

The Weight of Our Disappointments – Text Study

Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh

Temple Israel of Hollywood – Rosh HaShannah 5783/2022

1. The First Disappointment in Torah (*Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* – edited by Tamar Biala, intro, p. xvi)

Reflecting on Genesis 3:9 “And *Adonai Elohim* called out to Adam and asked, Where are you?” – The verse raises a theological problem. Does God really not know where Adam is hiding?

Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 19:9) solved this problem by changing the vocalization from *Ayekah* (where are you?) to *eykhah* (How?):

וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶל הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיְכָה, אַיְכָה כְּתִיב

In other words: **How** did you wind up in the place you are in?!

How did this happen to you?!

2. **The Sefat Emet**, Hassidic Polish rabbi (1847 –1905) (*Va'etchanan*, 1875): Moses' unanswered prayers, were a parting gift to his people. **He offered them his own failure**. He modeled for them the truth **that our greatest dreams are sometimes left unfulfilled**; our **deepest prayers are sometimes left unanswered**.

3. Dr./Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler on the Sefat Emet (*Noticing the Nekudah*, Va'etchanan, 2022) teaches:

Prayer, on this read, is far from petition. It is an exercise in **creating intimacy without expectations; finding a way to have a relationship with the holy that is full of trust, and yet is devoid of tit-for-tat manipulations or a sense of entitlement**. Perhaps prayer is about **letting go of the all-too-human wish to control the Divine** through this or that action, this or that formulation, and instead is about opening up to a world of *matanot chinam*, unmerited gifts. And also, to the reality that sometimes, even for the most worthy among us, **the gifts don't come**.

4. **Rainer Maria Rilke** wrote (*Letters to a Young Poet*, 8th letter – Aug 12, 1904)

It is not only sluggishness that makes **human relations so unspeakably monotonous**; it is the **aversion to any new, unforeseen experience** we are not sure we can control....
And yet a dangerous insecurity is so much more human.

Talmud, Ketubot 62b

This is as it is related about [Rav Rehum](#)¹ (רחומי literally: love or compassion or womb), **who would commonly study before Rava in Mehoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur** (ie – he lived away from home all year, but had the permission to do so from his wife according to the Mishnah in Ketubot 62a, and came home once a year to see her for sexual intimacy before Yom Kippur. It's also relevant to note that the study hall would close for an extended break sometime during the month of *Tishre* and *Nisan*).

One day he was particularly engrossed in the halakha he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. **His wife was expecting him** that day (the day of Kol Nidre – before YK was about to begin) and continually said to herself: **Now he is coming, now he is coming.** But in the end, **he did not come.**

She was distressed (שִׁלְשׁוּ דַעְתָּהּ – literally her mind was “weakened, undressed, sickened”) by this, and **a tear fell from her eye.** At that exact moment, [Rav Rehum](#) was **sitting on the roof** (of the Beit Midrash totally losing track of time and his obligations to his wife and to the *chag*). **The roof collapsed under him, and he died.**

Consider the questions:

- How does this story hit you?
- In which ways do you act like Rav Rechumi? In which ways do you act like his wife? (Not to the details of the story, but to their choices and feelings.)
- As we start the new year, how do you hold your disappointments?

¹ 4th generation Amora, Babylonia. His wife is not named in the Talmud.