

Toldot 5785

November 30, 2024

Responding to Belle Weinstein

What an uplifting d'var Torah, Belle. Out of this Torah story of family discord and deceit, you have fashioned a heartfelt call for family unity and support. Acknowledging that no family is perfect, you are asking us to transcend our imperfections, and to forgive them in each other, for the goal of supporting one another through the ups and downs of life. In your story about your dislocated elbow and Alice's faster progress on the ski slopes, you remind us that following your advice isn't simple and sometimes will require us to overcome our inclination toward anger, jealousy, or other difficult emotions, but that through this effort we will become stronger individuals and stronger as a unit. Honesty, respect, kindness, and gratitude are the qualities you feel we most need to cultivate to achieve this.

Our origin story is notable for how imperfect our ancestors appear to be. The Torah does not hide their flaws. We see Sarah get jealous of Hagar and Ishmael and send them away. We see Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery – that one's pretty bad. And here we see Rebecca and Jacob conspire to take the birthright from Esau and take advantage of Isaac's blindness to deceive him and make it happen. These ancestors are meant to be our exemplars, our role models. What do we make of this?

There's a fascinating story told by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in the Talmud, Shabbat 88b. When Moses ascended on High to receive the Torah, the ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be God: Master of the Universe: what is a human being of flesh and blood doing here among us? The Holy One said to them: He came to receive the Torah. The angels said: The Torah is a hidden treasure that was concealed by you 974 generations before the creation of the world, and You seek to give it to flesh and blood? "What is man that You are mindful of him and the son of man that You think of him?" (Psalms 8:5) Instead, "God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth that Your majesty is placed above the heavens." (Psalms 8:2) The rightful place of God's majesty, the Torah, is in the heavens [with us], the angels said.

The Holy One, Blessed be God, said to Moses: Provide them with an answer as to why the Torah should be given to people. But Moses was afraid that the angels would burn him with fire from their mouths. So God spread the radiance of God's presence over Moses to protect him. And here's what Moses said: Master of the Universe, the Torah that you are giving me, what is written in it? "I am Adonai your God who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) Moses said to the angels: Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved by Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3) Moses said to the angels: Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols that you require this special warning? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be God, said to him: "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8). Moses asked the angels: Do you perform labor that you require rest from it? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? "Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), meaning that it is prohibited to swear falsely. Moses asked the angels: Do you conduct business with one another that may lead you to swear falsely? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Moses asked the angels: Do you have a father or a mother that would render the commandment to honor them relevant to you? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal" (Exodus 20:13) Moses asked the angels: Is there jealousy among you, or is there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant? Immediately they agreed that God made the right decision to give the Torah to the people.

In other words, the Torah is not made for perfect angels. It is made for ordinary, imperfect people. People who make mistakes. People who have been through difficult things. People who are tempted to do the wrong thing. People who have strong feelings and an inclination that can lead them to act in ways they are not proud of. There is no expectation in Judaism that we are supposed to be perfect. That's why it's so important that we see our ancestors with all of their foibles and flaws, lest we idolize them, lest we try to hold ourselves to an impossible standard, and so that we remember that we can love, respect, be kind and grateful, and support each other despite our imperfections, that we ourselves are worthy of all of those things even though we are not perfect.

Think about the fact that the Jewish people welcome every new year with a focus on our imperfections. The assumption of our holiest days of the year is that every single one of us sins. And the essential assumption is that we are not defined by our sins, but that we can do and be better. We can, every one of us, every Jew (and the story of Jonah comes to tell us on Yom Kippur that not just Jews but every human being) can learn and change and grow and heal and do better. It's incredibly accepting of us and incredibly hopeful about who we can be – us and all of humanity.

We all know that we're living in a time of cancel culture, in which a person can say one wrong word and be cancelled, rejected, reputation destroyed, career ruined. We're simultaneously living in a time in which people say intentionally outrageous and hurtful things about other groups of people in the public sphere. It's like these two polar extremes. One is that people say intentionally disrespectful and mean things, and the other is that people are supposed to be perfect.

It seems that one of the important things we can contribute to this moment in our society is a middle path. Where we endeavor to treat each other with respect and kindness, as you suggested, Belle, but we also don't hold ourselves or each other to impossible standards. We allow that we're all works in progress, that we might disagree with one another, that we might have biases that we've never examined, that unintentionally hurtful things might come out of our mouths. And that we're going to decide to be patient with one another, to give each other the benefit of the doubt, to make room for dialogue and learning.

Some of you might know that a new film is out about our congregation and our partnership with a Black Baptist church in Bedford Stuyvesant called Antioch Baptist Church. Not the film but the partnership was actually generously funded by UJA. We have been in the relationship for about 5 years, with a goal of addressing racism and antisemitism between our two communities. It has not been easy. It turns out there's a lot of racism and antisemitism in our world, and as you all know, the antisemitism has only been increasing. My sister, who is a celebrated filmmaker, decided to follow what would happen as we worshipped together, as we traveled and learned about each other's histories together, and as we kept meeting and discussing the complicated and delicate dynamics

between us. The resulting film is called All God's Children, it premiered in a sold-out theater to an extended standing ovation two weeks ago as the Centrepiece film at the DOCNYC film festival, and it's gotten glowing reviews in Variety and Deadline among other outlets.

The overwhelming reaction from the audience seems to be related to what you are talking about, Belle. Even when we did not agree with each other, even when they did things that were antisemitic and even when they felt that we didn't understand the racism that was shaping their lives, we did not walk away. Even though we were tempted. We were frustrated, we sometimes lost trust in each other, we unintentionally hurt each other, but we did not walk away. We actually came to love each other. Truly love each other. We still don't agree about a lot of things. We still don't fully understand each other. We're not ignoring the problems between us, but we're not going to walk away, ever. And I think the audience and the public are seeing this as an example of what we all need right now with each other.

As Jewish people and as a largely liberal community, we have work to do. For very good reasons we get alarmed when we see antisemitism, and we get alarmed when people are doing things we find antithetical to our values. Particularly with antisemitism we feel unsafe, we feel threatened. We are worried about what it portends. That is appropriate. But... in many cases we will have better outcomes if we can stay calm and not cancel people. Can we imagine never letting antisemitism go by unaddressed, and simultaneously trying to give the benefit of the doubt, staying in the conversation, and, if the intentions of the other seem to be good, approaching from the perspective of listening, teaching, learning? As we make clear during the Yamim Noraim, we believe that every person is capable of change, ourselves included. Every person can learn and grow and do better, especially when we help each other.

In our parasha, we do not see Rebecca or Jacob at their best. But we know that that's not all of who they are. Rebecca is the same person who, with chesed, generously offered water to Eliezer and his ten camels in last week's parasha and bravely set off to a land she did not know. Jacob is going to exclaim in wonder about G-d's presence at the opening of next week's parasha, he's going to toil for fourteen years for his love of Rachel, and he's going to wrestle with an

angel to become our eponymous ancestor. They're not defined by their worst moments, and no one else should be either.

None of us is perfect. We're not the angels in heaven who thought they deserved the Torah. We're just humans who've been through hard things and done our best and failed and been tempted and lost our temper and made mistakes and just keep trying. Each of us deserves the benefit of the doubt; and we deserve respect, honesty, kindness and support despite our imperfections. That's how we'll grow, that's how we'll improve, that's how we'll find our way back to one another in our families and in our larger human family. May we have the courage to keep trying.

Shabbat Shalom.