

Ekev
Rabbi Arinna Moon
August 23, 2008

Two weeks ago on Sunday when I arrived at the gate in the Denver airport thinking I was getting on the plane to go home, I quickly found out otherwise. My plane was delayed for two hours. Now normally, this would be cause for at least a little fussing and fuming, and it is true that I wanted to get home and get a decent night's sleep before working all day Monday. But I am a person who does not believe in coincidence. Things happen for a reason. In this case, the reason became apparent before I even got on the plane.

I began a discussion with the woman sitting next to me in the waiting area. She was about my age and returning to L.A. from a conference in Washington DC. My ears perked up when she mentioned that she had low vision – I never would have known if she hadn't said anything. In fact, she had macular degeneration, the same disease my mother has struggled with for the past twenty-five years. I have become all too well acquainted with her need for extra light, magnification and keeping objects in the same place consistently. This woman had a rare form of the disease that started when she was a teenager and was slowly robbing her of sight. Nevertheless, she had developed a career in the film industry. In the interest of self-care, she was working with a medical practitioner trying innovative ways to improve her vision. When he died suddenly, she was left on her own to continue the search for alternative treatments. It was then that her life path became clear. She needed to give up editing films and carry on the work that he had started. The conference was the first step in that direction.

I felt so inspired listening to her story. Here was a woman with a serious disability who was determined to improve not only her own life but the lives of other people. Instead of languishing in self-pity, she was bravely stepping into unknown territory and finding new people to partner with in this research, despite the daily struggle to see well enough to read or navigate unfamiliar places. She was determined to live fully even though others might see her as less than whole. I came away from our encounter having learned something new and feeling blessed to have been in the presence of this remarkable woman.

This week's Torah portion teaches us the lesson of valuing people with infirmities. Moses is recounting to the Israelites how they have been a defiant people and as an example of their faithless behavior, he retells the incident of the molten calf. He remembers how angry he was at them and how he smashed the stone tablets that God had inscribed. God was ready to destroy the people on account of their idolatry but Moses intervened on their behalf. Deut. 10:1-2 then says, "Thereupon the Eternal One said to me, 'Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood. I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark.'" Now this leads to a very interesting question. When the text says, *you shall deposit them in the ark*, does it refer to the new, whole set of tablets that Moses was instructed to carve, or to the fragments of the original, smashed tablets? Up until this point in the parashah, the ideas have been presented in binary logic: follow God's commandments and be rewarded or

don't follow them and be punished. In contrast to this type of thinking, the answer to the question posed about the tablets is "both/and" rather than "either/or."

The Talmudic sages figured that both sets of tablets were placed in the ark, the whole and the shattered together as discussed in *Bava Batra* 14a-b in the Talmud. This reasoning begs a further question: Why keep the broken tablets in the first place? Why not just throw them out since Moses had a new set the same as the first? In the Talmud, Rabbi Judah provides one answer, through a metaphor: "Show great care with an old person who has forgotten what he has learned through no fault of his own, for it is taught, 'Both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were placed in the ark'" (*B'rachot* 8b).

This is a beautiful way of saying that our God-given human dignity never perishes. It does not diminish with age or with the infirmities of mind and body. The tablets, though broken, were no less the word of God; no less sacred. Likewise, every person, regardless of age or physical ability is to be valued. The Rabbis took seriously the Torah's claim that each human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), placing this principle at the heart of Jewish ethics. The divine image in each of us impels us to treat our fellow human beings with the same reverence we reserve for God.

Unfortunately, we too often neglect to apply this principle in our treatment of elderly and disabled people. As we live longer and longer, we have more reason than ever before to address the challenges of an aging population. Some figures predict that seniors will constitute fifteen percent of the world population by mid-century, and much more in some countries like the United States, especially in the Jewish community. Judaism makes the *mitzvah* of honoring the elderly a paramount concern. The Torah tells us in Lev. 19:32: "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old", a verse that appears in the famous passage that begins, "You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy" (19:2). Honoring the elderly comprises an essential component of holy Jewish living. But this *mitzvah* is more easily preached than practiced. It can be difficult to have patience with someone who walks slowly, struggles for words or can't keep up with a conversation or activity. Anyone who has been a caregiver for an aging family member will acknowledge how it takes a toll on our time, our energy, and especially on our feelings. It can be painful to witness the evidence of "broken tablets" when we still remember a person intact and untouched by the ravages of time or disease.

Similarly, Lev. 19:14 says: "You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind." Yet how many of us turn away and ignore people with disabilities we encounter in stores and on the street? We are embarrassed to see the limbs that no longer function and don't want to take the time to try to communicate with someone who may have trouble making him or herself understood. The lack of simple human interaction often keeps people with disabilities socially isolated. I remember an incident shortly after college when I was riding the bus to work one morning. A man stumbled on to the bus, his crutches uncoordinated as he tried to maneuver with a missing leg. His hair was gone and his clothes hung disheveled on his body. Almost in unison the people on the bus recoiled from him in fear and horror. It took me a moment; I almost didn't recognize him. He was my friend from school. He was battling cancer and the people on the bus had mistaken him for a street person. I jumped up to sit next to him and I could feel the entire bus relax. It was a lesson in judgment I'll never forget.

Many of us have suffered through a temporary disability during our lives such as breaking a bone and tolerating the total inconvenience of a cast, or recovering from

surgery and guarding the part of our bodies that had been cut open. Some of us live with more permanent disabilities like the loss of the use of a limb or one of our senses. God willing, all of us will grow old and slow down in our capabilities as a result. Yet each of us is still a whole person inside regardless of our physical abilities or lack thereof. We have talents to share, wisdom to offer and pure spirits that reflect the holiness with which God has imbued us. We have worth and value, not just to ourselves but to other people. Like the woman I met in the airport who is dedicating her life to finding a treatment for low vision, each of us has something to give no matter what our physical state. We can expect that advances in medical science will find new treatments for disabilities and that life expectancy will grow and quality of life will continue to improve in years to come. But certain principles will remain unchanged in generations yet to come as our religion calls us to reverently lift up the frail with the firm, the broken tablets with the whole. May we come to recognize and embrace the godliness in everyone.