BROKEN WHOLE – KI TISA
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TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC
February 18, 2022

My woodshop teacher in high school, Clyde Huffman, of blessed memory is directly responsible for my love of woodworking and sadly indirectly responsible for the missing tip of pointer finger on my left hand. That's a story for another time.

Mr. Huffman taught me three woodworking proverbs that I have drawn great wisdom from both in and outside the shop since I was a teen. The first is the old adage, "measure twice and cut once." There is a wood scraps bin in my garage filled to overflowing with evidence of the many times I disregarded that edict in the name of haste.

The second is the alliterative phrase, "Tools are not toys" ask any of my child when they pick up a hammer or screwdriver, "What is the rule?" and they will repeat that moto word for word, "Tools are not toys" hopefully just before they start swinging said tool around like a baseball bat or lunging with it like a sword.

The third commandment of Mr. Huffman's woodshop was really more of an observation than a commandment. Mr. Huffman often observed to us that, "there are two types of people in the world, those that like to break things a part and those that like to put things together."

I have been thinking about that observation as I reflected on lessons in this week's Torah Portion, Ki Tisa. The parasha contains within it the story of the Golden Calf and Moses' infamous reaction to seeing the Israelites dancing around this molten idol.

According to the story in the Torah, Moses received God's word on Mt Sinai, carved into two tablets of stone by the hand of God. Carefully, he carried the tablets down the mountain, down to his people. But when he reached the camp, he found his people dancing before the idol of the Golden Calf. Powerful emotions welled up within him -- rage, disappointment, betrayal, despair, bitterness.

Enraged by their childish impatience and what he later understands as their post traumatic induced fear of abandonment Moses takes the two tablets of the 10 Commandments and smashes them into pieces.

At first his response appears as childish and impulsive as that of the Israelites who constructed a Golden Idol but as we will learn sometimes you need to break something in order to make something.

That was not a Mr. Huffman-ism – but another lesson learned both in woodshop and taught throughout Jewish tradition; including in this week's parasha.

Another teacher, Jewish educator Ron Wolfson shared with me the story of a walk he took through China town once while visiting San Francisco.

As Ron and his wife Susie came upon a particular story they noticed in the display case a magnificent ceramic box made of dozens of colorful fragments, a sort of three-dimensional collage. The shopkeeper removed the piece and set it on the counter, so they could admire it up close. And he explained what the piece was:

"In China, we get a lot of earthquakes; the shopkeeper said. It's not unusual for a family to lose a set of dishes or two every couple of years. So, a custom developed: After an earthquake, a family gathers the largest broken shards of their smashed dishes and brings them to a craftsman. Many families will come with their broken dishes. The craftsman assembles the many shards of many families into this: a shard box…one for each family."

The story reminded me of my own shard box. Since my very first days as a rabbi, 22 years this coming July I have collected one piece of broken glass from every wedding I preform and place it in a box with all of the other pieces.

This is the box, these are the pieces. [Show box]

I explain to the wedding couple that the glass beneath their feet on their wedding day represents their status before chuppah, before marriage, but when they crush it into a dozen pieces it, like the two of them is forever changed and can never go back to what they were before. That our tradition is teaching, (I don't reference Mr. Huffman under the chuppah but he is on my mind). Through this act our tradition is teaching that none of us come through life experiences unbroken; we all have cracks and fissures and sometimes we are even in pieces. What two people can do together, what a community can do that is often impossible as individuals is put things back together, to take the various fragments of our individual lives and create something new, whole, and holy from them.

A shard box, made up of the broken pieces of family dishes, or glass from beneath the chuppah. Many families' broken dishes gathered to create a uniquely beautiful artifact. Fragments of life before marriage forming the mosaic of a new union.

This is a remarkably vivid symbol. After struggling with life, struggling to do the right thing, say the right thing, to be present for one another, to help one another, we gather all the broken pieces – the broken promises, the plans that failed to come about, the intentions never realized, the hopes that never came to be – we gather all the shards, and we bring them together.

Yours and mine.

Your failures and my shortcomings. We gather them all together. And out of them, we create something new and whole and beautiful.

The broken tablets of the 10 Commandments is our Jewish communal version of the shard box.

The people cried in despair. They repented their idolatry. They prayed for God's forgiveness. And so God invited Moses back to the mountain to receive the word again and fashion new, whole tablets, which were kept in the Holy Ark of the Tabernacle.

But what happened to the broken pieces of the first tablets? According to legend, they were kept in the Ark as well, placed beneath the new set, the broken shards serve as a foundation for our new wholeness.

The broken and the whole … together they are holy. Together, they are carried in the Ark. Moments of closeness, of achievement, of fulfillment, of triumph. Together with moments of loss, sorrow, brokenness. We carry them together. And we offer them all up to God.

"Tools are not toys", "Measure twice and cut once" these are proverbs indeed but perhaps the most wise and helpful of them all is found in this example and echoed by the prophet Isaiah

"You shall restore foundations laid long ago.
And you shall be called
"Repairer of fallen walls,
Restorer of broken homes."
(Isaiah 58:12)

There will be earthquakes, things will fall apart, we will be broken in ways we did not anticipate or could not withstand. That has not only been the history of the Jewish people, it has been the experience of humanity to this very day.

Judaism does not promise a life without struggle or loss; just the opposite, we left the Garden of Eden long ago. What our tradition offers, what the example of the broken tablets carried in the holy ark as a platform, a foundation for the second set provides us is a reminder that we are a people that put things back together, even when circumstance tears them apart.

L'taken Olam B'malchut Shadi – to repair the brokenness in the world, and in doing so renewing our connection to the divine.

To repair is holy, to fix and put back together is not only necessary, it's a mitzvah – a sacred obligation.

Like Mr. Huffman's Woodshop Commandments – this teaching and the example of our ancestors in this week's parasha has relevance far beyond just this story. Everywhere there is brokenness in our lives, take the fragments, the broken pieces, the shards and remnants of what was an craft a shard box; make something whole and beautiful from what life and

circumstance tried to tear apart. There is nothing more beautifully and holy than a mended soul.