



Parshat Korach
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Lessons from a 6th grader
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This week, I had the most interesting conversation with one of our now-7th graders. I asked her what advice she would give to incoming 6th graders about how to succeed in middle school. I thought she would say something about the importance of doing homework on time or paying attention in class; something she had learned which helped her academically. Instead, immediately and without hesitation she said, “sometimes it’s hard to fit in, but if you try really hard, maybe you can.”

Her answer pulled at my heartstrings. I remember that feeling, of being in middle school and knowing there was a crowd of cool kids I wasn’t a part of. I remember all the ways I contorted myself, thinking that if I behaved in this way or joined that club, then people would like me and I would fit in. I remember being bullied mercilessly. And with shame, I remember watching other kids being bullied and thinking *Thank God for once it’s not me*. The idea of doing something that would alienate me further from my peers was horrifying. And while that fear has quieted over the years, that little inner 6th grader is still very much a part of me.

Listening to this young woman talk about middle school reminded me of a bit of advice Rabbi Rami Shapiro offered to new rabbis about working with teens. He said, “what kids want is someone to help them find the wisdom they need to get through middle school with the least amount of embarrassment and brutality. Sadly for them, you were probably bullied in middle school, and have no idea what to tell them. Sadly for you, talking to them about this makes you relive the horror of middle school. Try to maintain your dignity.”

It's real. And while I think this is generally good advice, I think there's also something to be said for the ways in which teens remind us of the fears we hold at our core. Beneath our adult exteriors, each one of us has that little 6th grader who worries every day about whether other people will like us and if we will fit in.

It's that little 6th grade voice that keeps us up at night, long after we should be in bed, scrolling through social media and taking note of what foods people are eating and where people are going so that we can curate our image to "fit in" with the image that's trending.

It's that little 6th grade voice that keeps us quiet when someone says a joke that makes us feel uncomfortable or does something that hurts. We will tell ourselves things like "I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill" or "I don't want to rock the boat," but really we are afraid that if we say something, we will lose our connection, lose our community, and we'll feel like we did in middle school. No one wants to go back to middle school.

I asked this now 7th-grader about fitting in. Why is it so important for us? Shouldn't we all want to stand out? Shouldn't we all want to be our most powerful, unique selves and be seen for our own gifts, rather than the ways that we mimic others? Why ascribe to the most common denominator?

Our conversation turned to the Biblical texts we've been studying, and with this young woman, I saw something in the story of Moses that I had never seen before.

Moses is a chronic outsider. He never gets the experience of "fitting in." He is born an Israelite but cannot be raised in the Israelite community because of Pharaoh's homicidal edict. He is adopted by an Egyptian, but Pharaoh's daughter, and Pharaoh himself, must have known

on some level that Moses belonged to a different people. Pharaoh never fully accepts him. Which means Moses wasn't Egyptian enough to be Egyptian and wasn't Israelite enough to be an Israelite. He wants to be a follower, to be part of the community, but God forces him to be a leader. Even amongst leaders, Moses doesn't feel like he fits in. He can't speak the way he thinks leaders should speak; he's not commanding in the way leaders have been before him.

Moses goes on to marry Tziporah, a Midianite woman. She is neither Israelite nor Egyptian, neither a leader nor a follower, and in some ways expresses the part of him that always feels like an outsider. Despite being a good woman and a good wife, the Israelites never accept her. If we were reading this text with modern eyes, we would say that our ancestors were prejudiced against her. They saw her as an outsider, mocked her for the ways in which her physical characteristics differed from their own.

There's one scene in particular where this comes to a head. Miriam and Aaron corner Moses in the tent of meeting to talk about the issue of his "Cushite wife." Our commentators confirm that Miriam and Aaron were not raising valid concerns; rather, this was an opportunity for them, in the privacy of the tent of meeting, to spew hateful rhetoric.

And what does Moses, the chronic outsider, do in the face of this hate?

He doesn't say, "how dare you disparage my wife! How dare you say that about my beloved." He doesn't say, "you know, that feels a little racist, that makes me feel uncomfortable" or even just "ouch!" He doesn't say anything. He remains silent.

God overhears, though, and God cannot stand by. God demands that the three emerge from the tent of meeting. Angrily, God castigates Miriam and Aaron for their evil speech and strikes Miriam with *tzaraat*, a condition that turns her skin scaly white. Cosmic irony at its best.

Miriam disparages Tzipora for having dark skin, so God makes her skin so light as to be inadmissible to the camp. As if God were saying, you think whiteness is so important, I'll show you what white supremacist thinking does to you.

And here's what's just so interesting. Moses, who stood by as Miriam and Aaron disparaged his wife, who did not speak up for Tzipora, now speaks up for Miriam. He prays to God, asking God to heal her. And God does. Miriam spends a week outside the camp, but then she's readmitted.

This story is often cited as an example of healing. We talk about Moses's power as a spiritual man, his relationship with God, we say his words of prayer when we ask for healing. But we don't talk about Moses so much as a bystander. We don't talk about how Moses, who had worked so hard to fit in, who had finally found his family and found his place, refused to face his own discomfort to speak up for truth and to protect his wife, and then stood up for the very people who had disparaged his wife.

I'm afraid. I'm afraid because in this moment, I think all too many of us are feeling like Moses. We come into this world feeling like we are chronic outsiders. We have generations upon generations of trauma, traumas that befell our ancestors because they couldn't fit in. Yes, it's true that for those of us with lighter skin, we can walk through the world without being noticed—people see us as white. But we know that deep down, we're not white enough. For those of us who have grown up in Jewish community, we see ourselves as Jewish, but we're not always Jewish enough to fit into every Jewish space. Our historical memory teaches us that not fitting in isn't just a middle school problem, not fitting in can be life threatening. Our history of pogroms, the Sho'ah, persecution, Antisemitism all teach us that when we are singled out, our safety and security are at risk. And so we want so desperately to be accepted, we want so desperately to be

a part of the American dream, to be part of the “cool kids” group. And we like Moses are at risk. The more we are afraid of being singled out, of being pushed out, of being seen as different, the less we are able to use our privilege to become agents of positive change. The more we worry about fitting in, the less we are inclined to think critically about what we are fitting into. The more we worry about how we are perceived, the less we are able to use our privilege and our power to protect those in need.

We, like Moses, need to take the time to process, not only about our identities in this world, but also about how our insecurities and unconscious thoughts compromise our ability to fight against hate.

I’d like to think that if Moses had processed his identities with a therapist, he would have been able to work through his outsider complex and might have been able to stand up for his wife. I’d like to think that if Moses had access to the kinds of resources we have access to today, he would read *White Fragility* and *The New Jim Crow* and *How to be an Anti-Racist*, and he would be prepared to have a real conversation.

Instead, Moses experiences Miriam and Aaron’s racism as an affront to his identity. And, as a result, he stays silent.

We cannot remain silent. We have work to do. We must acknowledge our own fears of being pushed out, our fears of losing our own safety and security. We must acknowledge the ways we’ve absorbed prejudice and bias, and the ways that we unconsciously perpetuate systemic injustice.

If we want to do better than Moses, than we have to start working now. That’s why our community is embarking on a year-long journey to learn about implicit bias, the injustices of

American history, and about how we can do our part to be stronger allies. We're going to be reading books, we're going to be offering workshops, and more than anything, we're going to be holding one another accountable to stand up against injustice.

Part of the challenge of being in 6th grade is that you don't yet know the person you will be. Neither do we. 6th graders, and all of us, have the same mission: to become ever better versions of ourselves.