

Erev Yom Kippur
High Holy Days 2021/5782
Cantor Wunch

Story #1

Once there was a great and powerful king, who ruled many lands. His most precious treasure was a diamond—the most flawless diamond in the world. Once, at a royal party, the king flaunted his diamond, passing it from guest to guest as it rested on a soft velvet pillow. Suddenly, the diamond fell and became deeply scratched.

The king summoned his diamond experts to correct the blemish. However, the distraught king learned that they could not remove the blemish without cutting the surface, thus reducing the diamond's value.

Finally, a craftswoman appeared and assured the king that she could fix the diamond without reducing its value. The self-confidence this artist displayed convinced the king to entrust the diamond's repair to her.

Several days later, the artist returned with the diamond. The king was astonished to see that the ugly scratch had disappeared. In its place, a beautiful rose was engraved.

The craftswoman had turned the scratch into the stem of an exquisite flower.

(as told by Pesach and Chana Burston, adapted)

Story #2

A long, long time ago in a far away land there lived a water bearer. He had two pots, and he had a very long pole, which he balanced across his very broad shoulders. He hung one pot from each end of his long pole. Each day the man left his home with his empty pots and his pole draped across his broad shoulders and walked down the path to the stream. Once at the stream, the man filled both his pots with water. Then he put the pots back on his pole, balanced his pole across his shoulders, and walked back home. Now what you should know is this: one of the man's pots had a crack in it! And just as you'd expect, every time the man arrived home, the cracked pot was only half full of water.

But that didn't change the man's routine: every day he walked down the path to the stream, collected his water, and arrived home with one pot full of water and the other pot half full. This went on every day, week after week, month after month, year after year. As you might imagine, the cracked pot felt sad and ashamed. One day as the man was walking home, the cracked pot mustered up the courage to speak to the man. "Excuse me, sir. I'm so sorry," said the pot. "And I really want to apologise and beg your forgiveness."

"Why?" asked the man. "What do you have to apologize for?"

"Over the years that I've helped you, I've never been able to deliver a full load of water for you. I've never been able to do my fair share. You work so hard, but because of my crack you never get the full amount of water. So your efforts are never completely rewarded, and it's all because of me and my crack."

Hearing this, the man felt sorry for the pot. "Listen," he said. "It's okay. Really, it is. In fact, the next time we go to collect water, as we walk along, I want you to look out over your side of the path."

The pot agreed. The next day, as was his routine, the water bearer walked down to the stream with his pole and his empty pots. Once at the stream, the man filled both pots with water and placed one at each end of his pole, which he balanced across his broad shoulders. Then the man started for home.

Instead of worrying about the crack and the water that was falling out, the pot did as the man had instructed. The pot looked out along the side of the path. And what he saw was amazing: fields of beautiful flowers!

The man stopped. “Do you see all those flowers?” he asked the pot. Before the pot had time to respond, the man spoke again: “And have you notice that these gorgeous flowers are only on your side of the path? It’s because I know that water leaked from your crack, so I planted seeds along the way. That way, every day when we walked back up to the house, you watered the seeds. It’s thanks to you that we have these beautiful flowers growing along the path. Without your crack, we wouldn’t have these colourful flowers to brighten my day and bring beauty to the world. So I need to thank you. Thank you for being a cracked pot.”
(as told by Rabbi Francine Green Roston in the book Three Times Chai)

The High Holy Day period is a time when we are instructed to look within ourselves, to identify our mistakes. We spend weeks examining our lives, finding the scratches, the cracks, the faults within us that have caused us to go astray, to fall out of line with our purpose. The process of *Cheshbon HaNefesh* – the accounting of our souls that is supposed to begin in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah can be a painful one. Becoming acutely aware of our flaws, our cracks, our scratches, can bring up feelings of shame, embarrassment, and anger. Like the scratch on the diamond and the crack in the pot, sometimes we need someone

else to show us how to reimagine our flaws, to see the beauty of our faults, to reframe our missteps.

Of course, not all flaws beget flowers. Not all accidents become works of art. Not all instances of carelessness turn into the discovery of penicillin. Some flaws, some misjudgments cause harm, cause pain and we must learn, change, fix, resolve. The challenge, of course, is knowing which is which – which of our flaws, which of our misdeeds require atonement, and which of our cracks, to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, are what let the light in.

This process of soul accounting culminates in a section of our liturgy called the *vidui*, or the confessional. In just a few minutes we are going to begin our annual atonement process as a congregation. We are going to say the words “*al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha*” – for the sins that we have committed before You. We list all the ways that we or others may have sinned, and as a group we repent.

Year after year after year we read and recite the same words. We have sinned, please forgive us. We have sinned, please pardon us. We have sinned, please grant us atonement. I get angry, I get frustrated, at the idea that we must beg, must plead to be forgiven. I wonder who or what is this God character that is so unwilling to forgive, so judgmental and harsh that we must petition just for the chance to be absolved... God, the Divine, the Source of All should be love... genuine, pure, comforting love... what is this beating my chest and crying out for mercy? *Al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha* – for the sins we have committed against You, not others – the sins committed against others are supposed to be taken care of already – the 10 days of repentance are for apologizing to others, but once that process is complete, Yom Kippur is for the sins committed against capital “y” You. You who are supposed to be our source of strength and grace suddenly

becomes judge, jury, and executioner. It doesn't really sit well with me or my theology, and so I need to reframe this. I need another way to understand this process to see the rose in this particular scratch.

We say that there is a spark of the Divine in all of us so what if... what if that You that we have sinned against is the You inside? What if this act, these words are directed inward, what if the sins are the sins we have committed against our holiness, the sins we have committed against ourselves? And what if there is no difference between sinning against God and sinning against ourselves? And let's be clear... the word "*cheit*" – *al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* doesn't even really mean "sin!" the Hebrew word '*cheit*' literally means going astray or missing the mark. *Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* means the ways that we haven't quite gotten it right before You. *Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* – the missed opportunities and the falling short in our reverence of holiness. *Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* – the ways that our words, our behaviours, our thoughts have not quite lived up to the holiness, the divinity that is implanted within us.

And so, when it comes to forgiveness, if what we have done wrong against God is truly what we have done wrong against the God WITHIN, then we become the victims of our own missteps, and only victims have the power to grant forgiveness. If my actions or inactions have harmed the divine within me, then I must do the work of forgiving myself... and all of a sudden this whole thing, this whole process, becomes just a little bit more difficult. If there is no outer force that can forgive me, and atonement rests solely on my shoulders, then I need another reframe, another way to see the flowers that the crack in this pot have watered.

So let's think about forgiveness. As kids, we all learn the phrase "forgive and forget." We are taught to accept someone's apology and move on. Start fresh. Act as if the sin, the wrongdoing never even occurred. How are we ever supposed to learn and grow when forgiving so often means forgetting? If I'm tasked with forgiving myself, how can I ever do so if that forgiveness requires me to just... let it all go? I wish that I could say that I am grounded and centered enough to let myself off the hook that easily, but I can't imagine being able to just release my own misdeeds and mistakes that easily. Instead, I'd like to propose that we reinterpret forgiveness as a means of acknowledging, of embracing before releasing. Embracing the flaw, embracing the hurt, see it for what it really is. The rose would have never come into being had the king not first noticed the scratch, and had the pot not been aware of its crack, it would have never spoken up and thus been shown the flowers... and so we must be able to acknowledge our scratches and our cracks, sit with them, examine them, before we can begin to let them go. I think it's important to pause here to point out that I am not recommending that everyone who has been harmed just magically release, magically forgive, magically find empathy for their abuser. Not at all. That is a different process, an important process, one that must be done with care and space and time. What I'm talking about is how we can learn forgiveness for ourselves. It is true that many of us are our own worst critics. The flaws that we learn to love in others are the same scratches and cracks that we punish in ourselves. Sometimes a little bit of self-criticism can be helpful – it can help us try to work harder or be kinder, be more self-aware, but many of us take it too far. We beat ourselves up, over analyze, perseverate, on every little perceived flaw. I do it to myself, all the time, and I'll bet many of you do too. Even today, even

right now while praying together, there is a part of my mind that is going over what I have done wrong, where I have missed the mark. There were so many topics that I wanted to cover over these High Holy Days. I tried to fit them all in, but like a cup of water, the more I poured in, the more came spilling out. A very wise person had to remind me several times that I can't do it all. And to be honest, I didn't take that news very well. For some reason, I believed that I had to do it all. I had to speak about every important issue, had to make sure that I fulfilled everyone's needs, but I know that in the end, no matter how close I got, I didn't. Regardless of how hard I try, I know that there will inevitably be some typos in the machzors, errors in the cue sheets. There will be an email I didn't answer, and an honour I forgot to bestow. I will inadvertently leave a name off the *Yizkor* list, or omit a favourite text. And I will apologize. And... I know, or at least I hope, that after all of that, you will all eventually forgive me... but will I forgive myself?

Well, here's the big reveal. According to our liturgy, that part, the forgiveness part doesn't need much reframing or reimagining at all, because before we even begin our confessions, early on – already this evening, we have this one line that puts it all to rest. *Vayomer Adonai – salachti kidvarecha*. And God said, I have forgiven as you have asked. We say this line 3 times in a row. In our tradition the number 3 is the number of intention... if you do something once it could be fluke, if you do it twice it could be a coincidence, but if you do it three times, it's clear that you meant it. So we say this line three times, to prove to ourselves that we mean it. We – the divinity inside of us – can forgive ourselves, must forgive ourselves, so that we can heal and learn to do better. Saying that we are already forgiven, or rather that we already have the capacity to forgive at the

very start can be a powerful way to reframe the entire confessional. We can thump our chests not to just say “yes, I take this burden upon myself” but to also say “and the power to find forgiveness is already waiting for me inside.”

On this Yom Kippur, let us make sure that we turn towards each other, and we turn towards ourselves. Let’s remember that we can play a major role in showing other people the flowers that they produce, and not just reminding them of their cracks and scratches. Most of us just like the pot in our story, are already painfully aware of our cracks, embarrassed by them, saddened by them, and unsure how to fix them. Let’s help each other reframe, reimagine our own stories. Let’s remember that the sins, or missteps that we confess to are ones that only we have the power to forgive, and let’s help each other find the strength to embrace our scratches, and grant ourselves that forgiveness. *Vayomer Adonai – salachti kidvarecha*. And God said, and WE said, we are forgiven.

Ken yehi ratzon

May this be God’s will.