

The Cracked Clay Pot

4/22/2023 at Har Shalom

Once upon a time, there was a potter who made two large clay pots. Each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots was sturdy, and smooth, and flawless. The other had a crack running along its side.

Each day, the potter would take the two clay pots to the river near her house, fill them with water, and carry them home. At the end of the walk from the river to the potter's house, the perfect, flawless clay pot would arrive completely full of water, but the cracked clay pot would arrive half full, because it had leaked. This continued daily for several years.

The cracked clay pot was embarrassed by its imperfection since it only brought back half of its water each day. Compared to the perfect clay pot, it felt like it was a failure.

Finally, the cracked clay pot spoke up and shared its embarrassment with the potter. "I'm ashamed of myself", said the cracked clay pot, "because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to our house. By the time we get home, half of it is gone."

The potter replied, "Yes. But did you notice that there are beautiful flowers growing on your side of the path, but not on the other side? That's because I've always known about the crack in you. It's been there ever since I made you! I knew that you were going to slowly drip water on the ground as I walked. So, I sowed flower seeds on your side of the path and every day on our walk back to the house, you watered them. Without you being just the way you are, those flowers never would have grown."

There's a song that we sing around the holidays that uses this metaphor to describe humanity's relationship to God--

Ki Hine K'Homer, b'yad ha'yotzer.... For behold, we are like clay, in the hands of a potter.

We know from the book of Genesis that you and I are made in God's image. But we also know that to be human is to be imperfect: to be flawed, with emotions like jealousy and rage and selfishness, to disagree with each other, to have moments where we demonstrate our failings clearly, to fall and then get back up again.

This is to say that humans are definitely not perfect clay pots.

We are each, in our own ways, that clay pot with a crack in it. Maybe even lots of cracks. But we were created to be human, with all of our ups and downs-- so how do we learn to not only live with our flawed nature, but to make true peace with it, perhaps even celebrate it?

How can we learn the lesson that the little cracked clay pot had to learn in our fable-- the lesson that our perceived flaws, in this case our humanity, might allow us to see things, and learn things, and explore things, that we never would have done if we were perfect and flawless from the get-go?

I think that this is where the beauty of modern Judaism, also known as Rabbinic Judaism, comes into play.

Let me explain. 2500 years ago, during the second Temple period, a splinter group began to form within Judaism. Today, we call this group Karaites. Karaites were an off-shoot of mainstream Judaism. They believed firmly in the holiness of the Written Torah (that means everything written in the Torah scrolls), but beyond the contents of Scripture themselves, they rejected the legal rulings and of rabbinic leaders. They wanted to keep the contents of the scrolls pure, literal, and as unchanged by humans as possible.

In the context of our fable, Karaites would want to be the perfect clay pot, *without* the crack in it. They saw the role of humans as being guardians and servants of a sacrosanct set of laws and rituals which, ideally, remain unchanged or unduly influenced by humans.

But we know from our story that when all the water remains safely within a perfect clay pot, even though there isn't a catastrophe, it doesn't get to mix with the soil or help sustain new growth. No new flowers can grow.

Now, Rabbinic Judaism disagreed with the Karaites-- and it is Rabbinic Judaism that survived to form the basis for the modern Judaism we know today.

I think that a big reason for this survival is that Rabbinic Judaism recognizes the authority of both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is what is in the scrolls we just read. The Oral Torah, however, was a system of rules and rituals supplemental to the Written Torah which, by virtue of being passed down orally for generations, had quite a bit of variation to it by the time the rabbis got around to trying to record all of it, in the Mishnah.

That means that in the Mishnah, we already had arguments, from a group of rabbis who cared deeply about Torah and who wanted to serve God earnestly and honestly, but who disagreed over the best way to do that.

But when Jewish leaders following the fall of the Temple had to deal with the fact that Jewish life became different in the Diaspora, the variations in interpretation of Oral Torah became a strength. They allowed for Judaism to survive by adapting to the rulings that were most sustainable in a scary new world.

Because of our belief in the sanctity of Oral Torah in addition to Written Torah, Rabbinic Judaism came to understand Torah as a living thing which we are always trying to better understand. We believe that through our actions as we perform mitzvot, pray, and try to heal the world, we imperfect humans therefore have the opportunity to discover new depths to our texts and be in relationship with God in deeper and deeper ways.

Furthermore, Rabbinic Judaism is full of stories of rabbis who make mistakes-- rabbis who are imperfect-- and who, from those mistakes, gain wisdom and Torah knowledge to share. It offers a framework for personal growth.

In our fable, if Karaite Judaism was trying to be the perfect and unchanging clay pot, I submit that Rabbinic Judaism is the pot that cracks on the potter's wheel and then learns to thrive as an imperfect vessel.

Besides-- if we're running with this image of the two clay pots, just think about all of the metaphorical flowers that the cracked clay pot of Rabbinic Judaism has nourished over the centuries! The rich discussions in our Mishnah and Talmud, our creative Midrash, our various denominations, our liturgy full of creative poetry-- none of this would have existed if Karaite Judaism had won out.

But ultimately, one of the reasons I am most grateful to be a part of Rabbinic Judaism, and the main reason why I am making such a case for it today, is because without it, I don't know how I would be able to reconcile my personal experiences and the world I know around me with some of the more challenging or troubling content of the Written Torah.

You see, on days like today, we opened the Torah, and we read about all kinds of maladies that can affect humans and clothes and even buildings in ways that don't exactly line up with our modern scientific knowledge, or our own lived experiences. But furthermore, this week's Torah portion begins with descriptions of bodies like mine, and rules and limitations on bodies like mine, without hearing voices from people with bodies like mine, and there's a part of me that really struggles to focus on the sanctity of what I am reading when I am asking myself "where are those voices? Why are they missing?"

There are lots of other things in this week's Torah portion-- fascinating things-- but it's hard for me to focus on them when the Torah portion starts this way. No matter how many inspiring and positive frameworks I hear of these verses, I still have an almost visceral reaction when I feel like voices are missing from the Torah, and I know from my conversations with some of you that I am not alone in my concerns and reactions.

And that's part of what I wanted to share with you today. Being part of Rabbinic Judaism helps me feel legitimate and valid and valued as I do the work to reconcile the emotions within myself in response to these Scriptures, and I hope it can reassure any of you who might feel similar tension.

Rabbinic Judaism teaches us that the Written Torah is an important part of the story, but it isn't the whole story. It teaches us that it doesn't mean we are broken if our learned experiences and values don't immediately align with a literal translation of the Written Torah, and that it can help to look at rabbinic interpretations for further guidance. But at the same time, it also doesn't let us off the hook and tell us we can do whatever we want. Instead, Rabbinic Judaism requires us to engage with our texts and value our traditions while also prioritizing well-intentioned debate and genuine, holy curiosity.

So, in the context of this week's Torah portion, being part of Rabbinic Judaism certainly gives me real comfort. Because while it is true that in the past, there were important voices-- like women's voices-- missing from discussions of our bodies, the tradition of Rabbinic Judaism means that now, those voices CAN be heard.

Rabbinic Judaism began thousands of years ago, but it continues to thrive to this day. New rabbinic discoveries and decisions are happening all the time. It is thanks to the rabbis in recent decades who have, (in the spirit of Rabbinic Judaism), interpreted and reinterpreted our tradition, that I can be giving this sermon today. It is thanks to Rabbinic Judaism that a woman like me is allowed to be a rabbi at all. It is thanks to Rabbinic Judaism that we can ask ourselves, what voices are still missing from the conversation? What voices need to be heard?

(Now, I want to take a step away from this sermon, for a second, and acknowledge that the fact that women can be rabbis in the Conservative movement is, in the greater scheme of human history, relatively new. And change takes time, and takes a while for everyone to become comfortable with. And that's totally OK!

But a wonderful aspect of Rabbinic Judaism is that the process of getting used to new frameworks, and facing our discomfort at other peoples' opinions, is worth it when it leads to deeper connection to Torah.)

Lord knows (potter knows!) I am not a perfect vessel. I am cracked all over from my humanity and my life experiences, each of which have left a mark. But this is true of everyone, including every rabbi-- our life experiences bump us and scratch us and bruise us. And that isn't a bad thing. The different scuffs and marks and cracks in us shape and influence our love for Torah and the stories we share.

And this is part of why it is so valuable, and so important, to have a variety of voices discussing Torah. We will all carry our Torah in slightly different ways based on our experiences. And as long as we love the water of the Torah that we carry, it's not a failure or shortcoming if some of the Torah we love spreads in ways it hasn't before-- in fact, those spills might inspire beautiful new traditions and interpretations.

That's just what happens when Torah is in relationship with humanity, just like when the water falls from the cracked clay pot onto the dirt. Torah mixes with our lives just like the spilled water mixes with dirt, and though it can at times make things muddy or confusing, sometimes, it also leads to beautiful flowers.

I understand that the words in our Torah scrolls were written long, long ago, and that many aspects of life were different, then. But I believe that those words are deeply holy, as they are written, and that they resonated with our ancestors. This makes them precious to me, even when I struggle with them. And while I still do not have a slam-dunk answer (or should I say today, a home run answer) regarding this week's Torah portion, I still value it, deeply. I still love it, and I still keep reading it.

Because here's what I do know-- I know this topic is sacred, and I know that people have wrestled with it for millennia. And that means that sitting with it, and wrestling with it ourselves, is in and of itself an important part of Torah, too. Whatever you believe or feel

about this week's Torah portion, you are part of that sacred discussion, and our tradition is richer for it.

Ki Hine, Ka'homer, b'yad ha'yotzer....

For behold, we are like clay in the hands of a potter.

Let's go water some flowers.