Benj Fried

Brokenness Is the Key

Shabbat *Lech Lecha* 5774

Imagine yourself in this situation. For your whole life you have hoped and longed to have a child. You feel that there is nothing more meaningful than bringing new life into this world. You want to share your love with a child, and you want to impart your values on that child to feel as though something of you can survive to the next generation. Despite your hopes and dreams, your child never arrives. Your wife is barren, and you feel a deep emptiness inside of you. Your wife feels her world to be utterly broken, the entire meaning of her existence seems to be a waste. You might expect that a person in this situation—someone who feels so unfulfilled, so broken—would feel distant from God, a God who has seemed aloof and deaf to his prayers. But in our Torah portion this week, *Lech Lecha*, we find just the opposite: a man willing to open himself up to God unconditionally.

When God calls out to Avram, promising him a nation, land, and blessing, Avram does not question this God who has never before spoken to him—he just goes.[[1]](#footnote--1) Despite having a barren wife and no hope of passing on any tradition, let alone fathering a great nation, Avram demonstrates tremendous faith in this God. While the Torah does not tell us why Avram had such faith in God, it also does not explain to us why God had such faith in Avram. At the beginning of this story, the choice of Avram seems to be not only arbitrary, but also inauspicious. The only detail we receive about Avram before his God’s call to him is that his wife Sarai cannot conceive.[[2]](#footnote-0) In fact the rabbis interpret that verse to mean that she was born without a womb.[[3]](#footnote-1) So how is it that God chooses Avram to establish a great nation if this dream is so hopeless? God could have chosen the other offspring of Terach. His son Nahor and grandson Lot both have fruitful wives, but God chooses the unexpected son—the hapless Avram.

I want to suggest that it is exactly because of Avram and Sarai’s hopeless situation that God chooses him. We all know that Avram and Sarai must have felt a great deal of brokenness from their situation. Their inability to conceive a child, to reach that level of fulfillment in their lives, must have broken their hearts. However, it is this brokenness that would have made Avram receptive to God’s calling in the first place. Avram was hapless; he could not attain self-fulfillment on his own. Avram knew he needed help; therefore, his lack of fulfillment created a space in his heart, and he opened himself up to the Totality of Existence. Had Avram had a child, perhaps he would not have answered the calling, for he would not have felt the need or desire to do so. God chose Avram, because God knew that Avram was the one who most needed Him; Avram’s brokenness was the key to having a relationship with God.

A Chassidic story by the Rabbi Nachman of Breslov points to why brokenness is the key to opening ourselves up. In the story, a king wants to test his son to see if he is fit to inherit the throne from him. He asks the son to take a giant boulder and carry it to the attic of a house. Try as he might with all kinds of levers, ropes, and men to help him, he cannot move the rock, let alone carry it to the top of the attic. He goes to his father ashamed and tells him he failed at his task. The king, disappointed in his son tells him to take a hammer and break the boulder into little pieces and take the pieces up to the attic. Rabbi Nachman concludes this story by saying that our hearts are the same way: in order for our hearts to be moved, they too must be broken.[[4]](#footnote-2) We all know that an unscathed heart of stone cannot feel compassion, cannot love another, cannot be moved to help another, cannot ascend to a higher spiritual realm. Only when we allow our hearts to crack open can they be moved. Only when our hearts break at the ugliness in the world do we connect to others with true empathy. Only when our hearts break at the beauty of the world, are we moved to awe.

As Jews, brokenness makes up so much of our identity as a people. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet discusses the character of the suffering servant: the figure despised by his contemporaries, scorned and mocked, and persecuted as though he were absolutely nothing.[[5]](#footnote-3) This suffering servant, of course, is a metaphor for the Jewish people: the perpetual scapegoats of history. Of course, the suffering servant, a figure of utter brokenness, is commanded to use the experience of suffering as a means of redemption, a way of transforming the servant into a light for the nations. Our experience as a people of brokenness has driven our people to the prophetic calling to bring justice to the world. It is why Jews have been on the forefront of fights for civil rights, LGBT equality, and economic justice. Because we have suffered, we know what it is like to feel that pain, and we know that God is affronted and mocked by the suffering of the oppressed, and it is why the Jew will never rest or be silent when his fellow man is in need.

Ironically, brokenness can also be the gateway to redemption in times of personal hopelessness. Consider Viktor Frankl, renowned psychologist and Holocaust survivor who developed his personal philosophy on life while in the death camps. While working in the camps one day, in a situation that truly had no hope of redemption or survival, Frankl began to think about his wife, from whom he had been separated months ago. As he thought about her, he realized how profoundly he loved her and how much he desperately needed to see her. In this moment of personal brokenness, Frankl developed meaning for his life. While other prisoners in the death camps despaired of life and died because they just could not cope with hopelessness, Frankl made meaning out of his drudgery by telling himself that his labors were a means of reuniting with his wife. His brokenness became his strength, as it enabled him to envision redemption and work with every fiber of his being to attain it. His determination to live out this meaning sustained him, and he was one of the lucky ones liberated at the end of the war.[[6]](#footnote-4)

We all know that in one way or another each one of us is broken. Some of us have aging parents who are becoming increasingly dependent on us. Or perhaps we are seeing ourselves age and are mourning the tiny losses that happen along the way. Perhaps we or our loved ones got a bad diagnosis. Maybe we are dealing with financial troubles and we just don’t know how we are going to make our next mortgage payment. Maybe we are struggling with demons inside us: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and sometimes it is all we can do to get up in the morning. And of course, we have all had our hearts broken. Often times we feel a certain shame about our brokenness, and we want to hide it from each other to give off the appearance that everything is all right, because it is simply easier that way. Sometimes we even hide our brokenness from ourselves, using denial to not even acknowledge it within the recesses of our soul.

I want to suggest to you all tonight that as we pray, that our prayer does not just have to be about thanking God for the bounty in our lives or singing praise to God for the awe we feel at the universe. We should also give ourselves permission to ask for help. Just like our barren forefathers, we all have something in our hearts that needs to be expressed. Maybe God won’t answer our prayers. But at least in the act of asking God for help, we are honest with ourselves and give ourselves the opportunity for cathartic release. And maybe it is exactly this cathartic release that we need to open our hearts to something unexpected happening. When Abraham and Sarah expressed their pain and anxiety to God, something did happen.[[7]](#footnote-5) Maybe God answered their prayers and opened Sarah’s womb; maybe the act of asking for help in and of itself fundamentally changed Abraham and Sarah and made them ready to conceive. Either way because they gave voice to their brokenness something happened. So I hope that brokenness can be the key that you use in prayer or in any other way to open your hearts to others, open your hearts to God, and open your hearts to a vision of what a redeemed life and redeemed world might look like. I truly hope that that vision will enable you to transform brokenness into wholeness.

1. Gen 12:4 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Gen 11:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Bavli Yevamot 64a-b [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Sayings and Teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Isaiah 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Frankl, Viktor. Man’s Search for Meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Gen 15, 18, 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)