

Disability Justice Discussion Group 12/19/24 JWB Ch 12

Torah study blessing

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melek ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah

Resources and Past Notes:

- General Jewish disability resources (list is growing all the time!): <https://bit.ly/JewishDisability>
- Other materials from this group (past meetings, etc):
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/187KeHzeZ3BwIFe2ZCM1YlxdxjG7pIH5j?usp=sharing>

Texts from Chapter 12 of Julia Watts Belser, **Loving Our Own Bones**: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole. (Beacon Press, 2023). additions in brackets --[]-- are added material by me, AVC.

Part One Discussion

On the seventh day, God finished the work of creating. And God rested from all the work of making ... In Jewish tradition, Shabbat is a day that recalls God's own rhythm of creation: Six days of the week to work, to shape, to make, and to labor, and then the seventh, set aside to rest and savor. When Exodus 31 describes Shabbat as the day on which God rests, it uses a beautiful Hebrew phrase, *shavat vayinafash*. [Exodus 31:17: For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day God ceased from work (*shavat*) and rested (*vayinafash*).] The verb that describes God's act of rest is linked at its root to the Hebrew word for soul [נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*)], for the spirit of life that breathes through our bodies. God stopped and got Her soul back.

Rabbis often wax poetic about Shabbat, and I suppose I'm no exception. But rather than extol Shabbat as a foundation for Jewish practice, I want to lay out its political force, the way it resonates with the principles of disability justice. Shabbat isn't just a way of tapping into Jewish culture or tasting a distinctive Jewish joy. It's an invitation to enter into a different relationship with work, with the world, with time. Shabbat is a way of unwinding the lies that make work the measure of our worth, the cultural patterns that tie our basic value as people to our ability to labor, produce, accomplish, and earn. Shabbat is my antidote to ableism....

Left to my own devices, I would eat up my life with worry and work and fear. It's Shabbat that reminds me: I am more than my "to-do" list. My work is not my worth. My humanity is not dependent on my ability to get things done.

Part Two Discussion

The tendency to value accomplishment isn't simply a personal fetish. It's baked into the very structures of society, the structures that undergird ableism. Ableism is a complex system, one that works in myriad ways to deny disabled people access, agency, resources, and self-determination.

Ableism manifests in the social attitudes that stigmatize disability, the architectural barriers that impede access, the complex set of power relations and structural arrangements that privilege certain bodies or minds as normal while marking others as deviant, dangerous, and despised. One of the ways ableism operates? It fashions speed and stamina as a threshold condition for basic belonging. Ableist values intertwine with capitalist pressures to laud those who work at a punishing pace. One of the lies ableism tells us? You only matter if you can keep up.

Patty Berne, the cofounder and artistic director of the disability justice performance collective Sins Invalid:

"We don't believe human worth is dependent on what and how much a person can produce. We value our people as they are, for who they are, and we understand that people have inherent worth outside of capitalist notions of productivity."

Berne's words resonate with me profoundly, as a Jew. A cornerstone of Jewish ethical commitment is the recognition that we are all made *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of God. To be *b'tselem Elohim* isn't dependent on speech or smarts or your ability to work the system. God doesn't see Herself just in the clever or the quick, in the lives we hold up as billboards of accomplishment.

Disability justice calls us to recognize the connections: the way ableism links up with white supremacy, with misogyny, gender violence, and trans hatred, with antisemitism and xenophobia. To challenge the violence and marginalization faced by people with disabilities, disability justice contends that we must also grapple with poverty and racism. To build a world where disabled folks can thrive, we have to challenge the unchecked, turbo-charged productivity culture that keeps all of us racing to catch up.

Even if you're not disabled, the cultural logics of ableism can be deadly. Ableism is part of what drives the brutal, brittle culture of efficiency that makes us to head to work even if we're sick, that imagines the body as an obstacle to someone else's bottom line. Ableism is the fear that gnaws us in the night: that we're only as good as our last accomplishment, that if we're feeling bad, we better fake it that we only matter if we're healthy, wealthy, and well.