

“The Healing Power of Radical Acceptance”

Rabbi Elana Rabishaw – 2023/5784

In his book, “Think Again,” author Adam Grant tells the following story:

One afternoon in Maryland in 1983, Daryl Davis arrived to play piano at a country music lounge. It wasn’t his first time being the only Black man in the room, however, before the night was out, it would be his first time having a conversation with a white supremacist.

After the show, an older white man in the audience walked up to Daryl and told him that he was astonished to see a Black musician play like Jerry Lee Lewis. Daryl replied that actually he and Lewis were friends, and that Lewis even told him that his style was influenced by Black musicians. Although the man was skeptical, he invited Daryl to sit down for a drink.

Soon the man was admitting that he’d never had a drink with a Black person before. Eventually he explained to Daryl that he was member of the Ku Klux Klan.

If you found yourself sitting down with someone who hated you and all people who shared your skin color, your instinctive options might be fight, flight, or freeze– and rightfully so. Daryl had a different reaction: he burst out laughing. When the man pulled out his KKK membership card, yeah– apparently they actually have those, to show he wasn’t joking, Daryl returned to a question that had been on his mind since he was ten years old, “How can you hate me when you don’t even know me?”¹

We are all guilty of judging a book by its cover. We all can think of times when we decided to not be friends with someone before we ever spoke a word to them. We get caught up with the

¹Adam Grant. 2022. *THINK AGAIN : The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know*. S.L.: W H Allen. Page 121-122.

things that catch our eye, the person who looks out of place, or who seems a little weird. If we get to know them a little, there are other things that might stop a relationship in its tracks. What happens the first time that we learn someone voted for a different political party than we did? Or what about when we find out that someone is Arab or Muslim? Daryl's response was probably unique. He chose curiosity. He chose to talk to the guy who had been taught to hate him.

It is natural to gravitate towards what is familiar. We all tend to be drawn to friendships and relationships with people who are similar to ourselves. How many of you moved to Boca because you knew that it had a strong Jewish community? I did! The Book of Leviticus commands us, וְאַהֲבַתְּ לְרֵעִי כָמוֹךָ, And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.² In Hebrew, this commandment can also be interpreted that we are to love our neighbors who are like us.

If we only focus on this commandment, our mentality can interfere with our relationships with other people. Either we stay within our own echochambers- only engaging with people with whom we agree, or we limit our interactions with people who have different opinions. I might have many friends, but if they all think, talk, and act like me, I'm missing out on broadening my world because diverse opinions can make us stronger.

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד , that two are better than one.³ That when we collaborate, the sum is usually greater than what we could come up with on our own.

This is why, throughout the centuries, rabbis made their students learn in pairs. Because we need a chevruta, or a text partner, who can challenge our thoughts and who will disagree with us. For the last year, every other week, I take an hour to study the Book of Psalms with my colleague and dear friend, Daniel. We have moments where we are gentle and help each other to sharpen our Hebrew skills, and other moments where we push back on each other- as we

² Leviticus 19:18.

³ Ecclesiastes 4:9.

grapple with the meaning of the Psalms and our own personal theologies. We also catch up on our personal lives, talk about our puppies. We have the type of relationship where we can be honest about our personal and professional lives, and give each other advice that we would not be able to hear from many other people.

That is where the deep learning happens. When we have people who fully see us and who know us well enough to tell us when we are wrong. Who can call us out for our mistakes and still love us. But with most people, we limit our interactions, and are afraid of what someone might think of us.

The fact is we all walk around afraid that someone is going to find out our hidden secrets. We're afraid they will judge us for our flaws and deficiencies - the pieces that make us doubt ourselves and question our self-worth, that are invisible to the human eye, but so clear to our inner eye. That we think no one could possibly understand.

These are the shards of ourselves that make us feel the most broken. So we suppress them, and try to ignore them, hoping that no one will notice, including ourselves. It is scary to walk around with these vulnerabilities.

During my third year of rabbinical school, a classmate of mine nonchalantly asked if I was an only child. When I said no, she was honestly surprised. Hebrew Union College is a small school, and we spent all day, every day together. How come I never brought them up? She asked.

The truth was hard. The truth was that my sibling and I used to be so close— best friends! And then, since I'm the oldest, I went to college, which was what I was supposed to do. Naturally we drifted a little bit. Four years later, I began rabbinical school, at the same time that my sibling dropped out of college. Their struggles had spiraled, and it made sense for them to move back home. I went to Israel, and we continued growing apart. Over time, I stopped recognizing them. And they stopped recognizing me. I found myself carrying the grief of losing my best friend. No

one saw this pain because I didn't talk about it. In the age of social media, if you don't have anything good to post, you don't post anything at all.

For the better part of the last seven years, I've walked around with a broken heart thinking that no one could understand what I'm going through. Thinking that my story was too complicated. So I just held it inside, hoping it would go away.

I felt a profound sense of loneliness. Sure, I felt torn up inside, hollow where my relationship with my sibling used to live, fearful for what might come next. At the same time, I wondered if I was making too much of it - after all, my parents were on the front lines, not me. I felt that I had a responsibility to live my life and push on because I was the healthy one.

But the reality was, that as much as I ignored it, the pain would not go away. I didn't think I was entitled to my feelings because I wasn't the one in the trenches, dealing with the rubble that follows in the wake of addiction.

In the recovery world, there are two branches of fellowship. The first is for the addict, and the second is for those who love them. Al Anon is for loved ones. It took me a long time to try a meeting. I was scared and did not know what to expect. I was searching for a community, for people who understood my brokenness, and could empathize with my pain. I was looking for a safe place to open up, where I could finally let out all that I had been hiding. Broken or not, we are all just looking for people who are willing to see us for who we are, who are willing to love us for exactly who we are, our whole, complete, broken selves.

An hour later, someone around the circle read the concluding words: "After a while, you'll discover that though you may not like all of us, you'll love us in a very special way—the same way we already love you".⁴

⁴"Suggested Al-Anon Closing". (n.d.). <https://district23alanon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CLOSING.pdf>

In that room, for the first time, I felt seen and loved even with my brokenness. I experienced radical acceptance from a room full of strangers. While we all have something in common that brings us into that room, we are all completely different. I have found fellowship and community with people I never would have spoken to outside of the safe room of Al Anon. I realized that being part of this community might add holiness and wholeness into my life. There is a reason that the Torah teaches us that love is a pathway to holiness, whether it is love of the self, love of each other, or love of the stranger.

In the midst of all of the purity laws in the Book of Leviticus, we are told that if a clay bowl becomes impure, the only way to purify it is to break it.⁵ That doesn't seem to make sense. How can something be purified if it's broken? The Biblical commentator Chizkuni offers an interesting explanation. He suggests that clay vessels are pretty cheap, and easy to replace.⁶ So what's the big deal if you have to smash it and start over?

But our broken souls are not easily replaced. Because unlike a clay pot, each one of us is made B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. We learn that the way to purify a broken soul is not to break it, but to love it.

We have to learn to love ourselves and each other. It's not enough to simply offer tolerance. What we really need is radical acceptance. We need to look within, and be willing to notice and accept every piece of us- without judgement so that we can accept who we are, the way we are. Al Anon is one example of a community that uses radical acceptance and love to heal broken hearts and broken souls.

As Adam Grant finishes telling Daryl's story, he says that,

having been the target of racism since childhood, Daryl had a lifetime of legitimate reasons to harbor animosity toward white people. Still, he was willing to approach white

⁵ Leviticus 15:12.

⁶ Chizkuni on Leviticus 15:12.

supremacists with an open mind and give them the opportunity to rethink their views through the power of conversation. When we choose not to engage with people because of their stereotypes or prejudices, or ours, we give up on opening their minds. Daryl estimates that he has helped upwards of two hundred white supremacists rethink their beliefs and leave the KKK. Many have gone on to educate their family and friends. But Daryl is quick to point out that he hasn't directly persuaded anybody to change their minds. Instead, he says that he gives them reason to think about their direction in life, which he does by beginning a dialogue with thoughtfulness and radical acceptance. Over time, these White Supremacists started to see Daryl as an individual with whom they have shared interests, like music.⁷

And with this kind of nurturing, relationships then are able to flourish.

Just as it has been for Daryl, radical acceptance is a lifelong practice. It does not mean that we endorse ideas with which we fundamentally disagree. But it means rejecting the idea, not the person who holds it. We have the ability to love people who are not completely like us. In fact, the deepest relationships might be the ones with whom we can have tough conversations, disagree, and still walk away with mutual love and respect. Then, we open ourselves up to living in relationship where we don't have to be afraid to expose our whole selves.

Author Brene Brown teaches us that true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world. We can only experience real belonging when it is whole and unconditional.⁸ And in order to receive this love and acceptance, we first need to be able to give it.

May this year be the one where we begin to embrace radical acceptance of ourselves and others. May we see brokenness and pain, in everyone including ourselves, not as a flaw to be ignored, but as a sign of our humanity. I pray that radical acceptance leads to love, of ourselves,

⁷ Adam Grant. 2022. *THINK AGAIN : The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. S.L.: W H Allen. Page 138-139.

⁸ Brene Brown. 2019. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. S.L.: Random House.

others, and the Holy One so that our souls may heal, and that this time next year, we can say that because of the love we gave and the love we received, our souls are a little less broken, and our lives a little more whole.

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