

"Flawed Thinking"

So this rabbi was talking with a doctor who confesses to him: “You know what my big problem is, rabbi? I care too much. I often treat patients without asking them to pay.” The rabbi looks at him and responds: “I do that, too!” The doctor is a little perplexed, and persists: “And you know, I often write prescriptions and cover the cost myself.” The rabbi thinks for a moment, smiles and says, “Yes, I do that, too!” The doctor now a bit frustrated says to the rabbi: “You know, I even do surgery and forgo my normal fee.” The rabbi nods his head and says, “Yes, I do that, too.”

“Wait a minute”, the doctor exclaims. “What are you talking about? You aren’t a doctor – you don’t do surgery, prescribe medicine or even see patients!” The rabbi was

startled: “Oh, no I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that I was a doctor. I just meant that yes, I also like to say good things about myself to others.”

We all have faults, real character flaws, and genuine deficiencies in our personalities. And yet we all fear letting others know that side of us. We are afraid to admit our shortcomings and our deficiencies. So when people are asked to name a fault about themselves, they, like the doctor, will often offer a disguised merit: “Well, I care too much!” “ I can’t stand it if things are out of place and not perfect.” “I have a tendency to be a workaholic!” “I refuse to delegate.”

Those are not flaws. We all have **real** flaws and we hide them because we are afraid that when we admit our shortcomings, people will reject us, think we are awful people, and judge that we are not deserving of love.

I don't agree. Listen to the Torah when it comes to living a flawed life. When the Jews leave Egypt, we discover that our people are tragically flawed. After witnessing all that G-d and Moses had done for them in Egypt, they have little faith. At the Red Sea and with Pharaoh and his men about to overtake them, they rebel. Instead of putting their faith in G-d and Moses, they cry out, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die in the wilderness? Far better to have stayed and serve in Egypt than die here."

Three days later, they complain bitterly to Moses about a lack of water. They then murmur against Moses and wax nostalgic about how good they used to have it in Egypt where they had meat to eat and bread to fill their bellies. G-d provides them with manna and asks that they not gather the manna on the Shabbat. They do so

anyway. They then insist on meat, receive it and eat so much they get sick. At the wilderness of Sin, they complain against Moses and almost stone him. This is a terribly flawed people.

Tomorrow's portion is just the first of many sections of the Torah where we find ourselves embarrassed by our ancestors. The Israelites are a greedy, petty, and disloyal bunch, constantly challenging the authority of Moses and turning against G-d at every opportunity. And the Torah never fails to point out every flaw about G-d's "chosen people".

The Torah does the same thing with our heroes.

Moses is probably the greatest individual in the Torah and yet his flaws are more than: "He cares too much about people." Or "He is too modest". The Torah shows him to be a terrible father, a distant husband, and a man with an

awful temper. In his later years, Moses commits serious errors in judgment, is involved in genocide, is uncertain of his own leadership, jealous of others and angry at G-d.

And Moses comes across as one of our **least** flawed individuals! The heroes of our people, from Abraham on down, are so flawed we are sometimes embarrassed to even call them our ancestors. From Abraham giving up his wife to be raped to save his own life to Sarah torturing her maidservant, from Isaac's strained relationship with his father to Rebecca deceiving her blind husband, from the fierce sibling jealousy of Rachel and Leah to the craftiness of Jacob. And let us not forget the murderous intentions of the children of Jacob against their brother Joseph! We are one flawed nation!

The rabbis read the Torah and can't help but notice the emphasis on the flaws of our great heroes. They

believe the Torah does this to make sure we never deify our leaders, prophets and teachers. We love and honor them all, from Abraham to Solomon, but they are not gods; we don't worship them, and we will never consider them saints. The Torah hides nothing from us about them, constantly reminds us of their missteps, to make sure we never forget that only G-d is perfect and only G-d is worthy of our devotion. There must never be a "cult of personality" among our people.

I think there is another reason. I think the Torah refuses to hide the flaws of our great people to remind us that as human beings, it is okay to be flawed and alright to have shortcomings. I am not a psychologist but I find it amazing how many people feel the need to come and unburden themselves to me about their lives. And they will admit shortcomings about themselves that they would

never tell anyone else. And what stuns me is not that they are flawed, but that as a result of these flaws, they hate themselves. They come to me and tell me they can't stand who they are. They feel they can't move on with their lives because they have determined that they are bad people and are not worthy of love.

I want to believe that when the Torah points out the flaws of our heroes and our people, when we are shown how our "greatest generation", the ones who forged our nation, were little more than a bunch of disbelieving, dispirited, petty souls, we learn a great lesson. And that is that G-d never abandons us, loves us and cares for us no matter our shortcomings.

G-d loved our people and G-d cares about us despite our flaws. Our heroes and people were just like us, flawed and difficult to love at times, but G-d loved and cared for

them. He didn't expect perfection from them and He doesn't expect perfection from us; he demands that we realize that we are created in His divine image and are capable of great things despite our imperfections. It is okay to be flawed.

Let me leave you with something you might not have thought about before. One of the greatest sentences in the Torah is a line that summarizes everything about Judaism: "V'ahavta L're'echa Kamocha", "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). It is a beautiful statement, but do you realize what is implied with those words? That you **first** love yourself! "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." G-d wants us to love ourselves. We don't have to beat ourselves up for our mistakes and imperfections. We do not have to deny our failing and shortcoming; we need not hide our deficiencies or offer disguised merits

like the doctor felt the need to offer to the rabbi: “ I care too much.” We are not perfect and we don’t have to be. And when we embrace our imperfections as part of who we are, we discover the love that G-d showed us when he liberated our very *imperfect* people long ago.

AMEN

(My thanks to my colleague and friend Rabbi David Wolpe for the idea and inspiration for this sermon).