

The Weight of Our Disappointments: Part 1

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I'm excited to dive into some texts I've been studying these past months with you this morning.

Some secular – and some Jewish.

They all have to do with the **weight of disappointment**.

I've become very sensitive to the many disappointments we hold in our lives.

Just to be clear – I'm not talking about BIG tragedies, like the horrors of war, major illness, tragic death or abuse.

Rather, smaller but incessant exhales of “ugh!”, “really?”, “that again?”, or “is that all?” that we carry in our hearts.

We sit with feelings of disappointments in...

Our friends

Our partners

Our synagogue

Our children, siblings and parents

Our work and colleagues

Our government and elected leaders

All that we missed during COVID

Even with Ourselves

And even with God

I imagine I'm not alone in these feelings.

So, I was struck by the **first character** to be disappointed in the Torah.

(pass out study sheet)....

Reflecting on Genesis 3:9¹ “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?

Midrash² solved this problem by changing the vocalization from *ayekah* (where are you?) to *eykhah* (How?):

¹ *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* – edited by Tamar Biala, intro, p. xvi

² Bereshit Rabbah 19:9

וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶל הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֵיכָּה, אֵיכָּה כָּתִיב

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

How did this happen to you?!

It's amazing that GOD is the first “character” in the Torah to express disappointment in US.

And I wonder.... if disappointment happens because we have certain expectations of one another, of the world, of our LIFE, and things go awry - WHAT were God's expectations of US? And were they realistic?

Hold for a moment a disappointment you're sitting with...

Bring this person, this situation, this part of you – to the surface.

It may be a minor one, or something major that you're struggling with.

It's natural to hold these disappointments.

But if we're honest with ourselves – not one person can be the “be-all and end-all” for any of us.

Not one friend,

Not one spouse,

Not one relationship.

And surely, WE can't be that for anyone else either.

So, it's not surprising that we **don't always meet** one another's expectations, and they don't meet ours.

Here's another amazing text – we travel in the Torah from God to Moses....

What is one of greatest disappointments of Moses' life?

Think about it, he....

1. Stands up to Pharaoh
2. Helps the Israelites withstand the plagues
3. Guides them through the desert for 40 years

And after ALL that – he doesn't get to enter the Promised Land.

That's all he wants!

And we wonder – Come God!! – can't You just give that one thing to Moses?!

OK – he's able to SEE the promised land from the top of Mt Nebo - 3,300 ft high in the sky!

But he **never sets foot on the land.**

And by the way, Moses is **not** a push over – he BEGS.

He pleads (*Va'etchanan*) for God to change God's mind. (Deut. 3:23-27)

But God won't budge.

In fact, the Midrash teaches the Moses begs 515 times³.

How do they come up with that number? Because if you add the letters of *Va'etchanan* ("and he begged") together you get the number 515 😊

I have empathy for Moses – his inclination to plead and try to orchestrate things to work out in the way HE wanted them to – is **so human** - but then, so often things don't work out how we want them to....

³ Moses prayed in fact 515 times for a reversal of the judgment. Whence do we know this? From Deut 3:23, "I pleaded with the Eternal at that time..." The Hebrew for "I pleaded" is Vaetchanan, the letters of which add up in gematriyah to 515 (vav is 6, aleph is 1, tav is 500, chet is 8, nun is 50, nun sofit is 50. (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Plaut-Bamberger revised, p. 1433)

Now here's what's fascinating: The rabbis see in Moses' UNANSWERED pleading, his **rejected** prayer, a **model for prayer in general**.

Why? Why would an **unanswered prayer**, why would **leaning into our disappointments**, become a model for prayer?

The Sefat Emet⁴, a Hassidic Polish rabbi who lived in the late 19th century teaches that Moses' unanswered prayers, were actually a parting gift to his people. **He offered them his own failure**. He modeled for them (for us?) the truth **that our greatest dreams are sometimes left unfulfilled; our deepest prayers are sometimes left unanswered**. (How true.)

The contemporary teacher Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler⁵ *drashes* on the Sefat Emet by teaching:

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

⁴ Sefat Emet, *Va'etchanan*, 1875

⁵ Dr. Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler, *Noticing the Nekudah*, *Va'etchanan*, 2022

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.**

Creating intimacy without expectations... without tit-for-tat?

Imagine that?!

Because when we don't have expectations, then we're not disappointed.

But is that human?

Is that possible?

Society constructs these myths and fantasies of what a "happy life" looks like – and then when it doesn't turn out that way... we're left **sitting with our disappointments.**

With our relationships that didn't work out the way we dreamed them to be,

The children we didn't have,

The career we haven't made happen,

The conversation we didn't have,

The money we didn't make,
The bill of health we didn't receive,
The grandchildren who don't live near us,
The country of inequality we continue to live in,
The people who don't love us in the way we want to be loved.

In 1904 the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote⁶:

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.

I wonder: Is it even possible to safely embrace a “**dangerous insecurity**” or is that an oxymoron?

It's frightening to make rash choices, that we may regret.

We have obligations to those who count on us – even when they disappoint us.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 8th letter – Aug 12, 1904

Part of us wants to live like Rilke is asking us to live – **to embrace the new and unexpected**, but part of us is also scared of the unknown – **so we create a world that we THINK WE CAN CONTROL**, we **set up expectations** for ourselves and others, and then – lo and behold – we're let down.

One of the most devastating stories in the Talmud has to do with a disappointment between spouses – **on** (of all times) **the eve of Yom Kippur**.

After we read this story, I will invite us to break into *hevrutah* and 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?

Let's read together:

Ketubot 62b (Talmud)

This is **as** it is related **about [Rav Rehum](#)**⁷ (רחומי literally: love or compassion or womb), **who would commonly study before Rava**⁸ **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*⁹ and *Nisan*¹⁰).

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 *Yom Kippur* 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 (הָלַשׁ דְּעֵתָהּ – 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**

⁷ 4th generation Amora, Babylonia. His wife is not named in the Talmud.

⁸ Rava was Rav Rechumi's teacher

⁹ During the holidays of Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah

¹⁰ During the holiday of Pesach

roof (of the *Beit Midrash*¹¹ totally loosing track of time and his obligations to his wife and to the *chag*¹²). **The roof collapsed under him, and he died.**

This story of Rav Rechumi and his wife, who waited and waited for him to come home, breaks my heart.

In this self-critical tale, the rabbis **own** that EVEN THEY distract themselves (in this case with Torah) and disappoint the people who love them most.

Literally the **weight of her disappointment** kills Rav Rechumi – the rabbi who is supposedly compassionate. He loses his life, because his passion, his attention, is misplaced, and she is left even more alone.

Now, I invite you to turn to someone – and share with them:

- 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.)

¹¹ *Beit Midrash* means “Study Hall”

¹² *Chag* means “holiday”. In this case it is Yom Kippur day.

- As we start the new year, how do you hold your disappointments?

(After hevruah discussions...)

The Irish poet David Whyte teaches¹³ that:

“The **measure of our courage** is the measure of our willingness to **embrace disappointment, to turn towards it rather than away.**”

In this next year I invite us all to be courageous. To gently hold, sit with and be curious about our disappointments – because embracing them, I admit, is a bit much for me 😊.

¹³ David Whyte, *Consolations*, p. 74