

## A B R O K E N O P E N H E A R T

*Yom Kippur Yizkor – Wednesday, October 12, 2016*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, KS*

*Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

Many years ago, while in Israel, I stopped by a roadside stand and bought a huge, gorgeous watermelon. Now, watermelon is probably my favorite fruit. And anyone who has been to Israel knows that their watermelon – indeed, all their fruit – is especially flavorful. As I carried it back to the car, I tripped over a rock. The watermelon flew out of my hands and – yes, you know, it smashed to the ground.

I stood there disbelieving my bad luck. It was broken open. It could not be salvaged. As I started to walk away, the Palestinian proprietor of the stand came up to me. He asked what was wrong, why I wasn't picking up the watermelon?

With a mixture of embarrassment, annoyance, and confusion, I replied, "Isn't it obvious? The watermelon broke."

His response remains with me to this day. "No, it didn't," he said. "It just broke open."

It just broke open!

He was right. It had. And all that wondrous fruit was sitting there waiting to be consumed. I focused on what I had lost. He looked at the watermelon and saw what was still there.

Fast forward many years to a restaurant here in Overland Park. I was having lunch with a congregant. He asked me, "How are you?" It was shortly after my step-father had died, and I said, "I have a

broken heart." When I explained what had happened in my life, he responded just as my Palestinian proprietor did. He said, "Maybe your heart's not broken. Maybe it's just broken open."

And yes, he was right, as well.

When our loved ones die, a wave of emotions rolls over us. Like an actual wave, those emotions are powerful. They pull us off our feet, whip us around in the undercurrent. And we struggle to get our heads – and our hearts – above the water. We gasp for air and frantically seek our bearings. We say our hearts are broken.

But are they?

Perhaps, instead, they are just broken open. And whether like a ripe watermelon dropped before you in the summer sun or a warm loaf of bread on a cold night that is broken open or like a loved one's letter whose seal is broken open...what is revealed inside is something that equally overwhelms and awakens senses long asleep.

About a year ago, David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, asked in an op-ed piece how folks found their life purposes. He received a note from Greg Sunter in Brisbane, Australia. Greg wrote, "Four years ago, my wife of 21 years passed away as the result of a brain tumor. Her passage from diagnosis to death was less than six months. As shocking as that time was, almost as shocking was the sense of

personal growth and awakened understanding that has come from the experience for me through reflection and inner work — to a point that I feel almost guilty about how significant my own growth has been as a result of my wife's death."

When I first read this, my own heart opened...understanding even more fully the words spoken to me in the restaurant two years ago. For like many of you, whenever I have lost one whom I have loved – family, friend, congregant – there is a palpable increase in the emotional reservoir I carry within. I feel more. More pain. More love. A more acute awareness of life and its precarious nature. I recognize that even in my personal sorrow, I want to hug more. I want to help more.

Greg Sunter's reflections led me to discover Parker Palmer, and his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*.

A Quaker elder, educator, and writer, Palmer says that there are two kinds of broken hearts: the first is "an unresolved wound we carry with us for a long time, sometimes tucking it away and feeding it." The second is a different way to consider what a broken heart might mean. He says, "Imagine that small clenched fist of a heart 'broken open' into the largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy."

He then shares a Chasidic tale where a disciple asks the rabbi, "[When we recite the V'ahavta, we say: Set these words, 'al levavecha.'] Why does Torah tell us to place these words *upon* our hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?" The rabbi answers, "It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on

top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in ..."

And that is what has happened with each of us. When our hearts have broken open because our loved one died, space is opened up. Into that space falls the holy words and images, the memories of times we have shared, of love and support given and received.

This past year, I once more entered into the world of mourning, as my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, Ralph, died. I was in Israel at the time and flew home for the funeral, to be with my sister and our family. On the plane home, I had 12 hours of solitude to contemplate this loss and was struggling in my aloneness. A caring flight attendant came over, saw that I was weepy, and asked if there was anything she could do. I told her that my brother-in-law died and I was anxious to be with family to talk about Ralph, to tell stories of a man I honored and loved. What did the attendant do? She invited me to the galley, sat me down in a crew seat, gave me something to drink, and then sat down next to me, and asked me to tell her about Ralph. It broke open my heart. And in my tears, I told her about an amazing human being, who had touched my life and changed the lives of my sister, her children, and our entire family for the better.

Yes, my heart had been broken open. And in that space that was exposed, although raw, I was both able to rediscover the gifts Ralph had given me – had given my family – and was able to appreciate and accept the gift given to me by the flight attendant...the gift of compassion.

To quote Jamie Greenwood, an online blogger: "Know this: A broken heart is an open heart. It is in the breaking, when our

hearts are peeled back on themselves, that our truths have passage to come in and out. If we're lucky, our hearts will break [open] over and over again to reveal new ways of being, of thinking, and of loving...

Yes, there is pain every time we're cracked open. Immeasurable pain. And with each break, each sting of pain, our hearts are able to expand and strengthen our capacity to love more and more and more."<sup>1</sup>

And here is the P.S. to my flight back for Ralph's funeral.

After I returned to my seat – I was sitting on the aisle – the woman across from me asked if I was alright...I had been gone for over half an hour. I explained what had occurred, why I had needed to talk, and she started to cry. I asked why? She said she was just returning from a funeral in Israel...for her father...and because she was a woman, she was not permitted to say kaddish at the grave. I told her who I was and what I did...and asked if she would like me to join her to say kaddish for her father. I found my compassionate flight attendant, explained the situation, and she gave us a couple of minutes in the galley alone. There, 35,000 feet above the ground, somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, in the middle of an airplane's kitchen galley, two Jewish souls recited kaddish – one for a father; one for a brother-in-law – and our hearts were broken open.

\* \* \*

When I think of my smashed watermelon...when I think of our broken open hearts...I am reminded of the story told of the world's creation, the tale we shared during our Rosh Hashanah morning family service. When it was time to create this world in which we live, God placed sparks of God's goodness and love in containers, for the world could not exist without them. Yet, the goodness and love could not be restricted to a closed container. That is when a cataclysmic accident occurred, what our tradition called "shevirat ha-kaylim," the breaking of the vessels. When the cosmic containers broke, God's goodness and love exploded out...and they hang there in the world waiting for us to collect them, to hold on to them, to share them.

Our hearts, also called vessels, are the ones that have broken open. It was a cataclysmic event for each of us. Our loved ones – those whom we cherished and who cherished us – left. And as our hearts broke open, there was great pain. But goodness and love and memories were exposed. And it is now ours to hold onto those gifts and use them to heal ourselves and others. May our hearts continue to expand and open, as we share the gifts given to us by those who have gone, with those who remain.

Now, let us turn in our prayerbooks to p. 492, and rise as a community. Let us recite Kaddish and thank God for allowing our hearts not to be broken...but to be broken open.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://tinybuddha.com/blog/broken-heart-open-heart/>