

Sermon

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“I can’t do it.” “I’m not good enough.” “Please, not me.” “They can do it better”. How often do these types of thoughts cross our minds? Thoughts of self-deprecation or judgemental, negative voices determining that we are less than. They act as an invitation into a darkness where our goodness and beauty are not to be seen. They also act as a red flag that our mental health may need attention – a sign that something is off balance and we are reacting in the only way we know how – to chastise ourselves. But what if there was another way of responding when these thoughts arrive? What if, instead of accepting the thoughts and adding to them, we chose another path – that of self-compassion and turning towards community? Of course, life is messy, often unfair and painful. We don’t have the privilege of simply choosing to be happy or turning negativity into positivity. But we can accept the messiness and the pain as being part of the human condition and bring compassion and community to the party of the many emotions we hold each moment. We can choose to prioritise our mental health without shame and judgment.

To help us explore this alternative path let’s turn to Moses. For rather than our spiritual teacher, father and ancestor being a perfect, saint-like role model for us, we see his humanity and our own. In Parashat Vaera, firstly, we hear the groaning of the Israelites – their pain given the circumstances of their slavery and the oppression they were under. Many times throughout the Torah we hear, alongside G-d, the crying of the Israelites and our ancestors. We hear Abraham weep following the death of Sarah. We listen to the deep darkness of Jeremiah’s struggle with his place and role. We sit alongside Job

as he screams out: “Why me?” Why do bad things happen to good people? We sit with Rizpah as she mourns for her sons. And we stand here alongside Moses as he also asks G-d, twice in this parashah - “Why me?” I can’t barely talk – let someone else lead the Israelites.”

In each of these modelling of humanity, we see a part of us. A real, messy, insecure emotional part. There is no pretence that life is anything other than complicated and through seeing our ancestors’ struggle, we are liberated to step into our own without judgment. Indeed, our very name, Israel, means, literally, one who struggles with G-d. We are strugglers – finding our way through our lives with all its pain and beauty. As the writer Glennon Doyle succinctly wrote:

I don’t think that I’m broken at all. I no longer think that I’m a mess. I just think I’m a deeply feeling person in a messy world.

We are not broken for feeling feelings. We are, as Doyle also writes, responding appropriately to a broken world. What Moses and all of our ancestors teach us is that we are never to blame for any emotion we hold. Emotions arise naturally in us. In it is our reaction to our emotions where we can cause further harm – these secondary emotions. We feel sad so we judge ourselves for not being able to be the happy person we feel we should be. We feel scared so we feel ashamed at not being strong enough. We feel angry so we separate ourselves from those around us to prove that we are unloveable. We turn our initial, human, natural emotions into something to beat ourselves with. We use them as weapons against ourselves to critique our worth and value.

What if, instead, we chose another way? In the parashah, straight after Moses’ first questioning of his own value, we read a

long list of tribes and their children, and the families of Moses and Aaron. Whilst this roll call feels like an interruption of the story, it is vital to it for it is a response to Moses' fear – “you are not alone – here is your community,” the text says.

Judaism recognises the struggle and beauty of living our lives and through prayer, law, custom and ritual it keeps insisting, in the words of Hillel, the 1st century sage, that we do not separate ourselves from our community. Yes, this is hard. Being with people when we are in pain is complex. But we also know that connection is the balm to moments of shaky mental health. Recognising that we are part of something bigger than ourselves and that everyone is putting one foot in front of the other – this is

vital to helping us to take that next step and find liberation. It moves us from me to we – from an individual suffering to a community of people who struggle, care and act for each other. We can then find our power and can recognise where, instead of individual blame, the broken parts of society mean our pain is inevitable and action is needed.

May we be able to find and step into community, wherever and whatever that means to us. May we turn to compassion rather than judgment. May we each find the courage to feel our feelings and turn from self-blame to action towards a better, more whole world for all.