

A Broken Heart is the Master Key
Yizkor 5769, Rabbi Zoë Klein

This morning, Rabbi Kellner spoke with us about seeing with our hearts.

His words made me wonder what it means also to see with one's heart when one's heart has been broken.

A poem by W.H. Auden reads:

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart.

The Hasidic master of the nineteenth century, Nachman of Bratzlav said “Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.”

What can this possibly mean?

What can it possibly mean that nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken?

Once the Baal Shem Tov asked his follower, Rabbi Zev, to explore the secret meanings behind the blasts of the shofar. Rabbi Zev indeed learned and explored the secret meanings and wrote them down on a slip of paper to look at during the service. When the time came for the blowing of the shofar, he took out his shofar and walked to the podium. He began to search everywhere for the slip of paper, but it was gone; and he did not know on what meanings to concentrate. He was greatly saddened. Broken-hearted, he wept bitter tears, and called the blasts of the ram's-horn without concentrating on the secret meanings behind them.

Afterward, the Baal Shem Tov said to him: “Lo, in the habitation of the king are to be found many rooms and apartments, and there are different keys for every lock, but the master key of all is the axe, with which it is possible to open all the locks on all the gates. So it is with the shofar: the secret meanings are the keys;

every gate has another meaning, but the master key is the broken heart. When a man truthfully breaks his heart before God, he can enter into all the gates of the apartments of the King above all Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”

A broken heart is the master key, the key to the palace. The rabbis say that while the gates of repentance close, the gates of tears never close.

And so here this afternoon, so many of us come with broken hearts, we see the world through this broken heart, it colors us, it paints us a new deeper color. What does the world look like now? On the one hand, it looks empty. There is an empty chair. The pillow beside ours is no longer indented. There is an absence, a grandparent, a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a dear friend, a mentor, a child...

We come with our broken hearts, knowing what it says in our prayer books, that prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

Mend a broken heart...but wait, look again, what does the world look like when we see it with our broken heart? It is full of stories, it is full of memories, there are colors in this world that we never noticed before, it is so precious, every moment, why, the world is not empty, but full, full of things to experience, doors to open, full of feelings, including pain and disappointment, anger, and loss, and beauty too, and love, quiet memory and hope. I see things differently with my broken heart, I notice things I never noticed before...

When Moses smashed the tablets of the ten commandments in his anger, the Israelites collected the broken fragments and kept them in the holy ark along with the new whole set of tablets. Broken or whole, they were all inscribed by God and therefore holy.

One day Rebbe Nachman of Breslov was about to teach when he suddenly grabbed hold of the chair he was sitting on and said: “When one sits on the chair, one is a mensch!”

Today, we think of the word mensch meaning a person of integrity and honor. For those who know Yiddish it implies more; those familiar with Rebbe Nachman’s teachings know it implies even more than that.

In the modern idiom, a mensch is a whole human being. It is someone who has integrated the diverse elements of his or her being, both physical and spiritual; someone who has overcome the inner emptiness we sometimes feel. When such a person sits on a chair, the chair is full. One sits on it, and one is a mensch.

If you wonder whether or not you are whole, whether or not you are a mensch, whether you have wholeness in spirit or body or emotion, Nachman is saying just sit in a chair! The very fact that you fill it up is your answer! The Hebrew word for “wholeness” is shalom. Do you have shalom? If you can sit in a chair, than you do! Simple!

Nachman’s philosophy is actually a little more complicated than that. The empty chair represents the “alienated self.” Rebbe Nachman was born in 1772 and his short lifetime spanned the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution. Beethoven and Mozart were composing during the Rebbe’s day. There was a great conquering of external frontiers, but Rebbe Nachman felt that there was an unprecedented inner void. He said, “I’ll tell you a secret. Great atheism is coming into the world.”

And alienation from God, according to Rebbe Nachman, leads to alienation from self, to a sort of black-hole feeling, or more simply, emptiness. When we experience the death of a loved one, we can understand these feelings. At first we may ask “Where was God?” and that alienation from God leads us to wonder, “Why them and not me? Who am I? Aren’t I nothing, too?” and that is emptiness. The chair I am sitting in might as well be holding no

one at all. Here today, gone tomorrow, nothing. But, the chair squeaks. The headrest is imprinted. I am in it, so I have to be whole.

When Rebbe Nachman's infant son died, he was shattered and empty. His closest followers had come to console him, they could not bear to witness his torment and they ran from the room. When they returned the next day, the Rebbe said to them, "Had you not run out, I would have told you something beautiful." He then said, "If you don't feel happy, pretend to be. Even if you are downright depressed, put on a smile. Act happy. Genuine joy will follow." He also said, "Finding true joy is the hardest of all spiritual tasks. If the only way to make yourself happy is by doing something silly, do it...Depression does tremendous damage. Use every ploy you can think of to bring yourself to joy, nothing is as liberating as joy. It frees the mind and fills it with tranquility...Avoid depression at all cost. It is the root of all dis-ease."

Nachman taught that a depressed heart is like an overturned bowl, an upside down bowl. It can't hold anything. A broken heart, on the other hand is a broken bowl. It can still hold things, it just leaks a little. It can be fixed. He taught that if one is depressed, one should try to move from depression to broken-heartedness, that broken-heartedness is a better place to be, because we are aware of our heart and with all our fissures and fractures, we are aching for love and repair.

I love that he says "Act happy and genuine joy will follow." Along those lines, I guess he would say, "Sit in an empty chair, and eventually you will be whole." We sit here, this yizkor, trying to redeem our sorrow with a smattering of words, and against all odds, the chair we are in is indeed full, and so, perhaps, are we.

If you have a broken heart, you have the master key. Let yourself in. May we each, even in our brokenness, find that we wholly belong to a sacred and supportive community, where the memories and stories of our loved ones are shared and cherished.

Baruch dayan emet. To the extent that we all have broken hearts, each in our own ways, may our places of brokenness offer

us direct access to the source of comfort, and may God be with all who mourn.