

NO SUCH THING AS “NORMAL”

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When I was a child, there was nothing I wanted more than to be “normal.” I didn’t want to be an orphan, I didn’t want to live with my grandparents. I was embarrassed by my relatives who spoke with funny accents from a country that was reviled daily in the press and by my classmates.

I wanted to live the carefree, perfectly normal life that *everyone* else had. Oh – and I wanted to be blonde, with blue eyes and five foot 10. “Normal” in Orange County is a bit different than the rest of the country.

But then, as I got older, I began to notice people’s lives were often different than how I perceived them to be.

By the time that I was in college, and my friends and I felt more comfortable in sharing our vulnerabilities with each other, I started to see that those people who I thought were living so called “normal” lives were battling their own isolating problems.

I learned about teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, divorce, mental illness, chronic illnesses, cancer, domestic violence and infertility. I witnessed how my cousin dealt with the rejection of his siblings when he told them he was gay, and I saw how his father never recovered from his suicide.

I began to realize that there is no such thing as “normal.” I came to understand that what we think we see is not always what is, and that no one goes through this life unscarred.

I love stories. In Israel when you ask someone about themselves you say “what’s your story?” Storytelling is one of the things that drew me deeper into Judaism. Each year as we go through the Torah reading cycle I read the stories of our people as though for the first time and I inevitably find myself hoping that things might turn out differently. That maybe Cain won’t kill Abel, maybe Jacob and Esau have finally learned how to get along with each other.

Perhaps this time, Abraham won't throw out Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, and that he'll argue with God on behalf of Isaac, and the boys will grow up loving each other and teach their descendants to as well. Each year I read these stories with fresh eyes because when I read these stories I see not only our matriarchs and patriarchs, but I see members of my family, of our congregation, and the larger community as well.

Their stories, their struggles, are our stories, and our struggles. We too suffer from dysfunctional families, from chronic illness, we also wrestle with questions of faith and identity, sometimes we feel dissatisfaction with, or alienated from, our community and our God. And the wildernesses we wander in are more often than not, spiritual in nature.

Like us, none of our Biblical heroes are perfect. They are painfully, and sometimes breathtakingly...human. I say breathtakingly because it is often *because* of their frailties and their personal trials that they find strength and courage, and stretch themselves to become something greater, not in spite of them, but *because* of them.

And I believe it is often *because* of their imperfections, not in spite of them, that they are chosen for their tasks. Their struggles make them more sensitive to the unprotected in our society, better equipped to hear those whose voices go unheard, more aware of those who need us to be sensitive to their sense of otherness.

Strengths and weaknesses are often two sides of the same coin – depending on how we express our feelings, we can build up or tear down ourselves or others. Isaac is blinded by his love for his family and as a result both of his sons suffer from his inability to see them as they are. And the Torah does not tell us if Jacobs limps because he wrestled with his own demons or with a divine presence. And did he wrestle with his faith out of fear or out of courage?

Moses has a speech impediment, yet he is the one God chooses to be the spokesman for the Israelites. He overcomes his self doubt, finds his voice and uses it to inspire and to lead others towards a better life. His story reminds us that all of us can rise above our perceived limitations and reach unimagined levels of success.

For me, saddest of all is King Saul. The first King of Israel was brought down not by a foreign enemy, but by his own mental illness that tortured

him into a self-destructive path from which he could not return or find refuge.

And the Bible is filled with so-called non-traditional families. Blended families bringing together children of different mothers under one tent like in Abraham's and Jacob's families, and there is the uncle who raises his orphaned niece in the story of Mordechai and Esther, Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and loved by her as though he had come from her own flesh, and Ruth and Naomi redefine the meaning of family as they take each other into their hearts.

And there are too many dysfunctional families to mention.

However, throughout the Bible, we are reminded of one important truth – that we are all created *b'tzelem elohim* – in the image of God. The story of humanity begins with our creation – and the Torah teaches us that every person, male and female, is created in the Divine Image – each of us contains within us the spark of the sacred if we are only open to recognizing it.

So if each person is created B'tzelem Elohim – what does it mean that our heroes are so flawed? What is our sacred text teaching us about God?

Is it that God is imperfect? Or that God exists not only within us, but in what we perceive to be our imperfections or weaknesses as well? Or is it our ability to struggle, to find meaning in our humanity that makes us a reflection of the Holy One?

In the times when I have struggled, felt broken, or at a loss, there has been a teaching from the *midrash* that has given me comfort. It is a story about the broken tablets.

After the Revelation at Sinai, Moses went up the mountain to commune with God and to receive the 10 commandments that God inscribed in stone for us – an eternal reminder for us of our Covenant with the Holy One.

At the end of Moses' 40 days on the mountain, the Israelites begin to get scared that they have been abandoned by Moses – and by God, and they demand that Moses' brother Aaron build them a Golden Calf.

God sees what is going on and orders Moses to go down the mountain. Moses goes down, the two tablets in his arms. As he looks below and sees what the people have done, he is furious and smashes the Holy Tablets to the ground. Enraged and devastated, he goes back up the mountain to seek solace from God, and to carve a new set of tablets.

The Torah tells us that the second set of tablets were put in the Holy Ark and carried around with us until the Temple was built by King Solomon. But what happened to the broken tablets?

Our tradition teaches that the broken tablets were put in the Holy Ark as well, next to the whole ones as a reminder to us for all times. We are taught that even in their broken state – they retain their holiness because they were created by God.

I am often asked by those who are suffering, what is the meaning of their suffering. That is a question I cannot answer. I don't even believe that is a question that God can answer. Only the one who is going through the pain has the ability to endow it with meaning.

But I do know that their life is no less holy, no less important because of the suffering that they are enduring. The Rabbis teach that we too were made by God, and like the broken tablets, even when our bodies or spirits feel broken, we are no less holy, and should be treated as such by ourselves and by others.

Not a day goes by when I do not miss my parents. The older I am, the more I realize what I missed out on by not having them in my life. While the sense of loss will always be with me, I have worked hard to find meaning in my loss. It has forced me to live my life more fully than I might have otherwise, and even all these years later, I continue to find meaning in that event that set me a part as a child. My own sense of isolation makes me a more attentive parent – making sure that I don't take a single day with my children for granted, making sure I create enough memories for them that can sustain them for a lifetime if needed.

And while part of me still hopes that I'll wake up one day and be five foot ten. I no longer strive to achieve an elusive sense of normalcy that does not exist. And I have come to embrace the very things that made me feel like an outsider as a child.

I doubt that had my parents lived I would have ended up as a rabbi. My early experience with death made me see life in a way that I am sure I wouldn't have had I had a so called "normal" childhood.

That is not to say I wouldn't rather have my parents. Of course I would. But I also recognize that had it not been for losing them, there would have been something else that would have made me feel outside the circle.

Because as I have learned, there is no such thing as normal, and none of us goes through this life untouched or untested.

There are some types of suffering that time can not dull, and for those who suffer from mental illness, chronic illness, or continue to be consumed by the pain created by the absence of a loved one, I pray that they might have a reprieve from their suffering.

But if a reprieve is not possible, I pray that they find a way to transform their suffering into something that helps them live their life with greater awareness, or in pursuit of the sacred.

There is an idea in the Talmud that basically teaches that "if it wasn't written, you couldn't say it." What this means is, that if the idea wasn't written in sacred text, it would be too heretical to say. This teaching helps us understand why the rabbis included certain books of the bible in the sacred canon. An example of this is the Book of Job. Job is described as a righteous and God-fearing man.

In the course of Job's story, his wife and children are stricken with illnesses and killed, he loses his livestock, and all of his wealth. All simply to test his faith and to see how he will react. Finally, all of this is too much for Job and he rails against God.

Job gives voice to his pain, his anger, his confusion about why are all of these things happening to him if he has done everything he should have done in life.

By allowing Job's anger a place in sacred text, the Rabbis are also, by extension, allowing all of us not only to express our pain and anger, but also to see our own stories, our own pain, in a sacred context.

Our tradition does not demand that we accept our pain, but rather it allows us to do as Job did, to ask why, and then to seek meaning, and ultimately spiritual healing, from our suffering.

Judaism teaches us to embrace our otherness, because oftentimes it is only when we are standing outside the circle that we can see more clearly. The quintessential Jewish experience is to be outside looking in. It is that sense of otherness that is supposed to make us more sensitive to the needs of others, to the needs of the oppressed, the needs of those too weak to speak up on their own behalf.

Throughout our liturgy we are reminded that it is our *history* of otherness – of being outside the norm - that gives us our perspective, our compassion, and our imperative to pursue justice. It is *because* we were slaves, not in spite of it, that we were given a sacred task to care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger. It is because of our suffering that we are called on by our tradition to try heal the pain that we see in our world. We have been taught to find meaning in our communal suffering by using it to inspire us to be engaged in tikkun olam and repairing the injustices that surround us.

So why is our sacred text filled with stories of flawed heroes who were chosen by God to do great deeds? It is to remind us that each of us holds within us the potential for greatness. And greatness is not defined by superficial appearances of normalcy – but by dealing with our daily struggles with courage and with faith. By wrestling with our personal demons as Jacob did, holding on tight until we receive our blessing, then letting it go, so that we can move forward, even if we still limp a little because of the wrestling match we endured. The limp is not to slow us down, but rather should be a reminder that we have prevailed, and conquered that which had been holding us back.

As we move forward into a new year, may we find meaning in what sets us apart, may we find paths to help bring us closer to others, and may we find joy in the life we have been given. *Ken yehi ratzon* – May this be God's will.