

“LIKENED TO A BROKEN CLAY SHARD”

A STUDY GUIDE ON BROKEN-HEARTEDNESS AND HEALING IN UNETANEH TOKEF

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1) The Unetaneh Tokef prayer on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur lists numerous metaphors depicting humans' fragility. How do you understand them? In particular, what feelings come up for you to see that we are to be compared to broken clay shards?

Let us give significance to the sanctity of this day...

Human beings -- their origin is dust and their end is dust; by their very lives they obtain their bread.

Likened to a broken clay shard,

like a dried out blade of grass,

and like a faded flower,

Like a fleeting shadow,

and like a disappearing cloud,

and like a gust of wind,

and like dust flowering,

and like a vanishing dream.

But You are the Sovereign God, living and lasting!

וּנְתַנֶּה תְּקוּף קִדְשֵׁי הַיּוֹם...
אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעֶפֶר. וְסוּפוֹ לְעֶפֶר. בְּנִפְשׁוֹ יָבִיא
לְחַמוֹ.
מְשׁוּל כְּחֶרֶס הַנִּשְׁבֵּר.
כְּחֶצִיר יָבֵשׁ.
וְכֶצִיץ נוֹבֵל.
כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר.
וְכַעֲנַן כָּלָה.
וְכִרוּחַ נוֹשֵׁבֶת.
וְכֶאֱבֶק פּוֹרֵחַ.
וְכַחֲלוֹם יְעוּף:
וְאַתָּה הוּא מֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם:

2) Tell a story about a broken clay shard: What is its past and what is its future?

3) Let's look at a story about a broken clay shard in Halakha (Jewish law). For background, let's look at the basic laws of ritual impurity (טְמֵאָה) and purity (טְהוּרָה) in the Torah:

VaYikra/Leviticus 11:29-35

The following shall be impure for you from among the things that swarm on the earth: the mole, the mouse, and great lizards of every variety; the gecko, the land crocodile, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon.

Those are for you the impure among all the swarming things; whoever touches them when they are dead shall be impure until evening. And anything on which one of them falls when dead shall be impure: be it any article of wood, or a cloth, or a skin, or a sack—any such article that can be put to use shall be dipped in water, and it shall remain impure until evening; then it shall be pure. And anything on which one of them falls when dead shall be impure: be it any article of wood, or a cloth, or a skin, or a sack—any such article that can be put to use shall be dipped in water, and it shall remain impure until evening; then it shall be pure.

And if any of those falls into an earthen vessel, everything inside it shall be impure and [the vessel] itself you shall break.

זֶה לָכֶם הַטְּמֵא בַשָּׂרִץ הַשָּׂרִץ עַל-הָאָרֶץ הַחַדָּד
וְהַעֲכָבֵר וְהַצֶּבֶל לְמִינֵהוּ: וְהָאֲנָקָה וְהַכֹּחַ וְהַלְטָאָה
וְהַחֲמֹט וְהַתְּנַשְׁמֹת: אֵלֶּה הַטְּמֵאִים לָכֶם בְּכֹל-
הַשָּׂרִץ כֹּל-הַנִּגְעַ בָּהֶם בְּמָתָם יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרֶב:
וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-יִפֹּל-עָלָיו מֵהֶם אִ בְּמָתָם יִטְמָא מְכֹל-
כְּלִי-עֵץ אוֹ בְּגָד אוֹ-עוֹר אוֹ שֶׁק כֹּל-כְּלִי אֲשֶׁר-
יַעֲשֶׂה מִלְּאֲכָה בָּהֶם

בַּמַּיִם יוֹבֵא וְיִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרֶב וְטָהַר:

וְכֹל-כְּלִי-חֶרֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִפֹּל מֵהֶם אֶל-תּוֹכוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר
בְּתוֹכוֹ יִטְמָא וְאֵתוֹ תִּשְׁבֵּר:

With that background in mind, what does this classic, legal text teach about broken clay shards?

Mishna, Tractate Kelim (Vessels) 2:1

(c. 200 CE, Land of Israel)

Clay vessels and lye vessels are equal in the manner of their impurity: they can be rendered impure and they render [objects] impure in their interior space; and render impure by [contact] with their exterior, but do not become impure by [contact] from the outside; and their breaking is their purification.

כְּלֵי חֶרֶס וְכֵלֵי נֶתֶר, טְמֵאֲתָן שׁוּהוּ. מִתְטַמְּאִין וּמִטְמָאִין בְּאֵוִיר, וּמִטְמָאִין מֵאֲחוּרֵיהֶן, וְאֵינָן מִטְמָאִין מִגְבֵּיהֶן, וְשִׁבְרֵתָן הִיא טְהוּרָתָן:

Does this mishna affect how you understand the metaphor of the broken, clay shard in *Unetaneh Tokef*? What happens to that metaphor once you know this law?

4) What are we good for if we're like broken, clay shards? How does God see us? Take a look at the following midrash:

Midrash Pesikta deRav Kahana, #24 - Shuva

(c. 400 C.E., Land of Israel)

Rabbi Abba bar Yudan said: That which [God] disqualified in animals, [God] affirmed in humans: With animals, [God] disqualified animals that are blind or have broken bones, or maimed, or with tumors (VaYikra/Leviticus 22:22), but affirmed in humans: "a broken and crushed heart, [God, you will not spurn]" (Psalms 51:19).

Rabbi Alexandri said: If a commoner makes use of a broken vessel, it's a disgrace to them, but the Holy One is not like that, but uses only broken vessels: "YHWH is close to the broken-hearted" (Psalms 34:19); "[God is] The Healer of the broken-hearted (Psalms 147:3); "A broken and crushed heart, God, you will not spurn..." (Psalms 51:19).

Therefore, Hoshe'a exhorts Israel, saying to them, "Return, Israel" (Hoshe'a 14:2).

[ה]...א"ר אבא בר יודן מָה שְׁפֹסֵל בְּבֵהֵמָה הַכֹּשִׁיר בְּאָדָם, בְּבֵהֵמָה פֹּסֵל עוֹרֵת אוֹ שְׁבוּר אוֹ חָרוּץ אוֹ יִבְלֵת (ויקרא כב:כב), הַכֹּשִׁיר בְּאָדָם: "לֵב נִשְׁבֵּר וְנִדְכָה..." (תהלים נא:יט).
א"ר אלכסנדרי ההדיוט אִם מִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ הוּא בְּכֵלֵי שְׁבוּר גַּנְיִי הוּא לוֹ, אֲבֵל הֵקִי אֵינּוּ כֵן, כָּל שִׁימוּשׁוֹ כְּלֵים שְׁבוּרִים: "קָרוֹב יְיָ לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי לֵב" (תהלים לד:יט), "הֵרַפָּא לְשְׁבוּרֵי לֵב" (תהלים קמז:ג), "לֵב נִשְׁבֵּר וְנִדְכָה אֱלֻקִים לֹא תִבְזֶה..." (תהלים נא:יט).
לְפִיכֵן הוֹשַׁע מִזְהִיר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם, "שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל" (הושע יד:ב).

According to this midrash, what is the significance of comparing ourselves to broken clay shards in *Unetaneh Tokef*?

5. One final thought: a comparison, for context.

Midrash Pesikta deRav Kahana, #24 - Shuva

(c. 400 C.E., Land of Israel)

"Your fountains will spread abroad, out in the streets, streams of water" (Proverbs 5:16): Words of Torah are compared to water....But perhaps, just as water does not

"יְפִוצוּ מֵעִינֵיךָ [חֻצָה בְּרַחֲבוֹת פְּלָגֵי מַיִם]" (משלי ה:טז) - נִמְשְׁלוּ דְבָרֵי תוֹרָה לַמַּיִם...אוֹ מֵהַמַּיִם אֵין מִשְׁמַחִים אֶת הַלֵּב כִּי דְבָרֵי תוֹרָה אֵין מִשְׁמַחִים אֶת הַלֵּב? תִּלְמוּד לומר "כִּי טוֹבִים דְּדִיךְ מֵיַיִן" (שה"ש א:ב)...מֵהַ יַיִן אֵי אִיפְשָׁר לוֹ

rejoice the heart, so words of Torah do not rejoice the heart? Scripture tells us: “for Your love is better than wine” (Song of Songs 1:2)...And just as it is impossible for wine to be preserved in vessels of gold or in vessels of silver, but only in the lowest of vessels, those of clay, so too, words of Torah cannot be preserved in one who is in one’s own eyes like a gold vessel or a silver vessel, but only in those who are in their own eyes like the lowest of vessels, like clay vessels..

להתקיים לא בכלי כסף ולא בכלי זהב אלא
בירוד שבכלים בכלי חרס כך דברי תורה אין
מתקיימים במי שהוא בעיניו ככלי כסף וככלי
זהב אלא במי שהוא בעיניו כירוד שבכלים ככלי
...חרס

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