



Min HaMetzar: From Out of the Depths, Finding Hope
Kol Nidre 5785 - Vows, Shattered Tablets, and Hope
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One day, when Ethan was just three years old (he's 18 now), back when we lived in New York, we took a drive to one of our favorite spots—Dunkin' Donuts. For me, it was a regular stop, but for Ethan, it was a treat. His little face would light up when we pulled into the parking lot, especially when he knew a Boston cream donut was in his future.

I had just returned from my fourth service trip to Latin America, leading high school students and adults to build homes for families in need. Ethan, full of curiosity as always, peppered me with questions.

"Did you use shovels, Daddy?"

He was quick to remind me he had his own toy shovel.

"Did you build with bricks?"

I explained that we used cement blocks. In response, he fished some Lego pieces from his winter jacket pocket, eager to show me his "building" skills.

On the way home, out of the blue, Ethan yelled from his car seat, "Daddy, I want to go build with you next year!"

My heart swelled with pride and joy, and though I knew he was far too young, I didn't want to discourage his enthusiasm. So, I made him a promise.

"E, that's a great idea! How about this: the first year you begin high school, 9th grade, you and I will go build a house for a family together. Deal?"

He beamed, and we even shook on it. It was one of those moments I wanted to hold onto forever.

But life has its own plans. By the time Ethan entered high school, we had moved across the country, settled into our new home here in San Diego, and—like all of us—found ourselves in the midst of a pandemic. The promise I made to him, one we both looked forward to, didn't play out as I had envisioned. Yet, thanks to persistence, and perhaps a bit of Divine timing, we eventually fulfilled that promise—building together during his junior and senior years, a powerful journey and experience shared with some of you as well.

Promises. We make them with the best of intentions, full of hope for the future, yet so often, life intervenes, reminding us how fragile those commitments can be. *Kol Nidrei*—vows that are not vows, promises that are not promises—holds up a mirror to that fragility. The Rabbis of the Talmud understood deeply that no one can foresee what tomorrow will

bring. Rabbi Meir, a sage of the 2nd century, called vows "wicked" because they bind us to a future we cannot predict. Rabbi Dimi, another Jewish scholar from the Talmudic era, nearly two centuries later, even referred to those who made vows as sinners—not out of malice, but out of the very human need to create certainty in a world that resists it.

So, what do we do when the promises we make, either to others or to ourselves, break? When the job we relied on disappears, when the relationship we trusted in unravels, when illness resurfaces, or when terror strikes as it did on October 7th? What do we do when the narrative we believed was ours dissolves, leaving us holding nothing but broken pieces?

In the aftermath, we are left grasping at shards—fragments of broken promises and shattered expectations. Yet, here's the profound truth our tradition teaches: nothing is discarded, not even the brokenness.

The Talmud, our rabbinic teachings, recounts the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the first set of tablets, only to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. In his rage and despair, he shattered those sacred tablets. But the Rabbis, with their boundless wisdom, tell us that both the shattered fragments of the first tablets and the whole second set were placed side by side in the Ark of the Covenant. The broken and the whole, together. The ideal and the reality.

Isn't that the story of our lives? We carry our brokenness alongside our hopes for wholeness. The trauma of October 7th shattered so much, but here we are, together, holding onto the broken pieces because they are part of our story too. We cannot, and should not, try to escape them. In our tradition, even the shattered is sacred.

Throughout this past year, I, like so many of you, have listened to the impassioned pleas of Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the beloved parents of Hersch Goldberg z"l, as they called on the world to bring home the hostages. For nearly 11 months, as their son endured captivity, their boundless compassion, unshakeable resilience, and steadfast devotion to love and community became a beacon—a light in the darkness for so many. Jon and Rachel shared countless powerful lessons, but one remains with me, pressing heavily on my heart in this sacred moment. Jon taught, "In a competition of pain, there are no winners."

Those words echo as a constant reminder of the fragile line we walk between loss and hope. Pain is not a competition. Whether we mourn the loss of a loved one, the crumbling of our sense of security, or the devastation in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, each grief is unique, yet none of us bears it alone. This year, our collective suffering runs deep, as does our shared responsibility to lift one another through it, as I spoke of over Rosh Hashanah.

When Moses shattered those first tablets, God could have simply replaced them, erasing the pain of that moment. But instead, both the whole and the broken were preserved. The

fragments matter. They remind us that even in our rage, our despair, and our failure, there is something sacred. Our broken promises, our shattered plans—they, too, hold meaning.

I recently learned the story of a man who, owned a beautiful vase. He cherished it deeply and placed it in a prominent spot in an outdoor space right outside his home. One day, a gust of wind knocked the vase over, shattering it into countless pieces. Devastated, he considered throwing the fragments away. But then he remembered the old Japanese art of *kintsugi*, where broken pottery is repaired with gold, highlighting the cracks rather than disguising them. Inspired, he gathered the pieces, used lacquer mixed with gold dust, and transformed the broken vase into a stunning work of art. It became a symbol of resilience, beauty in imperfection, and a reminder that even what seems shattered can be made whole again, perhaps even more beautiful than before.

A few weeks ago, I had the sacred privilege of sitting with a beloved congregant and his family as they kept vigil by his side, his body slowly beginning to fail. They had asked me to come, to offer comfort, to be present in those precious, fragile moments. We sat together, listening as his soft, raspy voice recounted stories and stats of his favorite college football team, his memory still sharp, his joy palpable in the telling. Even as his body weakened, lying in that hospital bed, he commanded the room with his spirit. We laughed. We wept. We touched—hands, arms, backs—reaching out for connection, for love.

After some time, I gently suggested we consider reciting the *Vidui*, the confession prayer we've spoken together tonight and will again tomorrow—a prayer traditionally said at life's end. It's a chance to release the burdens we carry, to ask for forgiveness, to let go of old wounds, shame, or unspoken regrets. In these moments, we forgive one another and send love, bridging the transition from this life to the next.

When I mentioned the *Vidui*, his eyes lit up. For a moment, I wasn't sure if he had the strength to speak the words aloud. But then, with clarity and determination, he looked at the page and began to say them. What followed were hugs, tears, and a flood of forgiveness from his family. "We love you, Daddy," they whispered.

And isn't that what we all long for? To be loved, to be forgiven, to be remembered. Yet, what do we do when someone we love breaks a promise, not out of malice but because life intervened? What happens when they're no longer here to apologize? Can we find it within ourselves to forgive? Can we, like the Israelites, carry the shards alongside the whole?

I believe we can.

Kol Nidrei invites us to stand vulnerably before God and one another, cradling both the broken and the whole. It calls us to face the fragile promises of our lives, the ones that have slipped through our fingers, and the ones that still hold us steady.

It reminds us that while we cannot undo the past, we can carry its lessons forward, allowing the cracks in our hearts to become the very places where light enters. And in that space, there is *Tikvah*—hope that grows from the soil of our imperfections.

As we enter this new year, we are tasked with leaning into the courage to forgive ourselves and one another for what was, and to embrace what might still be. We are reawakened with the knowledge that we do not walk this path alone—that we are part of a community bound together by shared struggles and dreams.

Together, may we begin the process of restoration, honoring the beauty in what remains and finding holiness even in the pieces. When we encounter one another on this holiest of days, we greet one another by saying: *G'mar Chatimah Tovah* - may you be sealed for a good year – one in which we continue to find the strength to heal, a time where we double down in leaning into the hope that inspires, and the resolve to know that both personal and communal wholeness is still possible. Amen.