

The Broken Bucket

Originally by Rabbi Jason Rosenberg

Additional inspiration from Cantor Ellen Dreskin

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Shana Tova! Our new year begins and so we need to prepare ourselves for the powerful concepts of self-reflection and growth. We are just starting out, so it is advisable to pace ourselves. I've always felt that at Rosh Hashanah evening, we need an entry point to these Days of Awe. A sermon, a modern innovation for the holidays, is really a story or usually many stories linked together to teach and reveal. As has become our custom, instead of several stories that make up one sermon, let's start with a sermon that is actually one big classic story. Told in many versions, I am indebted to Rabbi Jason Rosenberg and Cantor Ellen Dreskin for their inspiration for "The Broken Bucket."

Do you remember when indoor plumbing was first introduced? Of course you don't. It was in 1829 that 26-year-old Isaiah Rogers excited the world when he demonstrated indoor plumbing at the Tremont Hotel in Boston. While it may have taken a while to make it to most homes in the US, we barely imagine a world without it.

This story takes place when no one had indoor plumbing. In the home of an older woman who lived by herself. To get any fresh water, she had to go a local river, a trip she made every day.

Each morning, she went to get water. She took a long pole. Then she took an old bucket and hung it from the left side of the pole. Then she took another bucket and hung it from the right side. Always the same buckets on the same sides of the pole.

The walk down the dirt path from her house wasn't terribly long and was much easier heading to the river when the buckets were empty. At the river, she would take the pole off her shoulders, gently and carefully take each bucket off the pole. One at a time, she would dip each bucket in the river, filling it with cold, fresh water. Then, just as carefully, she would place each bucket back on the pole, oh so carefully lift the pole up, and back onto her shoulders, and turn to make her way to walk up the path, a bit more slowly, to her little house at the end of the dirt path.

As she walked home, the left-hand bucket held the water as you expect it would. But the right-hand bucket, it had a small crack in the bottom. As

soon as the woman started walking down the path, the bucket would start leaking. A steady persistent drip. By the time the woman reached home, the bucket would be half empty.

Nothing changed the next day. The pole, the buckets on their usual sides, the right-hand bucket dripping out water. The days passed. The months passed. The years passed. Nothing changed. Until one day, just as they arrived at the river, the right-hand bucket sighed.

This surprised the woman. She had never heard a bucket sigh before. Then the bucket spoke. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry."

"What are you sorry about?" the woman asked the bucket.

"That I keep leaking. You work so hard to bring water to the house, and I am half-empty by the time we get home. A bucket has one job and I can't do it correctly."

"Well, you do bring home half a bucket full of water."

"Don't mock me. I know what I am. I'm a failure. I was meant to carry water. I can't do it. I have this crack, this defect. I'm a failure at the one thing I'm meant to do."

The old woman looked down at the bucket, this bucket which had been on her right side, for all these years, with a look on her face which was a mix of sadness and caring. After a long moment, she began to speak. "My good friend. I am so, so sorry. I had no idea that you felt this way. You've been suffering all this time, and you have no idea at all, do you?"

"What you mean? No idea about what?"

"Here. Let me show you."

She gently picked up the bucket and filled it with water. She put it on the pole as usual. She added the left-hand bucket filled up on its typical side. As they walked down the dirt path home, she said to the left-hand bucket, "What do you see?"

"What do I see?" said left-hand bucket, who had never spoken before. "I see dirt. I see the path. I see the same thing I see every day."

“That’s right,” said the woman. “Now, what do you see?” she said to the right-hand bucket.

The bucket looked down for the first time and was amazed. All along the edge of dirt path were flowers, beautiful colorful flowers, showing every hue imaginable. While the left side was bare, the right side, her side, was lush and picturesque. And her crack that dripped out water? The drops fell right onto the flowers given moisture to each plant.

“I planted those flowers,” said the woman. “They’re lovely, but they need a lot of care. And, they especially need daily watering. So when I found you, I knew I had found exactly what I needed. Every morning, I fill you with water. And every morning, as I walk back up this hill, you sprinkle out, so carefully, so precisely, drop by drop, exactly the right amount of water to keep these flowers alive. To keep them flourishing. To keep them beautiful. This path is the most wonderful place in my entire world. And it’s all because of you.”

The woman consoled the bucket, “I’m so sorry that you never knew this. So, so sorry that you thought that you were broken. That you were a failure. You’re not a failure, and you’re not broken — you’re perfect.”

The bucket was stunned into silence. And the woman looked at it with wise eyes and said, “What’s amazing is that precisely the thing that you thought made you broken was the exact same thing which made you so powerful. What you thought was your greatest flaw, was exactly what I needed to make our world a more beautiful place. The crack which you thought made you nothing was exactly what was needed to make our world holy.”

“What you think of as your weakness can sometimes be your strength. See yourself as half-full not empty. Turn those flaws into blessings, and this year change your world.”