In a Farewell to Arms, Hemingway wrote:

“The world breaks everyone
and afterward
many are strong at the broken places.”

Life, in my experience, shatters some of us,
while others are merely broken,
and still others simply injured or fractured.

Yet most of us seated here tonight
are discomforted by self-descriptions of being broken or shattered.

'Broken' has a sense of failure,
a sense of not being up to snuff
that most of us seem to feel embarrassed by.
Especially given the blessings
of our era, geography, and socio-economic stations—
especially compared to our forbearers
or others we work with,
or are self-consciously aware of—
to describe ourselves
as in-any-way 'broken'
seems confabulation.
Confusing life's normative struggles or minor injuries
with those who have literally fallen
and failed to rise up again.

Thankfully
most of us are not 'broken'
in the sense of one who no longer functions
or participates in life
as one previously did.

Yet even referring to ourselves as injured
implies a handicapping
most of us would reject
and do without.
So okay, most of us thankfully are not 'broken',
Or seriously injured,
but NEITHER are we QUITE whole.

The impact of our own choices and experiences,
both the best and the worst,
leave an indelible record written in fractures
— if not always craters —
in our lives.

Despite all of our pretense,
we are fractured, frayed, abraded — pick your metaphor!

Yet by pretending, or insisting,
or trying to will ourselves
into a state of
"Perfectly Fine! Thank You Very Much!"
we fail to acknowledge
the roots and reality of our fracturing
and the wisdom that it might bring us.

When I was a little boy of 4 or 5 years old,
my parents had taken me along
on a visit to my grandparents
at their apartment in Chelsea.
I was with my grandma Rae
on the sidewalk outside of their building
running playfully down the street for some reason
when I tripped.
No cuts or visible bruises,
but at that age
every little fall, dent, or ding
felt like a major assault on both my body and ego.
And by that age
various adults had advised me
that I was too old to cry for every minor altercation,
so I bravely attempted to hold back the tears
that had started to spring un-summoned.
My grandmother, God bless her, was not of the same school.
Sergele, what are you doing?
'I'm a big boy grandma",
I answered
“I’m not supposed to cry for every little thing”.
Serge, she said
If you don’t let those tears out they will turn sour,
and you will turn sour along with them.
Such was my introduction
to both self-denial and honest introspection.
Strength comes not from denying our injuries
but in acknowledging them
and growing from them.

Hemingway encapsulates the power of this Day of Atonement-
“The world breaks everyone
and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

He was no doubt
reflecting on the brilliant design of our bodies
such that when a bone breaks
and then heals according to design,
the fracture point is transformed
from the weakest point
into the very strongest point in the bone.
It is, in fact
that very property
of human healing
that has led to the modern therapeutic technique
called micro-fracturing
which was developed for athletes
to restore strength to weakened bone and ligaments.
Micro-fracturing is the application
of many, small almost microscopic fractures
to the bone
to encourage new, healthier and stronger bone growth
in a weakened spot.

In my experience,
our lives are filled—almost daily—
with metaphorical micro-fractures,
the price of getting out of bed
of facing the world,
of interacting with others,
and of taking responsibility for our lives.
They are not merely unavoidable, but to be embraced.

And yet,
we are reluctant, -- at best.
Avoidant—more often—of even acknowledging our condition.

It is one thing to be stoic,
quietly acknowledging the daily fractures of life
and moving beyond them.
But it is another thing entirely
to pretend these fractures are absent,
failing to at least acknowledge them,
seeking to deny their presence in our lives.

Yom Kippur is designed
for the acknowledgement of sins
that accumulate within us during the year
as a result of denial
or spiritual blindness.

Sin in Jewish tradition
is viewed
not so much as ‘a stain of black ink on white paper’,
but rather
much more like
an unhealed micro-fracture of the body.

As a concept ‘Sin’
represents not simply injuries we have done to others,
but always, always
the damage unavoidably done to ourselves.

The Day of Atonement
comes as an annual exercise
in self-reflection and self-acknowledgement.
We simply cannot change—
much less grow—
if we pretend,
if we ignore,
if we deny;
proclaiming that
‘all is fine’,
‘everything is okay’.

Yom Kippur comes to tell us
that the nature of living
is to experience fracturing,
and that to hold the tears in
is to deny ourselves
the growth
that those fractures offer us.

Sin, failing, regret —
these are the spiritual terms
for the internal human processes
that help us learn and grow from the abrasions of living life.

Yet we continue to struggle to keep our tears in,
to ignore or deny the pain,
to endure it,
until we become so inured to experiencing it,
that we come to believe
that we have mastered and overcome it.

It appears to me
that so, so many of us
walk around
not even recognizing the price we are paying.
Confusing our emotional containment
with resilience.

Yom Kippur comes to remind us
that while erring is certainly human,
our errors accumulate like baggage
that we add and carry throughout the year.
Like an overstuffed backpack
that we have borne for too long and too far,
we slowly loss feeling,
turn numb,
and forget that we can relieve ourselves of the burden
and stand up straight and stronger.
But first,
we must recognize and acknowledge
the load.

Rituals of expiation and atonement
are intended to acknowledge this fact.
To interrupt and cancel out
our habits of avoidance and denial.

Yet how often
do we close ourselves off—just a little—
from family and friends
who sense our fracturing,
who reach out to us,
who would help care for us,
only to have their insight and concern
—however politely—
dismissed.

At our most honest moments,
do we not fear
that if we were to acknowledge these fractures
we might release a Pandora's box
that we would then never regain control over?

Is not one of our greatest fears
that others we love,
and others we compete with,
will see us as broken,
or if not broken
as fractured, injured.

Our most primal animal instincts
tell us never to demonstrate injury
lest we become prey to predators.
How, we ask ourselves, can we be loved, respected, or even just accepted, if we admit to the fractures we accumulate by living? How can we be the whole and complete beings to which we aspire, if we acknowledge that we carry these fractures within us?

It is tempting to deny the pain and assaults of the past year which are marked by this day, to obscure the moments of shattering, to hide our injuries. But this sacred moment and space arrive granting us permission to NAME and SHARE our pain. It is only then that the possibility of growth is offered and begins.

Jewish tradition comes to remind us, to inform us, to even yell a little bit at us, that God designed us to fracture. That God loves our fractured and even broken nature.

In the Midrash of Leviticus Rabbah we learn: "God has declared the broken and crushed heart to be [most] desirable."

We also are taught: That when a person chooses to use broken vessels, it is considered a disgrace,
but that when God chooses to use a broken vessel (i.e. us) it is NOT, as it is said, 'The Eternal is close to the broken-hearted' (Ps. 34:18)."

The Kotzker Rebbi taught, Ein yoteir shalem mi leiv shavur. "Nothing is more complete than a broken heart."

God, we Jews affirm, did not create us as perfect beings, but as "fractible" beings who seek to perfect ourselves, literally fracturing and re’casting’ ourselves with each breath we take. It is our very fractured state of being that opens us up to experiencing God’s Presence.

The varying blasts of the shofar on the New Year are not an intellectual exercise, they are visceral, meant to pierce our hearts and spirits. Meant to assert our fractured natures and thereby connect us to one another and to the Divine.

As Maimonides comments (Laws of Repentance 3:4): the shofar calls to each of us saying: “Uru yeshanim mish'nato – Awake! you sleepers from your sleep. Arouse yourselves you slumberers from your slumber. Reflect upon your deeds; . . . and embrace God in your repentance."

The blasts of the shofar are gut wrenching reminders of our fractured state of being. This is not mere metaphor or inference. It is experientially true.
We follow the pattern of a Tekiah —
a single long one-note sounding,
the ideal of wholeness,
of God’s Presence,
as a frame surrounding the other notes.

Those notes— Teruah and Shevarim
—are sonic reflections and assertions
of our own injured experiences.

Teruah the resounding and truly fractured staccato notes,

and Shevarim,
the three ‘broken’ notes
as the Hebrew name translates.

When we sound these notes,
we are acknowledging
our fractured and ‘fractible’ state of being,

but we are also sure to surround and cushion them
with that one unbroken note of Tekiah,
that note that affirms our connection to the Divine.

Psalm 51, verse 19 confirms this —
A broken spirit is a sacred offering to God,
for a broken and contrite heart God cannot spurned.
We were not designed
or intended
to avoid pain or injury.
Our development, growth and improvement
can only come about by the wear and tear
of daily life and experience.
We were created to embrace such experiences,
and thereby live most FULLY
and RICHLY.

Kabbalah offers this imagery:
each of us is a seed
planted by the Divine gardener.
A sealed, protected shell
planted in nurturing soil.

But our destiny
is not to remain safely in our shell.

Our purpose necessitates
that we break through that shell.
That we SHATTER
the comfortable container surrounding us.
We will suffocate and starve
—however peacefully—
if we do not.

The price of growth,
is abrasion and self-injury.
We must fracture a portion of ourselves to develop.

As Daniel Matt teaches,
our metaphorical seed may think of itself as PERFECT,
but does not become REAL
until it fractures
and strives to rise above its previous ‘perfect’ condition.

Let us resolve on this Eve of Atonement
to deny false perfection,
to acknowledge our broken places
and find our strength and lives therein.

Let us recognize that
—to slightly misquote the adage—
We cannot arise and fulfill the best within us
If we will not first recognize and acknowledge
That we have fallen!
and could even use a hand getting up.