archives/exodus/?syspage=article&item_id=36040

ⁱⁱⁱ Talmud b. Shabbat 33b