The Missing Piece

Rabbi Sim Glaser
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5764 years ago, as the Torah relates, the world came into being. Created, some will tell you, by a perfect God who had once inhabited all of space and time but decided it was time for some company. God pulled back allowing room for the universe to come into being.

Our tradition is quick to tell us that things didn’t go so smoothly from that point on. Jewish mysticism proposes that not unlike a dinner party gone awry, the vessels God had designed and set out to contain the extraordinary emanation of divine light burst apart, causing the fragments of the new universe to be thrown every which way. Missing pieces eternally desiring their way back to wholeness.

In short, we learn that in creating the universe God, well, God messed up. Read on and we see that in the six days of creation some pretty clever stuff is manufactured. Creatures that fly and crawl. God sees it and says: Hey, it is good! A toasty sun to make things grow, and moon and stars to guide by night - again… thumbs up! Fruit bearing seeds that will, upon planting, yield more of the same delicious fruit. What a concept!

Then on the sixth day a being is created in God’s own likeness, and God says – Hey, uh, hmmm. Like the parent who strives to shape their offspring in their own image, and then sees them turn into teenagers, God seems a bit surprised that the kid has problems.

A very curious beginning from a God who we have been taught is the paragon of perfection. One of the most frequently asked question of rabbis is – if God is perfect and all powerful and all knowing, why then does God permit atrocities? Why are there Holocausts? 9/11’s? School shootings? Hurricane disasters? After years of listening to this question I have come to the conclusion that to believe in God as a sentient, thinking entity, you have to understand that God is flawed. Imperfect.

This should comfort those of us who have spent much of our life chasing after perfection. Since we are created in the image of an imperfect God, there cannot have been, nor will there ever be, a perfect human being. We are a part of those primordial broken fragments, ever in search of some sort of completion.

And this is precisely how it needs to be.
The days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur afford us a good opportunity to meditate on the missing part of ourselves. For it is the very knowledge of our incompleteness that drives us to do extraordinary and wonderful things.

Judaism shares a great deal of wisdom regarding broken fragments and missing pieces. Think about our Jewish rituals. What is the first act of husband and wife following their becoming wed underneath the huppah? (er, no, that’s the second act, you get arrested for doing that under the huppah!) – I’m talking about the shattering of a glass as a symbol that the search for wholeness is only beginning, and the challenge that marriage presents to two imperfect human beings.

When a Sukkah goes up it is quite purposely missing an entire wall - a symbol of the frailty of our home lives, and a hint that when you peek into another family’s open door you discover that nobody has it entirely together.

Jewish mysticism teaches that when we build a new house, we are to leave a piece of it unfinished. This is to remind us that there is always work left to be done. A Challah truly kosher for Shabbat must have the corner broken off and burnt before baking the rest. The Passover Seder that cannot see completion until the missing piece of the Afikoman is returned. And speaking of rituals and missing pieces – don’t even get me started on circumcision! (It’s a personal thing)

Judaism may have formulated the “missing pieces” philosophy, but we don’t have a monopoly on it. The great artists of the renaissance left a bit of their canvas unpainted to impress upon the viewer that no human being can create something entirely perfect. Look closely at the authentic Persian rug lying in your living room – it has one little stitch missing to remain imperfect.

Shel Silverstein spins a fine little fable – The Missing Piece - about a circle that has a large triangular wedge cut out of it. More than anything, this circle wants to be whole, but as it cruised about the world looking for its missing part, it proceeded pretty slowly – kachunk – kachunk – kachunk – enabling it to admire flowers and butterflies and sunshine along the way.

In its plodding travels the circle found many of approximate compatibility, but no exact fit. Finally the circle locates what it believes is the perfect fit, and it finds it can roll so fast that it cannot see or appreciate anything along the way. In the end, the circle found it didn’t really like the world as much as it used to, and discarded the “missing piece” in favor of a flawed, but more profound existence – one that allows it to truly experience the world.

Another similar story comes from Indian tradition about a water-bearer who carries two pots on either side of the pole balanced on his shoulders. One of them is cracked and loses half its water every trip he makes. For years the water-bearer delivered only 1½ pots of water to his master’s house. The perfect pot was very proud of itself for always
completing the mission, while the “crackpot” was ashamed of its imperfection that caused it to achieve only half of what it was supposed to achieve, and felt like he needed to apologize to the water-bearer for causing him to not get the full value from his efforts. The water-bearer feels badly for the “crackpot” and says – next trip we make, take a look at the side of the road that I carry you on when we come up from the stream. I have always known of your flaw, and I took advantage of it every day by planting flower seeds along the path on your side. When they grew I would pick them and decorate my master’s table. Without your flaw, there would not have been this great beauty to decorate his house.

Perfection has had a dubious distinction in many civilizations. The ancient Aztecs, for example, used to have sports tournaments just like we do. But while some sources say the Aztec teams would literally play to the death, other accounts have it that at the end of their world series or final four, it was customary to sacrifice the winning team to the Aztec God, as though to say that such perfection has no place in a human world. How’s that for incentive? Look out Twins!

Our Bible is never shy about sharing the flawed characteristics of its greatest figures. My colleague Rabbi Joseph Edelheit shared with me some curious insights regarding three of the most important figures in Biblical history, Abraham, Moses and the great King David. Avraham, Avinu – our father, Moshe – Rabbeinu – our great teacher, and Melech David – powerful King, and how if you hold them up against the three basic pillars of Judaism: God, Torah, and Israel, you see that each of them is missing one of those fundamental pieces. Think you can figure out who is missing what?

Ok. Check your answers against this - Abraham has the God thing going. Just look at that meshugganeh story we just heard. Hears God’s voice, literally discovers monotheism. And as for Israel? We know that Abraham is promised the gift of Israel as a reward for being an agent for his God. What then does he lack? Torah. To be completely fair, Abraham had to lack Torah – it didn’t come along for about 500 years after his death. The Torah is the guideline for behavior with one another; a manual for relationships. Abraham was arguably flawed in that area. Here’s a man who, to save his own skin, gave his wife away to Pharaoh, pretending Sara was his sister. Or lied to his son: Hey Isaac, how about a nice walk up that mountain for a really different kind of sacrifice? Or my personal favorite – Our big family doesn’t seem to be getting along, perhaps I should banish my concubine and her son Ishmael out into the wilderness to die of starvation – yeah, that’s the ticket! Without the derech eretz – the basic elements of behavior the Torah teaches us about living in a world of humanity, Abraham is but half a person.

And Moses? Nobody in human history knew God as well as Moses. We are told that Moses confronted God panim el panim – face to face. As for Torah – man, Moses wrote the Torah! What is Moses missing? Israel. Any student of Torah in this room should be able to inform you that Moses never made it into the physical land of Israel. But more importantly, he lacks an understanding of the people Israel. He knows them only as children, never being allowed to see them mature. As he retreated into himself his own
family crumbled. He could not deal with their exhaustion, their thirst, their ingratitude for their freedom. For all his extraordinary teaching and leading, Moses the man never really stood within community. He is always the guy on the outside. Israel was Moses’ missing piece.

David is arguably the most powerful, charismatic public figure in the entire Bible. Strikes Goliath dead with a single rock from a sling shot when he is but a boy. A victorious warrior in battle, amassing more land that any ruler before him. David is the King that brings the people Israel to Jerusalem unifying them eternally. But when it comes time to build the great Temple in Jerusalem, David is denied that honor. He has too much blood on his hands. Blood from excessive campaigns of war. Blood from a man he had murdered to win over his wife, the beautiful Batsheva. In the course of David’s violent and lascivious career he moved further and further away from heaven until he was unreachable by God. All power with no soul. All appetite, no conscience.

So there you have it. Abe, Moishe and Dave, three ultimate Jewish heroes each missing a huge component part of Jewish destiny. Each figure lacks a key part of our national fate or destiny. Why then, do they still inhabit such an immensely prominent place in the Jewish psyche?

Because it is in their very incompleteness that they became powerfully holy. Abraham struggling for guidance and his constant misunderstanding of what God wanted of him yielded the fruit of a remarkably intentional and prescriptive religion which to this day is our blessing. Moses, endeavoring to understand his role in community led him to bequeath us a book that constantly reminds us that all of living is found in relationship. And David, obsessed with power and accumulation with the material left us with 150 Psalms basically begging God for re-admittance.

Our tradition teaches us that there were two sets of commandments. Moses smashed the first set in anger, and after he calmed down went and retrieved the second set, which, by the way, God made him cut from the mountainside himself. When they set the new tablets in the ark, the people were at a loss as to what to do with the broken fragments. The rabbis teach that God instructed them to put the broken pieces in the ark alongside the whole set. Why? Well for one thing, the first set was written by God, and for another, they remind us that we are all broken fragments of something sacred. Even the broken parts are sacred.

Another Jewish source tells us that when the skin of the tree becomes scarred, it is that very spot that allows for new growth.

Earlier in the service we asked: What will be our destiny this year? Who will suffer by fire? Who by trial? Who by loneliness? Who by illness? Who by vanity? But let’s add this question: Who this year will be empowered and inspired by what it is they are missing? Who will turn it right around and use their loss as a strength? Which cancer patient will start a support group for others fighting disease? Which lonely and rejected person will reach out to someone else in their religious community and say: Hey – been
there, felt that! Who, like Elie Wiesel will turn their agony ridden past into a source of hope for another’s future? Which child who has been assigned by peers to the “unpopular” group at school will befriend someone else who is there? Which businessperson who remembers the fight to become successful will give a leg up to someone struggling in our impacted economy? Who still feeling the pain from losing a parent will help relieve the choking air of sadness that another is feeling?

The sages teach us that God treasures damaged goods. We are imperfect, we are flawed, and thus, we are higher than the angels. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav once said: There is nothing so whole as a broken heart. There is nothing so exquisitely human as a person who struggles to find their missing piece. In that struggle may we discover our greatest strength.

Two long years ago, it seemed as if the world was virtually crumbling, fragmenting almost beyond recognition, I went to visit my son at NYU to cheer him up. We decided to lift our spirits with a visit to the Natural History museum uptown. There they have a 360-foot walk called the Cosmic Pathway which tries to give you a grasp of the enormous age and size of the universe which is probably 13 billion or so years old. Each step you take along the pathway represents 75 million years. When you reach the end of the path, the last marked distance is the width of a human hair. That width represents, in the scale of the total exhibit, the entirety of human existence.

And I remember thinking how incredibly young humanity is in the great scheme of things. The universe has been trying to put itself back together for billions and billions of years, while we, the latest variety of creation have been at it for a very short time. We are only beginning to understand.