

## Ma Nishma – Shavuot – by Rabbi Abby Sosland

Being perfect isn't what it used to be.

The rabbis picture the Revelation at Sinai-- which we will relive this coming Wednesday morning on Shavuot-- as a perfect moment, with all the people standing at the mountain perfect, as well. A midrash suggests that all of the people were all healed when they stood to receive the Torah. No one was blind, no one was deaf, and everyone was at full capability.

How do we know that there were no lame among them? For it says: "and they stood at the bottom of the mountain" (Exodus 19:17), and "stood" can only mean on one's feet...and how do we know that there were none deaf among them? Because it says "and we will hear." (Ex. 24:7) How do we know that there were no blind among them? Because it says: "and all the people saw the thunder" (Ex. 20:15). How do we know that there were none mute among them? Because it says: "and all the people answered" (Ex. 19:8). You are thus led to conclude that they were all healed. (Bamidbar Rabbah, Parshat Naso 7:1)

The midrash offers a beautiful concept, imagining that just hearing the voice of God brought each of us healing. And yet, something about the image is troubling. If everyone at Sinai was physically "perfect," were there no differently-abled people receiving the Torah at the source?

The more we learn, the more we understand that different abilities are not imperfections to be fixed but different ways of experiencing the world. Writer Andrew Solomon reflects on this in his book *"Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity."*

Many conditions I had thought of as illnesses emerged as identities in the course of my research. When one can experience a condition as an identity, one can find pride and satisfaction in it... Most deaf children are born to hearing parents, and those parents usually want to fix the deafness. Many deaf people, however, believe that their condition is the basis of a unique and invaluable culture with its own language, arts, and traditions.

What if the things we used to see as "imperfections" were no longer viewed that way? Instead of wishing everyone were healed, we could wish that everyone was accepted exactly as they were. As Rabbi Avi Weiss writes,

Which is the greater miracle at the time of revelation? On the one hand, it certainly reflects God's intervention if all people, even those who couldn't see, were given sight at that moment. On the other hand, revelation, which embraces even those with limitations, makes an extraordinary statement. It teaches us that just as at Sinai, everyone was welcome so too must we do everything in our power to see to it that everyone in our community is embraced.

Today we understand that "perfection" comes in many different packages. When the rabbis imagined an idealized religious moment, they pictured everyone being the same. Today, we can strive for a different kind of perfection: people of all shapes, sizes, and abilities standing together receiving God's word. May our own communities live up to that vision. Chag Sameach!