

## **Life on One Foot**

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

*“The doors of the aircraft have just been closed for push-back. Please set all your mobile devices to airplane mode.”*

As the Flight Attendant’s words permeated the cabin, I felt the vibration of my phone as a text came through. It was from Ron. I read his message, and my heart froze.

“I’ve been taken by ambulance to the hospital after being hit by a car. Don’t panic.”

Don’t panic??? MY GOD! My husband is being taken BY AMBULANCE and I am not supposed to panic.

So many thoughts filtered my mind.... Where was Ron? He had travelled to Charlotte, North Carolina to participate in a conference. Where was I? Well, I had gone to Vegas for the day. Was this my punishment for going to sin city?

The moment our plane touched down at LAX, I called Ron.

Yes, he had been hit by a car, and his knee was fractured. The ER doctors considered immediate surgery. This option would require weeks of rehab in Charlotte. The other option would be to get Ron back home. This would require a village of people for the transport.

I got myself to Charlotte the next day to find Ron in a someone panicked state in his 10th floor hotel room. You see, just before my arrival, a voice over the hotel intercom announced that there was a fire - that the elevators had been disconnected, and all guests had to evacuate via the stairs.

## Life on One Foot

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

While it turned out to be a false alarm, it certainly gave Ron pause. There was no way he would have been able to get out the door and down the stairs in that broken state. That's when it really hit: we, both of us, were facing a new reality of life on one foot.

There's a familiar story from the *midrash* that gave us the expression "On one Foot." Our sages teach that a *nudnik* liked to do nothing more than annoy the rabbis. He once went to the study of Rabbi Shammai and said, "I want to convert to Judaism so long as you can teach me the entire Torah *Al Regel Echat/* while standing on one foot." Shammai had more important matters to deal with and sent the nudnik on his way. So the nudnik went next to the study of Rabbi Hillel and demanded the same: "I want to convert to Judaism so long as you can teach me the the entire Torah *Al Regel Echat/* while standing on one foot."

(Have all who are able in congregation rise).

Hillel then tells the nudnik: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now go and learn."<sup>1</sup>

You see - the most valuable lesson of Judaism and in life can be learned when we only have a foot to stand on.

Friends, as we enter these Holy Days, we consider the time we have been broken - facing life when things just aren't intact. For some it may be temporary. For others it may be permanent. Some face terminal illness. Others suffer chronic conditions. There are those with silent, mental disabilities. Some here have become guinea pigs to medications. Some suffer addictions. And there are those with broken hearts. There are some who will be healed. There are some that won't. And if there are some who

---

<sup>1</sup> Talmud Shabbat 31a

## Life on One Foot

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

don't personally face any of these, there is someone in your life who does. And so each of us, in our own way, learns to face the world "*Al Regel Echat/ On One Foot.*"

Judaism is no stranger to brokenness. If we pause to consider some of our most sacred rituals and symbols, they all embody broken moments:

- The **breaking** of the glass at a wedding
- The **breaking** of the middle MATZA at the Passover Seder
- The **broken** sounds of the shofar blasts (*Shevarim* and *T'ruah*)
- **Breaking** the fast after Yom Kippur

The broken symbol I find most meaningful is from our Torah. It's that scene when Charlton Heston - I mean Moses - sees the Children of Israel dancing around the Golden Calf. He takes the two tablets of the Ten Divine Statements, and shatters them on the ground. Moses then ascends Mt. Sinai to have a word with God - and to receive a second set of tablets.

Now - what do we usually do when a holy Book falls to the ground? We kiss it. But Moses does more...

Our Talmud teaches: *luchot ve'shivrey luchot munachim be'aron*" (Talmud Bava Batra 14b). Moses gingerly places each piece of the broken tablet, fragment by fragment- into the holy Ark along side the new set of tablets that were intact.

You see - even the most broken, the most shattered, the most torn are holy. God embraces the broken right along with the whole, not distinguishing one from the other. So too, if you are broken, inside or out. If you have a blemish, an illness, a disease. If you feel abandoned. If you wonder, "why me?" You are holy. You belong.

## Life on One Foot

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

But this journey is so often accompanied with difficulties. For Ron, every crevice on the sidewalk became the Grand Canyon, every puddle in the road became the Pacific Ocean, and every stair to climb became Mt. Everest. And one day, as we struggled through this journey, Ron looked defeated and said “Humans are weaker than we think we are.” But in that instant, Ron’s eyes grew determined, as he hoisted himself up our stairs each step a milestone, he continued: **“Yes, we are weaker than we think we are, but we are also stronger than we ever thought possible.”** And with that, Ron began the first day of the rest of his life.

It was this brokenness that opened the door to a world reborn. Just as a seed must break through its shell to grow, so too do we often go through times of incredible brokenness - to see the potential unfold before us.

I want to share a few stories that can further explain what I mean:

The first is about **Sam**, a painter who was on assignment in Washington DC to create a portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette. He received a message that his wife in Connecticut had become seriously ill after giving birth to their child. He rushed home, but by the time he made it, it was too late. His wife had already died. Heartbroken and wounded to his soul, Sam vowed he would find a way to get life-and-death messages delivered more efficiently.

Nearly 20 years later, the year being 1844, Sam - Samuel Morse that is, sent the first telegraphed message in history via what is now known as Morse Code. Now, you may know that Morse code breaks each letter down into a series of dots and dashes. (My father, a radio ham, taught me Morse Code as a child. In fact, to this day, he often calls me: “Da-Da- dit-dit, Morse Code for “Z.”) It is truly a miracle when broken dots and dashes transform into meaning. Samuel Morse healed the future through those broken letters.

## Life on One Foot

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

This second story was originally shared by Rabbi Wayne Dosick, in his book entitled, When Life Hurts. Rabbi Dosick recounts a concert of violinist Yitzchak Perlman at Lincoln Center in 1995. Childhood polio left Perlman only able to walk with braces and crutches. So when he took the stage, the journey was often slow and quite arduous. In this particular concert, in the middle of the performance, one of Perlman's strings broke with a snap that sent waves through the audience. After a brief pause, Perlman nodded for the orchestra to resume. He tucked the violin under his chin and continued to play the entire piece, adopting new fingering, and not missing a single note. At the conclusion, there was a moment of absolute silence. And then a thunderous roar of applause like never before. When the cheering finally subsided, Perlman spoke to his fans and simply said, "It is my job to make music with what remains." Yitzchak Perlman transformed the soul in spite of a his broken reality.

The third story is a more personal story: **Danny** was born with Downs Syndrome. From childhood, he used a wheelchair. Danny would come to religious school every week with a family member as well as an aide. During our song sessions, there was never a question that Danny was in the room. His smile and laughter were contagious. Many thought it would be out of the question for Danny to become a Bar Mitzvah. But they were proven wrong. With long and steady preparation, Danny was able to learn a few words from the Torah as well as many of the prayers. In fact, the only thing we had to do differently turned out to be one of the most moving parts of our service. You see, in every Torah service we do a *hakafah*, in which we march the Torah into the congregation. At a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the celebrant leads this honor. But how do you do this when the celebrant is in a wheelchair?

Easy.... Rather than bring the Torah to the people, we brought the people to the Torah. We invited the entire congregation to process in a huge circle onto the Bimah, where

## Life on One Foot

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

they could touch the Torah and give Danny a kiss! Danny's smile glowed into our hearts, breaking a deep darkness with light,

Look, the ancestors in our Torah did not accept limitations! Adam was missing a rib yet tilled the soil. Noah was an old man yet he built an ark. Sarah was beyond menopause yet bore Isaac. Jacob had a broken hip, yet he travelled throughout the region. Moses had a speech impediment, yet he became the grand orator of the Bible. Even with our brokenness, we can not be held back. And maybe, just maybe, it's precisely our brokenness that makes us holy.

When we go through these trials, there are many lessons along the way ...

To accept the **kindnesses** of strangers - and to pay it forward

That being a *patient* patient is really, really hard

That we are **inventive**, finding new (or perhaps ancient ways) to climb stairs, cook meals, prop open doors, and put on socks.

Not to jump to conclusions about others. You never know if they have a disability that is not obvious.

And perhaps most important: **Life can change in an instant.** With the haunting question "*Who shall live and who shall die?*" we take a deep breath and say out loud: "**I will break through my limitations - while embracing each moment in time - and create meaning along my journey.**"

One final story:

*A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.*

## **Life on One Foot**

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

*For a full two years, this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments.*

*But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.*

*After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream.*

*"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you".*

*The bearer asked, "Why? What are you ashamed of?"*

*The Pot replied, "For these past two years I am able to deliver only half of my load - because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you don't get full value for your efforts".*

*The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."*

*As they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it somewhat. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.*

*The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about*

## **Life on One Foot**

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2018/ 5779

*your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."*<sup>2</sup>

Friends, each of us has a flaw, a crack, a blemish. We may feel useless in some ways. And it can be painful and demoralizing. But we should never shut our eyes to the miracles that can unfold. And we may never realize how our lives become light for those around us.

Folks, on the anniversary of Ron's accident, we are going to climb the Baldwin Hills Overlook. I will have trouble keeping up with Ron, as he is in better shape than ever. We will listen to the music of Perlman on the way there. We will take notice of the flowers on the hike up. We will call my father and communicate in Morse Code from the top. And we will offer a *shehechyanu*, for life **al regel Echat /on one foot** put us through hell - but revealed Heaven.

Perhaps Leonard Cohen said it best: "There is a crack in everything — that's how the light gets in."

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.moralstories.org/the-cracked-pot/>