



Torah for Turbulent Times **"If It's Not Broken, Break It"**

A “broken letter” literally cut in half in the Torah? That’s right, this past week’s portion includes something unique. In the word “shalom” one letter in Hebrew, the *vav*, is cut in half. (see below) Rather than fix it, the tradition is to preserve it. What might it mean that even the word in Hebrew for peace, “shalom,” contains a broken letter? Why wouldn’t we just fix it? Isn’t our instinct to mend anything that’s broken, especially a letter in the Torah? Perhaps the letter is a reminder of what we already know, that is, in some ways everything is broken. And maybe, just maybe, the Torah is ahead of its time. That is, instead of a model that relies on how it’s always been done, the nudge is to push forward, give it a turn, and break it even if it’s not broken - all in order to see something differently and to innovate for the future.

One image I found that really conveys this idea is that of the horse and buggy, along with this quote. “Imagine if you waited until it was broken to fix it. You’d be commuting to work in one of these.” In our times many questions, small and large, loom over our heads. When will this end? Will school be back on? What day is it? When will we be able to do this or that again? Etc, etc, etc? Brokenness is an aspect of the reality of our world and even of our most sacred text. On the one hand, it’s important to name how it can make us feel: deflated, depressed, down and distraught (just to name a few). On the other hand, as the saying goes, there are two sides to every coin. Innovation encourages us to grow, thrive, and meet the needs of the future by not getting stuck in old patterns, habits, and ways of being in the world. As an example, take Jewish worship. Even when we ONE DAY go back to being “live and in the room together,” many have suggested that we stick with simultaneously streaming or zooming. Of course, just like with theater, it’s not exactly the same experience and it’s a challenge to feel the “soul” of the room. But, it certainly has some advantages like accessibility and convenience.

Returning to the Torah portion, we find that peace comes at a price. In our story, Pinchas takes matters into his own hands with a particularly violent gesture in order to stop a plague (Numbers 25:7-8). His problematic action helps to end the plague and he is rewarded by G-d with a “*brit shalom*/covenant of peace.” It’s literally and figuratively a broken peace, but it’s a peace that is nonetheless better than nothing. When we experience brokenness, something we confront each and every day in some way, it makes us sad. But, perhaps we can name it and reframe it, like the broken letter in the Torah. If we’re encouraged to innovate and plan for our future by breaking even that which is not broken, how much more so in order to ensure a healthy, holy, and holistic world for us and for those that follow.

-Rabbi Mark

