

CRACKS IN THE DIAMOND
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The Maggid of Dubnov told a story about a king who owned the most beautiful diamond in the world. Every night the king carefully took the gem from its storage case to gaze at it lovingly. But one night, disaster struck: the diamond slipped from his hands and fell to the floor. The king picked it up quickly. But when he examined the stone, he saw right away that there was now a thin crack running down its length. His diamond was ruined.

In a panic, the king called every jeweler in his realm. But each expert responded that once there's a crack in a diamond, there's no way to fix it. The desperate king sent out word that anyone who could repair his broken diamond would be richly rewarded. A few days later, a jeweler from a distant province arrived at the palace. After examining the diamond, he promised the king he would fix everything, not to worry. He took the diamond and promised to return with it in a few months.

The despondent king couldn't wait to see his diamond as good as new. When the day arrived, the jeweler presented a beautiful box. The king shook with excitement and opened it quickly. But when the king looked inside, his face turned red and he shook with fury. The same thin crack still ran down the center of his precious diamond. "What have you done?" he screamed. "You promised you would fix it!"

"Please, your majesty, wait!" said the old man. "Just turn the stone over." And when the king did so, he saw the jeweler had carved the petals of a flower at the top of the diamond. So now the crack running through the stone appeared to be the stem of a flower, and the diamond was more beautiful than ever.

One of our most fundamental Jewish teachings is that cracks run throughout all of creation. Our ostensibly solid planet **is cracked and scarred with fault lines**, a patchwork of puzzle pieces constantly shifting, pushing up mountain ranges, opening canyons.

Our creation myth teaches that **we human beings are made of this broken earth**: "*vayitzar Adonai Elohim et ha-adam afar min ha-adamah* -- the Holy One formed *adam*, humankind, from *afar ha-adamah*, from the dust of the earth" (Gen. 2:7). And just as the *adamah*, the ground on which we stand, is full of cracks, **we *b'nei adam*, we children of the earth, are also fractured**. The Talmud itself teaches "there's not a single crack on the surface for which there are not many cracks below" (Pesachim 48b). The constant, organic process of expansion and contraction inevitably fractures our planet, and us.

Fault lines fracture communities and societies. The deepest crack in the earth's crust runs through the Middle East and Israel. So, too, cracks there separate Arabs and Jews, Islam and Judaism. Within our own Jewish people, ever since an earthquake swallowed Korach and his band of rebels, Jewish communities have been riven with discord. And in this country, we certainly need not look hard to witness the frighteningly deep, yawning chasms separating American society by class, gender, race, religion, and politics. Our Jewish and American civilizations are rife with fissures and cracks. They are broken.

Fault lines run through our families. Jealousies and hurts, intended and unintended, fracture our closest human relationships. Not one family in the Torah is immune. It starts with the very first couple: Adam bitterly blames Eve for the family's eviction from the Garden of Eden. As for their sons Cain and Abel, we can only imagine what *they* were like in the backseat of the car. The subsequent estrangements between Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers, even Moses, Miriam and Aaron -- these mythic stories powerfully evoke and reflect the fault lines in our own familial landscapes. Our families, too, are broken.

Fault lines run through each one of us. Just as our faces collect lines and our bodies accumulate scars, over the years our psyches are fractured by hurts, by losses and illness and bitterness and depression, by shame over our flaws and destructive habits we can't seem to shake. No matter how together we might try to appear on the surface, as the years pass more and more cracks run through every one of us. Each of us, made of the dust of the earth is, as *unetaneh tokef* describes us, a *cheres ha-nishbar*. Each of us is a broken vessel.

The story of the cracked diamond reflects a core Jewish teaching: everything in this world, even those which are most beautiful, are broken. Cracks are built into the dynamic process of creation, and part of every landscape.

At the same time, there is holiness in the very reality of the brokenness. As the great Canadian Jewish songwriter-poet Leonard Cohen sings: "There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." According to the kabbalistic myth of creation, as described by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the 16th century, God created the universe by pouring light, pure spirit, into vessels, representing the physical world. But this holy light's intensity shattered the vessels, creating a cosmic mess of sacred light within the fractured pieces. The trapped, scattered sparks glow in the darkness, in every aspect of creation, even within us, yearning to reunite.

These holy sparks are everywhere, especially in the fault lines of our world and our lives. Landscapes shift, pressures build, tectonic plates slip, and eruptions reshape the terrain. So, we learn that we can find God not only in green pastures and still waters, but also in the valley of the shadow of death, in those forces which shatter our landscapes and reveal the cracks.

There is potential holiness in our losses and our transgressions. There is potential holiness even in the explosive divisions which rock and sometimes shatter our families, our communities, and our society. **Each of us is charged with the same task as the jeweler in the story. We must examine the cracks in our own diamonds, and transform them into something holy.**

It is natural for us to dislike and avoid the fault lines in ourselves, in others, and in our world. It's natural for us to deny or rationalize them, stepping over them the way we superstitiously avoid cracks in a sidewalk or trying to erase lines in our faces. But the harder we try to dodge the cracks, the more they tend to control our lives. **The only way to extract meaning and holiness from the fault lines is to face them, literally, head on.**

Maybe that's why during the Great Aleinu on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it's traditional to prostrate ourselves completely, bring our foreheads down to the ground, and come face to face with our cracked planet. We go down into the *k'lipot*, the broken shards, to uplift the sparks which, according to the Lurianic myth, yearn to reunite and be redeemed.

Today, we are spiritual archeologists. We're digging deep, through layers of denial and rationalization, into our fractures, searching out *nitzotzot*, sparks of holiness. The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, return or repentance, also means response. **By the way we respond to the fault lines in our lives, we retrieve scattered holy sparks,** transforming the crack in the diamond. By digging down to the bedrock underlying the fault lines—by returning to the core values which underlay, support, and unite our fractured landscapes—we redeem the brokenness in our world.

So when **divisiveness in our country prompts us to stand for core American principles of diversity, tolerance, equal justice, and religious freedom, these are acts of *teshuvah*** by which we redeem the sparks. When we recognize xenophobic tendencies opening a chasm between our country and the world, and we insist on keeping the doors of our country open to those fleeing from danger and death, that is an act of *teshuvah*. When we respond to racial fault lines by promoting acts of healing and justice, when we face and root out the prejudices within ourselves and others, we practice *teshuvah*, we extract light from the crevices dividing our land. When we refuse to deny the humanity and essential worth even of those with whom we vociferously disagree, we practice *teshuvah*.

When recognize **fault lines between American Jews and Israel**, and respond by remembering our deeper connection to Israel and its people, when we respond by standing with those who protect Israel as well as and those who defend our shared core Jewish values of equal justice, coexistence, and mutual respect, we are practicing *teshuvah*.

When we recognize **fault lines in our congregation and respond by hearing and respecting those with whom we disagree, that is an act of *teshuvah*** -- it's a response to the reality and the blessing of human difference. And when we transcend our fault lines and see ourselves as part of a larger, single landscape, this too is an act of *teshuvah* by which we respond to the reality of differences by constructing a secure congregation that will not break under stress.

Cracks run right through our homes, fault lines in our marriages and our families -- old hurts and estrangements which run deep, many of which can never be undone. **When we honestly face these cracks and respond by imagining different futures for our marriages and our families, that is an act of *teshuvah*** -- it's a holy response to the reality that even our primary relationships are always flawed, always vulnerable. When we face and transform differences with our spouses, our parents, our siblings, our children, our closest friends, we lay the foundation for the connection, the genuine intimacy for which we all yearn.

Tragedy and losses have fractured life for many of us. When we respond to these cracks as individuals and as a community by supporting each other at shivahs, through hospital visits, caring phone calls, providing meals, helping others find new jobs, planning *s'machot*, we respond to those cracks. In the wake of loss and irreversible breakage in our own lives, we take steps towards rebuilding. And every step forward is an act of *teshuvah*, a response which opens a new vista in a shattered landscape.

Many of us today feel broken by illness or depression or addiction. There's no blessing or holiness in our physical or emotional challenges, in and of themselves. When we respond by summoning courage to overcome our shame, admitting our wounds, exposing our insecurities, seeking and accepting love from others, we lift sparks out of the darkest crevices.

Each morning, when we look in the mirror we may notice the fault lines in our face. **Each of us is fractured by our mistakes, broken by knowledge of our imperfections**, some of them so huge as to be unavoidable. Moses himself in a rage shattered stone tablets containing Divine words -- that's a bit of a bigger deal than your everyday mistake, spilling some milk.

And yet Moses learns to transform that act of shattering into a deeply healing message. God stations him in a cleft in a rock -- in the very crack itself -- so he can receive a message of infinite, unconditional love and forgiveness. Here, our tradition teaches that we can extract sparks of holiness even from our most challenging flaws. **Even within our errors there is sacred energy waiting to be channeled into acts of love and healing.**

That's why the Talmud (Sanhedrin 99a) teaches that one who errs and makes *teshuvah* is superior to a *tzadik*, a completely righteous person. And Yehudah Amichai, the late great Israeli poet, wrote:

From the place where we are right,
 flowers will never grow in the spring.
 The place where we are right
 is hard and trampled like a yard.
 But doubts and loves
 dig up the world like a mole, a plow.
 And a whisper will be heard in the place
 where the ruined house once stood.

God's whispered voice, Amichai teaches, can be heard most clearly in the cracks, in the places where we are wrong, in the cracks which reveal our inescapable imperfection.

Our prophets describe redemption as a time of geological convulsion. A great earthquake will split the Mount of Olives, and new rivers will flow from Jerusalem. When that earthquake is over, says the prophet Zechariah (chap 14), "*Adonai echad ush'mo echad*, God will be One and God's name will be One; people shall dwell in the land, there shall be no more destruction, and Jerusalem shall dwell secure." Out of life's upheavals, says the prophet, sometimes we may realize an unexpected, deeper kind of shalom.

Pressures build up along fault lines. Traumatic earthquakes wreck our whole landscape, rocking our lives, our communities. Sometimes the best we can do is mourn and start building on the ruins. Sometimes, the ground settles and pressures are redistributed, creating the potential for something more stable and even more beautiful than what came before. Sometimes, dramatic disturbances along the fault lines in our lives lift up mountains and lower valleys, creating places of sublime beauty, vistas of grace, like the awesome mountains and canyons of the American West.

We shudder today from the seismic convulsions shaking America, which grow deeper and wider by the day. Today, we pray for wisdom and courage to respond to these fractures as did our greatest leaders of the past, by affirming and strengthening the essential core values which are the bedrock foundation on which our shared society rests, and by which it might rise to realize its fullest potential.

We reverberate today with the aftershocks of conflict in our community and families. In the Torah, Ishmael and Isaac reunite to bury their father Abraham, Jacob and Esau reconcile at the funeral of Isaac, Joseph and his brothers embrace after Jacob's death. Today, we pray that like them, we might find healing enough to live at peace across the fault lines in our own families.

We vibrate today with the aftershocks of our own personal crises. At the burning bush and at Sinai, Moses and our ancestors heard God speaking to them in a fractured

wilderness. Today, we pray that we, too, might experience God's healing Presence in the internal, broken landscapes of our souls.

Years ago, I stood at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, one of the deepest cracks in the crust of this planet, a place of overwhelming grandeur and beauty. I saw there yet another huge fracture running north and south across the Grand Canyon, a crack that's more that 1700 million years old. It's called Bright Angel Fault.

I have learned that there are there are bright angels not only in that awesome place, but in every fault line of every world, of every place, of every person, of every moment. In each crack in life, there are bright angels, forces embodying the holy light of creation, waiting to be redeemed. *Adam y'sodo mei'afar*, our essence is of the earth; *v'sofu l'afar*, and of the earth each of us will remain. And this earth, from which we came and to which we ultimately return, teaches that we are, none of us, ever alone. God dwells with us not only in the solid places, but also in our brokenness, in the fault lines of our lives.