

**Erev Rosh HaShanah 5778**  
**A Time to Break Down and a Time to Build Up**  
**Rabbi Karen S. Citrin**

I love looking up at the starry sky on a clear night, one soul underneath a blanket of billions of sparks of light. Have you ever wondered where the light comes from? Our ancestors did.

Let me share a story from sixteenth century Tzefat, the mystical town nestled in the northern mountains of Israel. Rabbi Isaac Luria observed that in his world, like ours today, many things seemed to be wrong. People suffered from hunger, disease, hatred, and war. “How could God allow such terrible things to happen?” Luria wondered. “Perhaps,” he thought, “it is because God needs our help.” He explained that when God first set out to create the world, God planned to pour divine light into everything. The Holy One prepared vessels to contain the holy light. But something went wrong. The light was so bright that the vessels burst, shattering into millions of broken pieces. Luria called this, *shvirat ha'kaylim*, the breaking of the vessels.

Our world is filled with broken fragments. When people hurt one another, the world remains shattered. When people have pantries filled with food and let others starve, the world remains shattered. According to Rabbi Luria, we live in a cosmic heap of broken pieces, and God cannot repair it alone. That is why God created us. God needs our help. We look to the sky and we remember. We can allow things to remain broken or we can try to repair the mess. Luria called this action of repairing the world, “*tikun olam*.” As Jews, our most important task is to find what is broken and repair it. (Retold in Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Miracles*). As our tradition teaches in Ecclesiastes, “There is a time to break down and a time to build up.” (3:3)

Tonight, on this birthday of the world, we are reminded about our role to mend creation. What is being asked of us? I can tell you that rabbis all over the world have been struggling with what to speak about these High Holy Days. It feels like the world is more broken than ever. Tonight, I want to talk about the brokenness, along with my hope for repair.

Our new *machzor*, the new book that many of you are holding in your hands for the first time this evening, will help us to navigate the brokenness of our world. You will see that our new High Holy Day prayer book leaves room for doubt and questioning. It embraces the brokenness in our lives, along with our yearning for wholeness. The new liturgy has moved away from a theology of certainty, images of God directing and judging us from on high. Instead, we see more focus on human responsibility and fallibility.

For example, on one page, a traditional prayer sounds certain, referring to a God who is “slow to anger, quick to forgive.” And on the left side of the page, a newer passage reflects, “I speak these words but I don’t believe them.” (p. 180-181) The new prayer book titled *Mishkan HaNefesh*, meaning “Sanctuary of the Soul,” reflects trends in the evolution of faith. We no longer take God’s existence for granted. Our new prayer book is multi-vocal, and includes the diversity of our beliefs and our communities today.

This new High Holy Day book is only the third in the history of the American Reform Movement. (CCAR, 2015.) Tonight, even with a shiny new book in our hands, we feel the

power of memory, the comfort of the familiar. Our *machzor* invites us in. We turn page by page to the really big issues of life, death, forgiveness, eternity, brokenness and healing. “There is a time to break down and a time to build up.”

One central theme in the *machzor* speaks to the brokenness of creation. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Teruah*, the time for sounding the Shofar. Tomorrow, we will hear the shofar blasts, the ancient call to awaken our souls to the New Year. Are we awake? The shofar blasts mimic the cries of our lives. Its piercing tones sound an alarm, express our fears, and compel us to respond. Tonight, in light of our mission to repair the world, I invite us to think about how each of the three calls speak to us today.

*Tekiah* – one clear note - the sound of memory. One clear note calls us back. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. On this first day of the New Year, we uphold the ancient truths of our Torah, “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land.” (Leviticus 25:10) We remember that we were once strangers. As Jews, from sea to shining sea, we stand in unison against acts of hatred, intimidation, and divisiveness. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. (“One Voice for the New Year,” Rabbis Elka Abrahamson and Judy Shanks, CCAR 2017)

As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel taught us, “Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.” He continued, “I marvel at the resilience of the Jewish people. Their best characteristic is their desire to remember. No other people have such an obsession with memory.”

Open your book of life and remember. Memory draws us back to family and community, to our core values, and the ideals that we have always stood for. Marcia Falk writes in her new book of blessings and poems for the New Year, “Recollections shape us, remind us who we are. Imagination brings what is buried to light. With each moment recalled, the kaleidoscope turns, patterns change, colors shift places. The selves within the self comes into view.... From youth to age, our bonds with others deepen, become more truthful.... The shofar calls, the crescent rises. The new year is upon us.” (*The Days Between*) *Tekiah* - open the book of memory and remember what we stand for.

*Shevarim* – three blasts – the melancholy sigh of brokenness. Something crumbled inside of us this year: A shockingly divisive election. The images of Charlottesville’s streets filled with hate-spewing marches. Torah scrolls put away out of fear of violence at a synagogue in America in the year 2017. A few miles from here in Boston the glass wall of the Holocaust memorial shattered. A local mosque attacked. Flooded streets of Houston and Florida. Immigrant children fearing their dreams shattered. How much more vandalism, how many clashes, which other cities, how many more acts of hatred? It is too much. We are exhausted. Yet, let us not grow numb to the brokenness.

The midrash teaches that *shevarim*, the broken notes, were the sound of Sarah’s cries when she heard of Abraham’s binding of Isaac, the frightening story that we will hear read in the Torah tomorrow morning. Sarah felt the pain and wept. Her cries call out to us. We, too, feel the pain.

Like Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah, he sings, "Love is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah." Brokenness is a fact of life. We were not created perfect. We were created in God's image, *b'tzelem Elohim*, and God is not perfect. We experience loss. We break and we are vulnerable. It is like the children's author, Madeline L'Engle who wrote, "When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable." (in *Daring Greatly*)

The vulnerability lens, as author and social worker, Brene Brown writes in her book, *Daring Greatly*, shapes our behavior. We are all plagued by feelings of never enough – never successful enough, never perfect enough, never thin enough, never powerful enough, never smart enough, never safe enough, never extraordinary enough. Vulnerability, she says, is the core of all emotions and feelings. "To feel is to be vulnerable."

Brown offers ways we can embrace our vulnerability, our uncertainties, and take emotional risks. For example, sharing an unpopular opinion, standing up for yourself, asking for help, saying no, starting a business, calling a friend in need, helping a partner make decisions about his or her will, calling hospice care, saying, "I love you," trying something new, deciding to have a child, learning to ride a bike or to swim, waiting for the biopsy to come back, going through a divorce, exercising in public, battling again after striking out, standing up when someone else is critical or gossiping, asking for forgiveness, having faith.

Vulnerability, Brown teaches, is speaking truth and having courage. The broken notes of *shevarim* lead us to strive to be our best imperfect selves, and to help heal the broken hearted. As Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said, "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart." From the shards of brokenness, we gain strength.

*Teruah* – nine short blasts – the sound of urgency. The events of this year are a wake-up call. We woke up to swastikas in our high schools, to crowds of white supremacists holding Confederate flags, to fiery torches of anti-Semitism and racism, hatred and intolerance. These events are a reminder of what we already know as Jews; that if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King taught, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny," whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world. The Talmud teaches that God created all of us from the first Adam, so that no human being can ever say, "I am greater than you." (Sanhedrin 37a)

Tonight, I join with my Reform rabbinic colleagues across our nation who have decided to speak with "One Voice for the New Year." "We will not be silent. We decry the moral abdication of the president who fuels hatred and division in our beloved country." This is not a political statement. It is not about parties. It is about being like the prophets before us. "We draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a warning against complacency and an impassioned call for justice. We call on you to rise up and say every day as proud Jews and proud Americans: We the people, all the people, are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine." ("One Voice for the New Year," CCAR, 2017).

It is an urgent wake up call. And Rabbi David Stern, the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, urges that we "can't hit snooze." ("*We Were Watching a New Generation of*

*Hatred Spread Its Wings,*” Sermon, August 2017) “The wake up call is about every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child.” (CCAR) We heed the call with peaceful protest, with our feet, our hands, and our hearts. We heed the call each time we come together, each time we acknowledge the worth of a fellow human being, with each kind word, and with each act of compassion. We heed the call when we show our children how to be compassionate people so that we will live to see a new generation that stands for love not hate.

Small acts of courage and kindness respond to the urgency. I recently learned of a story of courage and kindness in Austin, Texas. A temple committee was having dinner at a Greek restaurant near the end of the summer. This committee had been responsible for helping an Afghani family to settle in Austin. They were out celebrating, along with the family. They finished their dinner and were about to pay, when the waiter informed them that a total stranger had already paid for all of them – 18 committee members and 5 members of the Afghani family. The stranger knew what they were celebrating. He left no note and no name. They later learned that he was a Palestinian immigrant to Austin. (as told by Rabbi David Stern) “There is a time to break down and a time to build up.”

*Tekiah* – memory, *Shevarim* – brokenness, *Teruah* – urgency. Each is meant to be a cry of the heart. Tomorrow and at the end of Yom Kippur, we will hear one other shofar call – the *tekiah g’dolah* – the single long blast. The shofar blower takes a deep breath and holds the note for as long as he or she possibly can. The *tekiah g’dolah* is the strong and unwavering sound of hope. We hold onto it for as long as we possibly can. The *tekiah g’dolah* is the voice of optimism, of the eternal hope, *hatikvah*, that we Jews have always shared. The *tekiah g’dolah* is the vast vessel containing God’s light. Because we have to hold onto that vision, hold onto that note, and not despair. What are your sources of hope? Where do you see sparks of holy light?

To return to our mystical story of creation, Rabbi Luria taught that for every good deed we do, one spark of Divine light rises up and a broken piece is repaired. God is counting on us to restore the broken vessels, and bring light and peace into the world. “Shards of glass can cut and wound or magnify a vision, writes Terry Tempest Williams, author of *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*.” Luria presents a vision of taking that which is broken and creating something whole.

Ten days from now on Yom Kippur, we will find in our new *machzor* alongside the litany of sins, a new prayer called “*Hakarat Hatov* – Recognizing the Good.” It contains a list of good deeds. The prayer begins, “Let us affirm the good we have done; let us acknowledge our acts of healing and repair...” And it concludes, “All these have brought light and healing into the world. May these acts inspire us to renew our efforts in the year to come.” (p. 312-313)

Our mission for the next ten days and the year ahead is to fill the lines of this prayer with acts of goodness. Let us be able to look back a year from now and affirm all the good we have done. Our goodness will be the lights we hold up, sparks of love in place of fiery torches of hate. From the beginning of time, Creation was not perfect; it was broken. But in Genesis, God affirmed that each act of creation was good – *ki tov*. And with the creation of humanity, God

said, “*v’hinei tov meod* – behold, it is very good.” We wish one another, “*Shanah Tovah* – a good year. Not, “Happy New Year,” but may your year be good, may you strive for goodness.

Our *tekiah g’dolah*, our hope this year, is to affirm our inherent human goodness, and to do all that we possibly can to bring more holy light into our world. This is how we will break down and build up. Tonight, look up into the starry sky of the New Year and behold billions of fragments of light.

I will conclude with a passage from our new *machzor*, a personal invitation to each of us:

Dwell on each sound of the shofar; contemplate its meaning.

*T’kiah* –

One whole note

*Sh’varim* – *T’ruah* –

Three broken notes; nine staccato notes.

*T’kiah* –

One whole note

My return to the right path has the power to make me whole again.

*T’kiah* –

Once I was whole.

*Sh’varim* – *T’ruah* –

In the wear and tear of living, I became broken and shattered.

*T’kiah* –

My *t’shuvah* (turning) has the power to make whole again. (p. 205)

May this year of 5778 bring wholeness and healing, goodness and blessing. *Shanah Tovah*.