

Nasso - Never Let Them Make You Small

Take your fist, and hold up your thumb for a second so it covers my face.

It's kind of amazing, I'm only ~20 feet away from you, but that's enough that the half inch or so of your thumb can completely hide my face.

Please put your thumbs down, I want to see your faces.

I want to talk to you today about the ways in which other people can make us feel small, and about how we can shift that perspective. As many of you know, I like to teach through story, and today I am going to offer three stories, from three very different times and places, and very different situations - that all share a human piece in common.

The first story is from this week's haftarah reading. We are actually going to study it together, so I need you to take out the Etz Chayim and turn to page 813.

For background to understand this story, you need to know that in Ancient Israel some people would choose to take an oath to become a Nazirite - in Hebrew Nazir. In modern Hebrew, that word Nazir means a monk - someone who chooses not to engage in all of the pleasures of the world. Judaism no longer has that practice - there are no Jewish Nazirites or monks anymore - but in biblical times, a Nazirite would have to refrain from drinking any alcohol, or cutting his hair.

Judges 13:2-9 –

There was a certain man from Zorah, of the stock of Dan, whose name was Manoah. His wife was infertile and had borne no children. An angel of GOD appeared to the woman and said to her, "You are infertile and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.

Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicant, or to eat anything impure.

For you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a nazirite to God from the womb on. He shall be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines.”

The woman went and told her husband, “An agent of God came to me; he looked like an angel of God, very frightening. I did not ask him where he was from, nor did he tell me his name.

He said to me, ‘You are going to conceive and bear a son. Drink no wine or other intoxicant, and eat nothing impure, for the boy is to be a nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death!’”

Manoah pleaded with GOD. “Oh, my Sovereign!” he said, “please let the agent of God that You sent come to us again, and let him instruct us how to act with the child that is to be born.”

Notice - Manoach does not trust his wife’s account. He needs to hear it directly from the source.

God heeded Manoah’s plea, and the angel of God came to the woman again.

But God still prefers to go first the wife! The wife runs and gets Manoach, and the angel repeats to him exactly what he had told her. So now, Manoach is prepared to believe. He invites the angel to a meal, because – jump to verse 16:

For Manoah did not know that he was an angel of GOD.

How does he not know its an angel? His wife knows it's an angel! She told him it's an angel!

Then Manoach and his wife make a sacrifice to God, as the angel had instructed, and the angel goes up to heaven in the flames.

Manoah then realized that it had been an angel of GOD.

And Manoah said to his wife, “We will surely die, for we have seen a divine being.”

But his wife said to him, “Had GOD meant to take our lives, our burnt offering and grain offering would not have been accepted, nor would we have been shown all these things—and [God] would not have made such an announcement to us.”

Manoach finally understands what his wife knew all along, and now he’s terrified. But she is perfectly calm! We will come back to this story later...

For my second let’s jump ahead nearly 3000 years, to the end of the 19th century. This story I learned about from an excellent book called *Neurotribes*, about the history of neurodiversity. Has anyone heard of Lord Henry Cavendish? I had heard the name Cavendish, but that’s only because Cambridge University has a major physics lab named after him. In fact, the Cavendish lab played an important role in my husband’s family history, but that’s a story for another time. The thing that surprised me is that my husband, who is a Professor of Physics and has a Masters degree in History of Science and kind of knows everything about physics, also could not tell me what Henry Cavendish was famous for.

And yet Henry Cavendish was possibly the most brilliant scientist of all time. Brilliant, accomplished, but not famous. He is best-known for discovering hydrogen gas. This was before we had a periodic table, before anyone knew that there was even an element called hydrogen. Cavendish figured out a way to separate hydrogen out from the other components of air - mainly nitrogen, oxygen and water. And because oxygen is flammable and hydrogen is not, he called the hydrogen “inflammable air”. Then, he used electricity to combine hydrogen with oxygen, and determined that these are the two components of water. He had a couple other famous experiments. And scores of other important results, in a wide range of fields - many of which he never published, and never got credit for in his lifetime.

He was totally obsessed with his experiments, He took meticulous notes on every detail - good scientists always take good notes. He shared his notes

freely with anyone who was interested. But he rarely published – maybe because he didn't care about getting credit, but also because he was too worried that his results weren't perfect.

Cavendish had severe social anxiety. He lived in a big house in the middle of London, which he converted into a private laboratory. That's where he did all of his work. His neighbors thought he was some kind of creepy wizard. He almost never left the house, except once a day, at precisely the same time every evening, to take precisely the same walking route. He would walk at dusk, in the middle of the road, to avoid being seen or meeting any other human beings.

He was wealthy, and had servants living with him. He avoided them, too. When he needed to communicate with them, he would leave notes on a table. One time, a maid accidentally ran into him in the stairwell. He was so upset by the chance encounter, he immediately ordered a second set of steps to be constructed.

Many of his fellow scientists did not take Cavendish's reclusiveness well. One colleague called him "the coldest, most indifferent of mortals." Many thought he was arrogant, or selfish. But in truth, he was neither - he was just very, very uncomfortable being around other people.

That meant people did not understand him - especially in the 19th century. But even today, someone like Cavendish would be terribly vulnerable to bullying and victimization. His story could have been tragic – if he hadn't been independently wealthy. But because he could hire servants to take care of him, and he could fund his own experiments, he rarely had to interact with people in ways that caused him anxiety. It didn't matter that people talked about him behind his back. He had his experiments, he had a few devoted students who were very, very happy to work with him, and that was all he needed to be happy.

My third story is about us. The Jews. We have a long history of other people trying to make us feel small. From the time we were banished from

our land by the Romans in 70 CE, we lived as outsiders scattered around the world - belittled, and often brutalized because we were different. Our oppressors tried to make us into victims, but we refused. We were expelled from country after country. Routinely butchered by angry mobs. Forced to wear identifying clothing, so we could easily be singled out and shamed. Through it all, we remained proud to be Jewish. Proud to be different. Proud of our beautiful culture. If we had let them make us small, Judaism would not have survived to today, and we would not be here to celebrate Sarah's bat-mitzvah.

Had you asked me ten years ago, I would have said that all of that was in the past. Sure, every now and then you'd hear of some AntiSemitic incident. But most of us felt very comfortable being Jewish in America. The shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in 2018 was a shock to most of us. And the several other violent attacks in the years that followed. Now we felt we needed security guards outside every Jewish building. But even with all of that - public gatherings of Jews may have felt a little scary, but we did not feel small. We certainly did not feel ashamed.

Since October 7th, 2023, the atmosphere has changed again. Last year, a young man I mentored told me that he when he meets people for the first time, he doesn't introduce himself with his last name. Why? His last name sounds too Jewish. Another young man told me that his dormmates started calling him IDF-boy, because he, too, has a very Jewish-sounding last name. At services last night, Linda Rosen - whom many of you know - told me that one evening last week her grandson in Los Angeles had stepped out of his apartment, to wait for the guests that he had invited for Shabbat dinner. He was wearing a kippah very visibly, and he was holding his 4 year old daughter by the hand. A guy drove by and shouted out the window - get out of here you (obscenity) Jews.

And now, within two weeks, two violent attacks. First Saram Milgrim and Yaron Lichinsky, peace activists who worked at the Israeli embassy, were shot dead by a man shouting "Free Palestine." And then in Boulder, Colorado, another terrorist threw molotov cocktails burying 15 people at a

Run for Their Lives rally - a peaceful event raising awareness for the hostages.

It's not hard to draw a line from the casual bullying in a college dorm, to shouting obscenities at a stranger in the streets, to explosives and bullets. These are escalations of a pattern of trying to shame us for being Jewish. They want us to hide and feel small. They want us to be afraid.

Do you know what Linda Rosen's grandson told her? He said, I am not going to let them get to me. The next Shabbat, he was out there again wearing his kippah.

I'll close by taking us back to this week's haftarah, about the woman who was visited by an angel. Her husband's name was Manoach. What was her name?

We don't know. She's just called "the wife of Manoach".

It's possible that she preferred it that way. Like Cavendish - some people are private, and don't want their names up in the public arena.

But I think something else is going on here. Very few women are named in the Bible. I think the text intentionally withholds their names, as a critique of the sexism of her time. As a woman, she was so unimportant, her name was completely obscured by her husband's, just like my face can be obscured by your thumbs.

But who was the small one in this story? Manoach was distrusting, and scared. She was not afraid at all.

Nor should we be.

Don't ever let anyone make you feel small. Be proud of who you are. And create space for others who are different from you to be proud, too.

Shabbat Shalom.