

# Disappointment

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When R. Ahron Soloveitchik zt"l was recovering from his stroke he was had to learn to walk again. His *talmidim* (students) brought him to rehab and he's there, hoisting himself up and learning to walk. Each step was done in pain and agony. His students heard him murmuring something underneath his breath and they realized he was counting his steps. But he didn't count "1,2,3". He counted "אחת ואחת ושתיים." He counted, "One and one, one and two" just as the High Priest did on Yom Kippur. For R. Ahron apparently rehab in Chicago was like the *Kohein* in the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the High Priest in the Holy of Holies.

How do we encounter and engage a world that too often let's us down? Too often, our expectations are not met; our hopes seem in vain; our dreams left unfulfilled.

How do we face our disappointments?

In Hebrew disappointment is "*achzavah*." The word is quite instructive. "*Achzavah*" shares its root with the word "*kazav*," meaning a lie. Feelings of disappointment result from situations in which our sense of expectation proves far from reality, and therefore false. In other words, what we thought or hoped to be the case turned out to be a lie.

In Psalm 116, verse 11, the quintessential Biblical poet, King David captures this sense of disappointment, this feeling of "being lied to."

King David uses this very word:

תהלים פרק קטז

י אֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי בְּחַפְזִי כֹּל הָאָדָם כֶּזֶב

"I said in my haste: All of humankind is disappointing."

Man is false. Humanity is a disappointment. The hope or dream that is humanity is a lie.

In a classic rabbinic move, Rashi, the famous French midlevel bible commentator, seeks to identify the exact moment in King David's life where he might have felt so overwhelmed and burdened by such feelings of disappointment and regret.

Rashi lays out three possibilities. The first focuses on David's personal family life:

כי ראיתי את בני בוגד בי ומבקש את נפשי

Surely, David felt disappointed by his own son, Avshalom. As we may recall, Avshalom sought to dethrone his father and inherit the kingdom that way. David must have been devastated; he must have felt utterly disappointed by the family he had created for himself. His own son betrayed him!

Rashi's second possibility turns to the national level:

וכל ישראל גומלים לי רעה תחת טובה

David might have felt disappointed by the people of Israel. After devoting his entire life to the building of the kingdom, like many political figures, David must have felt burdened by the lack of appreciation for all he has done, for all of his sacrifices. David looks back on his life, wondering whether his actions will ever be understood and or fully appreciated.

Finally, Rashi's third possibility turns to religion and faith:

אף שמואל הנביא שהוא נאמן לנביא אף הוא כוזב שמשחני למלך (מצאתי):

David might have been disappointed by the prophet Samuel, God's representative and emissary. How would the prophet who promised the kingdom to David, and even anointed him, ever explain the many years of challenge and tribulation? How would Samuel or even God explain the time in which King Saul and his servants were chasing David and his men, threatening their very lives?

Rashi's three scenarios neatly organize this verse into three existential categories of human frustration and angst that ultimately result in profound feelings of disappointment. To be sure, there are other kinds of disappointments including being disappointed in ourselves, which I spoke about last night. But for a moment let's focus on these three: Our disappointments in our families and loved ones, in our nation and our community, and in our religion and relationship with God.

Like King David, we may look at our families and feel betrayed by our parents, or siblings, or spouses, or children. We devoted our entire lives to them and we simply can't understand, and sometimes can't stand (!), the choices that they make. "*Beni bogged bi*" – my very loved ones betray me.

Similarly, like King David, we may look at our people, be it our very community here at Beth Israel or the behavior of Jews worldwide, and feel a profound sense of disapproval or disappointment. I have volunteered and devoted so much to be a part of this community, of this people, and for what?! I have given so much and received so little back.

Finally, like King David, we may look at our relationship with Judaism or with God with a sense of utter disappointment. Our observances of mitzvot, our devotion to the Torah, our engagement with *tefillah* (prayer) all seem to add up to nothing. Our observance is unrewarded, our learning for naught, our prayers are unanswered.

These are real feelings, real issues, and real challenges for people in our community. No home is left untainted by some measure of disappointment or regret.

The ultimate question for us is – How do we confront, engage, and channel these overwhelming feelings of disappointment? This question has a special urgency today as we each seek to find a way to move forward in our lives and relationships.

I believe that the very same verse from Psalms offers two distinct strategies worthy of our consideration.

The first strategy focuses on the word “*be’chofzi*” – “in my haste.” In the psalm, David concedes that he may have rushed towards feelings of regret and disappointment.

In many cases, disappointment is quite simply the result of impatience. Our expectations simply need more time to blossom into reality.

That is in fact the critical closing lesson of the book of Genesis. Through the powerful story of Joseph, the Torah offers the ultimate example of this sort of patience.

It took many trying, difficult years for Joseph’s dreams to develop into reality. Joseph who was violently thrown into the pit by his jealous brothers, Joseph who was cast into jail by Potifar and his wife, Joseph who was forgotten in jail by Pharaoh’s cupbearer...At each of those moments Joseph could have given up on his youthful dreams...could have easily fallen into a

much-deserved state of disappointment and despair...And yet, throughout the narrative Joseph is continuously identified as a man of God, a man of patience, whose patience is a sign of faith.

Joseph's resilient patience not only permits him to see the fruition of his dreams at long last, but more importantly, enables Joseph to ultimately overcome bitter disappointment and to forgive his brothers. As we read in the Torah: "Don't be afraid," said Joseph. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:19-20).

Like Joseph, we may have good reason to feel disappointed by our dreams, by our loved ones, or by our faith...the book of Genesis however urges us to dream on, to not give up, but remain patient, and faithful, to an ideal reality that may yet come. Time may not heal all things, but time may still reveal that certain things never required healing in the first place. Today's disappointment may yet become the origin for tomorrow's triumphs and successes.

Patience however is not always appropriate; patience is not always an acceptable response. There are certain disappointments that no time will ever amend.

These sorts of disappointments may require a different approach.

In the psalm, David says, "*kol ha'adam kozev*" – "all humanity is false." King David, who may be only disappointed by his son Avshalom, or by the people of Israel, or by the prophet Samuel, is overwhelmed by this feeling and projects his disappointment outward, on ALL of humanity. His disappointment is ALL consuming. It envelops ALL people, ALL things.

When things don't go our way, especially when they don't go our way, we so easily slip from the particular to the general...

One bad relationship and all relationships are doomed to fail.

One child makes an unfortunate decision and we're prepared to disown our entire family.

One shul member failed us and we condemn the whole community.

One religious instructor let us down and we're ready to cast out God and His Torah.

Like David, our disappointments tend to consume us. In our way, we each say: “*kol ha’adam kozev*” – “all of humanity is a letdown.” We too, fail to isolate the moment and recognize the particular for what it truly is.

On one occasion Yitzhak Perlman was performing a violin concerto when, with an audible ping, one of the strings broke in the first movement. Everyone waited to see what he would do. With astonishing virtuosity, he continued as if nothing had happened, playing through to the finale using only the remaining three strings. The applause, as the concerto ended, was tumultuous, not only for his performance but for his audacity in continuing, undaunted. As the noise subsided, he was called on to say a few words to the audience. Sitting in his wheelchair, a living symbol of courage, he said just one sentence: “Our task is to make music with what remains.” (Adapted slightly from R. Jonathan Sacks).

Similarly, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk was known to say: “Three ways are open to a person who is in sorrow. He who stands on a normal rung weeps, he who stands higher is silent, but he who stands on the topmost rung converts his sorrow into song.”

Our challenge is to proclaim: “*Lo kol ha’adam kozev*” – “not all of humanity is a disappointment.” Our task is to sort out the good from the bad, to play the strings that still ring, to make music with all that remains.

Close to a year ago, our community received the devastating news that our town’s beloved *mohel*, a precious teacher and friend, R. Chanan Feld, was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

At the time, I shared with Chanan our community’s feelings of despair and heartbreak. This was R. Feld’s reply:

“Rabbi Cohen

The outpouring of love and concern has been overwhelming for this simple Jew.

Humbling is inadequate to describe the feeling.

Yet as small as I feel, the *teffilot*, *tehillim*, *limud ha-tora* have kept me going.

With unending gratitude and love - may you be blessed and blessed again.

Chanan”

Even in those darkest hours, till the very end, Chanan kept seeing the light.

The Yizkor service comes with its own set of unique challenges and disappointments as we reflect on the lives of our dear ones and the past.

At this time especially, let us seize upon King David’s advice. Let’s refuse impatience and seek faith instead. Let us reject generalizations in the face of specificities.

The passing of time may yet bring on the light, and even in darkness, there are always rays of light to be found. May we merit to hear the music of our redemption soon, and in the meantime, may we learn to make music with all that remains.