

Va Yera 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, November 8, 2014

This week we are beginning a new sermon series we are calling “When You Are Feeling Overwhelmed.” In other words, what are the spiritual lessons of our People that can help you get through what you are going through? If constant stress has you feeling disillusioned, helpless, and completely worn out, you are probably prone to feeling overwhelmed, and even burnt out. When you’re burned out, problems seem insurmountable, everything looks bleak, and it’s difficult to muster up the energy to care. So we retreat, we withdraw from life, hoping its challenges will go away... Or, on the other hand, feeling overwhelmed can push us to do something rash, something we may be very sorry for later on. That overwhelmed feeling can threaten your job, your relationships, and your health. But the good news is that there are things you can do about it.

So what can you do when you are feeling overwhelmed? You can regain your balance by reassessing priorities, making time for yourself, and seeking support. And of course there is professional support, from psychologists, physicians and therapists, and the like – and all of those can be very helpful. But, there are spiritual ways of healing as well. We are going to look at some of them over the next few weeks.

And the first thing you need to understand in a spiritual approach to healing that overwhelmed feeling is that you are not alone. Very often there are others who are going through just what you are going through. There are people right now, even here today, feeling what you are feeling. You are not the first person to feel this way, and you are not the last. And you may ask why that’s the starting point in healing? Who cares? And the answer is “perspective.” Virtually nothing helps more than regaining perspective. One way to address that overwhelmed feeling is to realize that as much as you feel this way – you are not alone, you are not the center of the universe and you can’t solve all the problems you are facing yourself.

That, I think is the meaning of the strange story we read in the Torah today. The Torah portion, Va-Yera tells the strange story of Lot’s daughters who lived through the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And the circumstances are really pretty awful, there’s no denying that. Life as they know it has been turned upside down. But in the midst of feeling overwhelmed by what’s going on, what do they do? The Torah tells us they get their father, Lot, drunk and do something with him that clearly fathers and daughters should never do. And then they do the same thing the next night, too. But why? Why resort to such depravity? And the Torah is pretty clear on this: It’s because they really feel like they are the last people on earth. It’s not logical, sure, but they are overwhelmed and they react. They have to do something to save themselves, even if what they choose to do is unspeakable.

But here’s the thing: Surprisingly, Tradition does not judge them harshly. They felt it was their duty to save the human race – and the only living male was their father, so they did what they did. (In fact, one of the children that comes from this forbidden union is

Moab. Ruth is a Moabite, and King David is her direct descendant. And it is said that the Moshiach will be descended from him!)

I think the reason that the Talmud does not judge them harshly is because instead of seeing them as bizarre people who did a ridiculous thing, the Talmud has empathy. It wants us, as omniscient readers, to identify with them. Not with their circumstance, of course, not to emulate or laud what they did, but to understand how a person could react like they did. In their tattered emotional state they thought: “We are the last people on earth. The problem begins and ends with us. We need to do something.” So they did. And we look at them and we say, “No, no, no! Stop! You are not the only people on earth, can’t you see that? You can’t solve this problem yourself, and it does not need to be solved at this very instant!” In other words, we look at their lives, we read their story, and we gain a perspective on their lives that they themselves cannot see. We see their lives from above with more objectivity than they could possibly have. And, in so doing we see that it will take time for them to heal; they need to give themselves that time and not react immediately. It is a matter of perspective.

So when you are overwhelmed, faith and spirituality allow you to look at your life, and the problems in it from above too; from a different perspective. So we read this story about people who feel so isolated and alone not with amusement, not with scorn, but with empathy. And it is in that empathy that we can begin to draw outside ourselves and regain perspective.

This is such an important part of spiritual healing – understanding that your problems do not begin and end with you, and you do not need to find immediate solutions – in fact you can make it a lot worse if you try.

So there are ways to help to gain perspective. One of them is empathy. Having empathy for others, like we do for the characters in this story, helps us to have empathy for ourselves. It gets us outside of ourselves. And if we can see our lives a bit more objectively, we can begin to make more objective assessments and more objective plans. But we need that distance and we need that time. And it does not have to come from exotic vacations, or even an abundance of free time, it comes from a mindset, it comes from reflection that is free, and available to us now.

Another means of shifting perspective, one that we like to practice here, is through the reflection that comes in contemplative prayer. The Hebrew word for “to pray” is “*Li-Hitpallel*,” a reflexive verb that means to look at one’s life anew through prayer. And so, for those of us feeling overwhelmed I’d like to suggest that we get in the habit of praying as a first response. Our first response to feeling overwhelmed should be to look outside ourselves for a source of healing. Too often we don’t think of prayer as a first response. In fact we think of it as just the opposite... We hear so often: “Well, I guess there’s nothing left to do now but pray...” But prayer is often not about miracles so much as it is about perspective and the ability to see the good the wondrous, and sometimes even the

miraculous that is all around us. And so we continue now in prayer, in reflection, in meditation, in giving ourselves the gift of a fresh perspective...