

## Speaking Up

Every year on the day before Passover, we observe *Ta'anit Bikorim*, the Fast of the First Born. This fast is observed in remembrance of the miracle whereby Jewish firstborns were spared from the plague that struck down the firstborns of the Egyptians. It is customary, however, that the requirement to fast is overridden by a siyyum – a celebration upon the completion of the study of a tractate of Talmud. Thus, it has been the practice here that, following morning minyan on the day before Passover, the Rabbis share with us the completion of *their* study of a tractate of Talmud. By doing this, they extend the mitzvah of the siyyum to all the attendees, releasing us all from the obligation of fasting for the rest of the day.

This year on *Ta'anit Bikorim*, the rabbis were completing their study of *Masekhet Sotah*, and Rabbi Fel taught a passage from that tractate in which Rabbi *Shim ben Yohai* states that a person should *praise* him/herself in a soft voice and *discredit* him/herself in a loud voice. Concerning this statement, the Gemara then asks: But should one *really* discredit oneself in a loud voice? For didn't the Sages say that the *Amidah* should be recited in a whisper so as not to embarrass transgressors who confess their transgressions during that prayer? The Gemara continues – this precept that the transgressor should not be embarrassed shows that one should say what is to one's discredit *quietly*. Therefore, the Gemara corrects the original statement in this way: Do not say that one should speak what is to one's *discredit* in a loud voice, rather say that one should publicize one's *pain* in a loud voice – in other words, one must make known one's *pain* to the community.

This teaching on the tension between keeping a painful or embarrassing matter hidden and speaking about it in public struck a chord with me that day. At that time, I had no intention of being a speaker this summer and, even after I found myself accepting Terri's invitation to speak, I was not thinking that this is what I would talk about. But once I'd made that commitment, I realized that I was ready to speak up about something in my life that I have kept mainly hidden for many years.

I was overweight as a teenager, so it felt good to me to be able to lose weight as an adult. But gradually, and without my being aware of it, the sense of satisfaction I felt with no longer being overweight morphed into an eating disorder – in my case, anorexia. It is a common misconception that eating disorders, particularly anorexia, typically affect adolescent girls – in reality, anorexia affects people of all ages and genders. But perhaps that misconception contributed to the fact that as I was developing anorexia in my 40's and 50's, I was either unaware, or in denial, that I was suffering the effects, both physical and cognitive, of insufficient nutrition.

Instead, my continuing weight loss gave me what felt like a sense of control – though I can now see that the need to feel in control, or at least to maintain an appearance of control to both others and myself, was actually an attempt to cope with my underlying fear of feeling out of control. But whether it was because of the appearance of control I presented or my age or both, members of my family and my doctors – because I went regularly for annual check-ups – also did not recognize my condition as it progressed. I was perceived as being knowledgeable and health-conscious (ironically, the research I've done over my career has been primarily concerned

with the effect of energetic stress on female reproductive function), so it may have been natural to assume that my lifestyle was healthy. I may also have projected a vibe of not wanting or needing help, which would have made it difficult for someone to approach me.

Eventually, however, I raised the issue of my weight loss with my doctor and I was diagnosed with anorexia and have been in treatment ever since. Early in my treatment, I remember telling my therapist that I wanted to “walk lightly” in the world – I visualized it as walking on a beach and not leaving footprints. It was as if I wanted to be invisible – or at least didn’t want to be seen as I really was. I needed to keep my eating disorder hidden, which meant not bringing it up myself and also not contradicting the assumptions people made. So, it always used to be that, when someone would compliment me on being in “good shape” or say enviously – you must have a “good metabolism” – I wouldn’t say anything. But more recently, on a few of these occasions, I found myself speaking up to correct those notions – “actually, I’ve been battling an eating disorder for many years”. And after I agreed to be a speaker this summer, I realized that I wanted to speak up more publicly to correct the unspoken and/or unrecognized assumptions that people may have about me – and others.

I am a relatively reserved and private person, but my connection to this community is important to me. During my worst times, I wanted to be invisible and not leave footprints. But a consequence of hiding and being invisible is isolation. Now, after years of battling this disorder, I want to come out of that isolation – to acknowledge who I am and have my footprints be seen. My recovery is ongoing, but I have reached a point where I realize that sharing

pain is part of recovery and growth, allowing me to feel that I am not alone anymore. And I hope that other members of this community who identify with some aspect of my experience will find it helpful to know that they are also not alone.

I had just about given up on finding a way to relate my talk to today's parasha, *Ki Teitzei*, which consists of a series of miscellaneous laws, including ordinances concerning inheritance, lost animals or other property, and prompt payment of wages, among many others. But then I discovered a commentary by Rabbi Shefa Gold. Rabbi Gold writes that, according to Maimonides, there are 72 *mitzvot* in this parasha. A *mitzvah*, she says, is literally a "commandment" from God, but it can also be understood as an opportunity for "connection", as the Aramaic form of the root means – "to connect". So perhaps there is a relation, after all, between the parasha and my desire to deepen my connection with others by sharing more of myself.

Susan Lipson

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