

When Tisha B'Av coincides with Shabbat, there is always this uncomfortable ambiguity: how to hold the joy of Shabbat with the cosmic grief of this season?

Of course, that ambiguity, that tension always exists, even on the days that our year cycle does not point to it. To be awake is to acknowledge all of the pain and brokenness, all that is wrong. To be well is to find the wholeness and the joy and the beauty that coexists alongside and within the outrage, the grief and the fear.

This week's parasha, Devarim, the first book of Deuteronomy, which opens Moshe's final speech to the Israelite people, spanning most of the whole book. Devarim is always read on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'av. Perhaps for this reading, as Rabbi Aviva Richman notes, many traditional commentators have a propensity to seek, and find – evidence of rebuke within Moshe's words.

To be sure, Moshe explicitly recaps some of the failures of the parents of the generation he is addressing, reminding them – and us – of the dangers of faintheartedness, of lack of faith. In some moments, his upset with the people's past behavior seems explosive, but he also has one moment in which he seems self-aware about this. In chapter 1, he describes first how Hashem commanded the people to ravel and take possession of the promised land. In verses 9-12, he recollects his frustration and interrupts himself, saying, "Thereupon I said to you, "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself. Your God Hashem has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky.— May Hashem, the God of your ancestors, increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as promised.— How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!"

He goes on, describing the delegated system of judges that we find originally in Parashat Yitro, suggested by his Midianite father-in-law. But I find myself particularly fascinated by this outburst of frustration and blessing, simultaneously.

Perhaps this is because as a parent, I relate to it. Yesterday morning, as I was biking my daughters to daycare, one was singing loudly as I was trying to ask which route we should take. I said her name. “What?” She said, and immediately kept singing. “Excuse me!” I said. “What?” she said, and then resumed singing as I started to talk. And then I lost it. “When I ask for your attention, and you say ‘what’ then you have to stop singing to listen to me! I love your singing – your voice is so beautiful, and I love how much you love to sing, I hope you always love to sing – but not when I am trying to speak to you!”

Right there, in the middle of a litany of frustration, some part of my brain knew that I needed to add the blessing. Needed to tell her that even though I was frustrated with a particular aspect of her behavior, I wouldn’t want, in principle to diminish the song.

Similarly, the commentator Or HaChaim says, “[Moshe] had interrupted this train of thought in order to counteract any negative results which would accrue to the people from a complaint about them by their leader. At this point he feels it is safe to carry on with what he had to say in verse 9.”

I love this comment because of what it teaches about how to reprove, and because it can be understood both metaphysically as well as psychologically. Metaphysically – as in Moshe wanted God to bless the people and not punish them for causing him such tsuris. But also psychologically, in terms of how the people themselves would hear his complaint. Some part of Moshe wanted to be careful not to diminish their song, as it were. And only by hearing that he saw their greatness and hoped they would live up to it, could they receive reproof about the ways they failed to live up to it.

I'm sure we all have experiences of how reproof doesn't work when it is just full of rage. It works much better when it includes relationship, "here is all the evidence I have that you *can do this well.*" And in all of the haftarot of admonition, the prophetic selections that fall during the three weeks, this insight is implicit: the prophets rebuke Israel, to be sure, and warn of disaster, but always point out that we *could* be doing better, that we have before and we will again, eventually.

To reprove is to believe that there is hope for a person and for a relationship. How often do we shy away from saying the hard to truth to someone, because we don't believe we have enough goodwill built up with them, or because we simply don't believe they are capable of receiving it? To reprove well is to pass that faith on to the one being reproved.

There is a commentary tradition that Moshe is also reproofing God in the book Devarim, suggesting that God has set the people of Israel up for failure. He mentions a place name that the Israelites never actually visited, "Di Zahav," literally, "enough gold." While everyone agrees that this is an allusion to the Golden Calf, in Masechet Sanhedrin, the sages say, "**Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be: Master of the Universe, because of the gold and silver that You lavished upon the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt until they said enough [dai], this wealth caused the Jewish people to fashion for themselves gods of gold.**"

Moshe praises God, but also rebukes. And if we understand that word, God, as broadly as possible, we see as with the interpersonal, so with the world: we are healthier when we are able to face reality with reproof; acknowledging what is broken, and with praise, acknowledging what hope there still is.

At Jewish weddings, we break a glass, reminding ourselves of all that is broken in the world, even at our time of greatest joy. And when we finish reading Lamentations, we recite **השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם**. As we move through and out of this season of outrage and mourning, reproof is the necessary link to the season of *teshuvah*. That is coming. We cannot improve, repent and return if no one helps us understand what we have done wrong.

So my blessing for us, as we go into and out of Tisha B'Av, is to remember to look at the world around us with both critique and joy. And if there is a hard conversation, if there's a relationship that feels fragile, now is the time to talk about it, bringing all of the fear of how hard it is, and all of the hope of what might be. If we do it well, we may find that we not only give but also receive a blessing.