



Rabbi Judy Greenberg Apr 24

Sitting with Our Emotions

Rabbi Judy Greenberg

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There is a children's book called *The Rabbit Listened*, by Cori Doerrfeld. In the book, a kid named Taylor is building something new and special out of blocks. It is awesome. But then, all of a sudden, it gets knocked down by an unexpected flock of birds. Taylor is upset. A parade of animals tries to help. The chicken wants to talk. The bear is angry. The elephant wants to remember exactly how Taylor had built it, the hyena wants to laugh about it, and the ostrich wants to forget about it. But as each animal comes, you see Taylor cowering and feeling worse and worse. Finally Taylor is all alone, and a rabbit scoots up close. Taylor notices the rabbit and asks it to stay. Over the following pages, Taylor goes through each of the emotions that the parade of animals had tried. But this time, it's at Taylor's pace - and as Taylor needs it. You see Taylor feeling better and better.

It's a book about empathy and listening. It's a book about the cathartic power of validation.

I feel like Taylor. I was building something wonderful - we all were. I had built a vision of spring semester: of Shabbat dinners and seders at Hillel, JLF on the 4th floor when we would have to lower the blinds to shield us from the radiant sunset over Lake Mendota, sharing the joys of my baby with family and friends as she grows. But, like Taylor's beautiful creation, these dreams have suddenly collapsed.

I read this week's double parashah of Tazria-Metzora, about how to diagnose and treat a contaminating disease, and the parallels between this disease and our current time of Coronavirus could not be more apparent. The parashah includes a lot of isolation, a lot of waiting, and a lot of plans to return to normalcy.

In the time it was written, this parashah was an instruction manual: if you have this symptom, do this, count this many days, and upon regaining your health, make this sacrifice. It's a little like the animals in the beginning of *The Rabbit Listened* - telling the afflicted what to do. But there are also moments when the parashah creates the possibility to feel seen, to feel validated, to feel comforted -- as Taylor was comforted, when the rabbit finally just listened.

After all the elaborate instructions for diagnosis, treatment, and sacrifice, the Torah says, "As for the person with leprous affection, his clothes shall be torn, his head shall be left bare... and he shall call out, "Impure! Impure!" (Leviticus 13:45). This departure from ritual speaks to me; it is an outburst of emotion, crying out. That's how I am feeling now. I am not in a place for detailed rituals. I am in a place for crying out.

On the topic of a house that continues to be infected with a plague, despite a deep cleaning and replastering, the Torah teaches: "The house shall be torn down - its stones and timber and all the coating of the house" (Leviticus 14:45). I'm not ready to move on. I need the rabbit with me as I process what is still being torn down. I am still crying out, in an outburst of emotion.

These two moments in the parashah touched me deeply because they saw me in my emotional state: like things we are shouting out, or watching as they are torn down. And these two moments, though they are the emotional low points of the parashah, do more to lift me up. I feel more ready to get back up because of the acknowledgment of how low we have fallen.

At the end of The Rabbit Listened, after the rabbit is present with Taylor for a whole gamut of emotions, Taylor is ready to build again. After Taylor expresses sadness, anger, frustration, nostalgia, and denial. Only then can Taylor look forward and dream about re-building.

We are experiencing so many emotions as we navigate so many losses - both large and small. May we find the rabbit who listens - who is able to sit with us, in whatever emotion that is. And may we also have the strength to be the rabbit for others.

We will rebuild, but sometimes feeling sadness is the necessary step before happiness.

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