

I have shared with you before my love of the play, *Les Miserables*. It has been one of my favorite shows for just about my entire life. I have seen it several times, and even tried to read the 1400-page book while I was in middle school.

The play opens with the main character, Jean Valjean, being released from prison after 19 years. Because he is a felon, he struggles to find work or even a bed for the night. Eventually he is taken in by a kind bishop, who feeds him dinner and gives him a place to sleep. In the middle of the night, Valjean gets up, and steals almost all of the bishop's silver. He is quickly caught and returned to the scene of the crime. But then, rather than denouncing Valjean, the bishop corroborates his story that the dishes were a gift. He even goes one step further and gives him two silver candlesticks. Valjean's actions and the mercy of the bishop forever changed the course of Valjean's life. The significance of this moment can be heard in the next song, when Valjean is shocked by his own actions.

The defining scene at the beginning of the play is so familiar, so real in my life. Not because I have stolen silver from

a bishop or was saved from prison by the kindness of someone I barely knew.

But because I can easily call to mind moments when I have acted without thinking, or not acted when I should have.

Because I have made decisions and refrained from making decisions that have caused pain and hardship to other people. I have moments in my life that I wish with all my heart to be able to take back.

The Torah contains similar examples. Moses is someone whose impulsive actions have far-reaching consequences in his life. He chooses, in the moment, to strike an Egyptian overseer, and is forced to flee from Egypt in fear for his life. Years later, he strikes a rock in frustration instead of speaking to it and, as a result, loses the opportunity to enter into the Land of Israel; no amount of prayer or pleading could change God's decree.

Another example from Moses' life stands out to me today. While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the two tablets from God, the Israelites became impatient. Finally, just as God is giving Moses the two tablets, the Israelites reach their breaking point and create the Golden Calf.

God informs Moses that this is the end of the road for Israel, that their $\aleph\aleph$ does not include Torah, and that God will not travel with them anymore. Instead, God will wipe out the Israelites, and start over with Moses. Moses counsels restraint. He urges God not to act rashly and to think through the consequences of God's proposed plan. God relents, and Moses precedes down the mountain, the tablets in hand.

But when Moses sees what is happening at the foot of the mountain something changes. We read "As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain."

Moses, impulsively, unthinkingly, smashes the tablets that God had made for Israel. The Torah emphasizes that these were not any old tablets, but God's own work. Only three verses earlier, the Torah states "The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets." There was no way for Moses to undo what he had done.

This event, this moment, seriously damaged the relationship between God, Moses, and Israel in a way that Moses struggled to solve. It is at this point that we can see Moses becoming caught in a loop, moving between the foot of the mountain and its peak, between Israel and God.

He goes up the mountain and experiences spiritual transcendence. He comes down the mountain and is swallowed by the problems of the world around him. He goes back up the mountain and is cleansed by the holiness that he encounters. Down the mountain, and the mundane reality of life contaminates it. Back up the mountain...

When did Moses finally break the cycle at Sinai? In the Tanchuma, we read that Rabbi Judah ben Shalum sat down with a calendar to figure it out. Moses ascended the mountain for the first time on the sixth of Sivan – Shavuot. He stayed there for forty days, coming down for the first time on the seventeenth of Tammuz. He stayed at the bottom for 3 days, and then climbed up the mountain again. Forty days later he descended from the mountain on the last day of Av. He returned to the mountain the

next day, the first day of Elul and climbed down a final time forty days later – on the tenth of Tishrei.

Today, Yom Kippur, Moses finally broke the cycle. God told him **סלחתי כדברך** – *salachti kid-varecha* – “I have pardoned according to your will.” These are the words that marked the climax of Kol Nidre, the moment where we reassure ourselves that all of the work that we have done was effective.

The question that should be consuming our attention right now, is what did Moses do that convinced God to forgive him and the people? What did he do that finally broke the cycle?

The p’shat of the text, a straightforward reading of the Torah tells us that he was able to break the cycle by finding a spot that was halfway. Neither at the peak of Sinai, nor in the depths of the desert. Close enough to the heavens to retain his sense of direction and purpose and close enough to the people to be able to lead them.

After all of these events, he moved his tent from the midst of the camp to the outskirts. Rashi explains that God was unwilling to be among the people after their sin, and Moses

followed God's example. He separated himself from the community because of God.

When Moses climbed down the mountain for the last time, his face shone with a Divine light. This frightened the people, and so he veiled his face whenever he spoke to them. Moses hid his connection to God because of the community.

According to this reading, he was able to break the cycle of highs and lows by disengaging. He was no longer with God, but he wasn't among the people either. In order to prevent being brought low through his interactions with the people around him, he had to give up the spiritual ecstasy that came from his time up on the mountain.

This is a common response to suffering that is described by Dr. Brene Brown, in one of the most popular Ted Talks, ever. She discussed her years-long research into what makes certain people "whole-hearted." In it, she argues that many of us are so focused on avoiding pain, or sadness, or shame, that we are blind to the damage this avoidance causes.

When we numb the negative feelings, we also numb our ability to feel positive emotions. That it is all wrapped up together, and you cannot experience one without the other. If Moses numbed himself to the pain of being among the people, then he must have also numbed himself to the awe and transcendence of Sinai.

The Talmud provides us with an alternate theory. Rather than viewing Moses as withdrawing from the world, a deeper read of the Torah can also show us that he engaged with it fully, the good and the bad.

As Moses prepared to climb the mountain for the last time, God instructed him “Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first...and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke, and you shall put them in the Ark.”

This verse can be read two different ways: God could be telling Moses that the replacement tablets should be placed in the ark, but Rabbi Meir understands God to be saying that all of them go into the ark, the whole tablets and all the shattered pieces of the first ones. All of that belonged inside the ark.

Reflecting on this interpretation, the poet, Rodger Kamenetz wrote:

The broken tablets were also carried in an ark.
In so far as they represented everything shattered
everything lost, they were the law of broken things,
the leaf torn from the stem in a storm, a cheek touched
in fondness once but now the name forgotten.
How they must have rumbled, clattered on the way even
carried so carefully through the waste land,
how they must have rattled around until the pieces
broke into pieces, the edges softened
crumbling, dust collected at the bottom of the ark
ghosts of old letters, old laws. In so far
as a law broken is still remembered
these laws were obeyed. And in so far as memory
preserves the pattern of broken things
these bits of stone were preserved
through many journeys and ruined days
even, they say, into the promised land.

From that day forward, Moses carried with him the whole tablets that reminded him of his greatest achievement and the broken pieces that reminded him of his lowest moment.

Valjean's story follows this same route. When he arrived in a new city after being saved by the bishop, he sold most of the silver to finance a new life. But he kept the two candlesticks. Throughout the rest of his life, they served as a reminder for him of two different things. They reminded him of his crime and the need to atone. They also reminded him of the kindness of the bishop, and the possibility of another path forward in life.

The broken pieces of his mistake were never left behind, they were never forgotten. He carried them with him in his ark. That moment shaped who he was and reminded him that neither he nor the life he built was perfect.

Dr. Brown describes individuals who have a strong sense of love and belonging as "whole-hearted." She chose this term intentionally, because these people don't pretend that life is perfect. They don't hide from the pain that they have caused or the pain that they have experienced. They have the courage to recognize that this pain is a part of life.

They accept their own imperfections and this acceptance allows them to feel more deeply the joy and gratitude that is also a part of life. They were whole-hearted – in Hebrew this would translate to **לב שלם** – *lev shalem*, which is also the name of our mahzor. We can only do the work of the High Holy Days when we come at it with a **לב שלם** – *lev shalem*, leaving nothing behind.

She closes her talk by stating that we need to embrace the imperfections and vulnerability of our children and say to them, “You know what? You’re imperfect, and you’re wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.” She’s right, and we also need to say this to ourselves. We need to acknowledge our imperfections and carry our mistakes forward with us. This will make us vulnerable, but we cannot confuse vulnerability with believing that we are unworthy of love and belonging. Recognizing it is a necessary step to living a life of meaning and connection.

The mistakes that I make never disappear. They are never undone. I can choose to ignore them. That option is always in front of me. And it would numb me to the pain of honestly considering the harm that I have caused. But it would also numb me to so many other things. It would numb me to myself and to those I love. It would numb me to the power of community and the wonder that can come from a spiritual experience.

Instead, I can strive to build an ark, to create a place where I can carry the best and the worst of myself with me. From the largest chunk of stone to the smallest grain of sand. Each fragment of the broken tablets was holy, and Moses was obligated to carry it. In order to experience the spiritual exaltation that comes from being on the mountain, he had to be willing to be brought low through his relationships. The same is true in our lives. We must each pick up the pieces of our own broken tablets and carry them along with us.

Some of this work can be done communally. We can work together so that the PJC continues to be a place where we are welcome in our moments of brokenness as well as our moments of wholeness. The PJC is our refuge from the world of carefully cultivated lives of perfection and success, a place where we acknowledge the difficult moments alongside the beautiful ones – and where we can glimpse the truth that there is not always a line that divides the two.

However, most of this work is personal. We each need to find a way to carry the broken shards of our mistakes.

Yom Kippur is the day when we finally break the cycle. It is the day when we pray that we stop running from our actions and face them. On Yom Kippur we lovingly pick up the broken pieces from this past year. We examine each one and remember how it happened. We notice the jagged edge here, the smooth line there. We remember the pain that we felt when it shattered. The sadness when we knew it could never be put back together. We remember that moment, and then we place the piece in the ark, carrying it with us wherever we go.