According to the Kabbalistic story of creation, at the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, God first drew in God’s breath, contracting God’s self, an act known as *tzimtzum*. From that contraction, darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split apart, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars….God had a plan through which a perfect world was to be created, and this plan…failed.

Lack of perfection is a theme of the High Holy Days. There would be no need for teshuvah if we never did anything wrong. And though some associate Yom Kippur with atoning for sins committed, the Hebrew *chet* is associated with missing the mark in archery, more akin to a mistake than to sin.
And like in archery, there is always an opportunity to try again, to do better, to be enough. This is what Yom Kippur is about. We are not less than because we need Yom Kippur each year. We are simply human and because of that, we need Yom Kippur each year.

So often, we are paralyzed by a concern of not being enough: the possibilities of mistakes and how they will be perceived, of dear relationships falling apart, of not knowing the questions to ask professionals who are supposed to take care of us - and of the ramifications of all these things. Yes, the idea of failure can be frightening, but beyond the definition of failure as a lack of success, how do we not get bogged down by whether we were good enough, did enough, were smart enough, tried hard enough and how all of these, whether directly or indirectly, will impact our lives and the lives of those we love? The internet, which has the power of being an amazing resource, can become a co-conspirator to our own defeating self-talk, with its message boards and facebook groups where we seek advice on how to make the “right” decision when so often there is no such thing. Going down the rabbit hole of links and responses is merely an attempt to mitigate any potential feelings of inadequacy by allowing ourselves to cling to the fact that we did everything we could, and researched all possible outcomes. But we know that, while very powerful, knowledge is not enough to avoid mistakes. If it were, it would seem that the vessels through which God created the universe, would have been strong enough to withstand their intended task. And certainly no one thinks any less of God for the less than perfect world we were left with. Why? Because without this miscalculation, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, we would not be here.

As this understanding of creation teaches: The very reason why we were created is to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. Yes, one could say that we were created to clean up God’s mess…literally our mission is to gather enough holy sparks so that, the broken vessels will be
restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete. What would have happened if God had succumbed to feelings of inadequacy after this creation blunder? Rather than give up, God found the inner strength to come up with a Plan B. Not only did God create more, God created humanity which would, for the most part, respect God and see God as an authority figure, all while fixing God’s mistake. I think this may be the first act of chutzpah.

So what are we supposed to do when we feel that we are not enough? As Yoda teaches, “The greatest teacher failure is.” Were we to not do anything with our misteps, with our mistakes, with our chets, they would be wasted experiences. And yes it would be wonderful if we could learn without the failure, without the pain, without the heartbreak. But if God can’t get by without these experiences, why would we?

These experiences have been part of the human condition since the beginning. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and thereafter were kicked out of the Garden of Eden. What did they learn from this? When God tells you not to do something, it behooves you to listen. We don’t know if this lesson was applied to other scenarios – following directions is not as captivating of a story to include in the Torah. What we do know, however, is that there were very real consequences of their missteps – and though their world was forever changed because of their actions, life did still continue. Though God may not speak to us directly, can you think of a time when you wish you had turned right instead of left? Said yes instead of no? What allowed you to move forward, beyond this moment of regret?

Abraham tried to save the people of Sodom and Gemorah, but failed to do so. Perhaps he should have warned the people himself of what was to become of them. Perhaps he should have tried to
convince God to save the towns even if there were fewer than ten righteous people there. If we think about the examples in our own lives where we thought we had figured out the perfect solution to our problems only to have the antithesis of our desired outcome transpire, we know that the road of “what ifs” is filled with heart-ache and suffering. Thinking of a time when you didn’t push as hard as you wish you had, didn’t ask the question that was nagging in the back of your mind, what resources allowed you to forgive yourself and move ahead beyond this moment of inaction? Rebecca missed the mark at showing her sons how to love one’s children equally. Her favorite, Jacob, went on to continue this pattern with his own children. In both generations, the favoritism led to the siblings becoming estranged from one another, hardly a parenting win no matter how one defines success. And yet, Rebecca is still heralded as one of our matriarchs and for being intelligent and independent. Jacob is still the one who wrestled with a holy being and from whom the people of Israel descend. We reflect on times when we were not our best selves, when we acted with less than altruistic motives in pursuit of an all-encompassing goal….only to be met with results that were not as we would have hoped. In these instances, what helped you move beyond the guilt so that when presented with a similar circumstance again, you would act differently?

Life-altering decisions, impacting not only your own life but the lives of others as well; repeated patterns of behavior which affect future generations. It would be easy for any of these individuals to demonstrate feelings of not being enough, concern for being looked down at by their peers and by those they respected. One could easily imagine how these experiences, these traumas, might impact how one moves through the world: a reluctance to try to new things (imagine Eve trying new fruit after her encounter in the Garden), self-sabotaging with constant procrastination or not following through with goals (in the story of Abraham that didn’t happen, what would Abraham’s role in the Torah have been had he kept putting off the important conversation with God about Sodom and
Gemorrah), or low self-confidence (Rebecca and Jacob could easily berate themselves for their parenting choices, but how would that change anything that had already happened?).

The Torah is filled with stories of people who are imperfect as a way to illustrate that we are not meant to be perfect. Just as I tell B’nei Mitzvah students that the fact that it is required to have two Gabbaim, two individuals following along in a book with a person reading from the Torah, demonstrates that Judaism knows that people make mistakes – even when they are intelligent, capable and prepared.

Similarly, we have Yom Kippur because to err is human. We all are going to miss the mark at some point – whether it’s professionally, in our relationships, or in our personal pursuits. If God’s attempt at creation didn’t go exactly according to plan, why should we assume that our attempts at life will be flawless? As we reflect on the idea of the chet, of missing the mark, we take note of the fact that in a game of archery, there are multiple arrows that each player shoots – again, recognizing that things may sometimes go our way and sometimes not.

So what can we learn from the kabbalistic story of creation? How does it influence how we look at the lives of our ancestors as described in the Torah? Sometimes, there is no blueprint to follow. God didn’t exactly have a model of how to create the world. God had to just try something and see what happened. And though it wasn’t exactly what God was going for, who is to say that any other created reality would have been any better? When we don’t live up to whatever vision of ourselves we have: as a child, as a sibling, as a parent, as a friend, as the type of career-person, as an engaged member of society – do we let that permanently define us or, like God, like Eve, like Abraham, like Rebecca and Jacob, are we able to move forward and change the narrative? God is not known as the
one who broke creation- God is known as the Master of the Universe. Eve is not known as the destroyer of paradise- she is known as the Mother of Humanity. Abraham is known for having the chutzpah to argue with God – regardless of whether or not the outcome was as he desired. Rebecca is known for her quick thinking more than for her parenting style and Jacob, the heel-grabber, is equally well-known by the name of Israel, the one who wrestles with God.

As we pray to be written in the Book of Life, of Prosperity, of Health, of all good things, when life doesn’t turn out as we had planned, may we find the inner strength to write the stories of our lives that we want told, rather than accept a particular chapter as the entire book. When we fall short of the mark, may we maintain the confidence and positive energy necessary to try to hit the bull’s eye again. In these ways, we can truly partner with God to collect the broken shards from the act of creation And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, will finally be complete. And we will rejoice in this shared victory rather than lament the supposed catastrophe. Ken Yehi Ratzon, May it come to be so.