

Rabbi Rochelle Tulik
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You Are Not An Imposter

Sometimes it feels as if nothing is in the right place. As if I am not in the right place. As if there is no right place for me at all. But sometimes the feeling is even worse. Sometimes, it feels as if I'm in the right place but somehow I still don't belong. That I'm still an outsider. That I'm just an imposter, pretending to be something I'm not. And that at any minute everyone is going to figure it out.

Imposter syndrome is a real thing and many of us know what it feels like. The impostor syndrome is a term coined in the 1970's that describes a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist within a person, even in the face of evidence of a person's success and competence.

I'll give a simple, even silly example.

I swim twice a week. Every week. Without fail. Unless I'm sick or the gym is closed, I swim. I love being surrounded by water - I love the quiet and the calm. But someone once asked me if I was a swimmer and I quickly said, "NO. I just swim for exercise." Immediately, I rejected my place in the water I love; rejected my own qualifications as a competent swimmer. Why did I say that? Why was I afraid to claim I was a swimmer? What would it have meant if I had

said yes? What is the difference between “being a swimmer” and “just swimming”?

A feeling of ownership. A feeling of acceptance. That the pool is my space. Not just an area I visit sometimes. Or that somehow being a swimmer means something more than just swimming. Even though I feel totally competent swimming, I do it well, I do it often, and I’m very comfortable in the pool - even given this evidence, I hesitated to claim to be a swimmer and somehow own that piece of what makes me who I am.

In that moment, when asked if I was a swimmer, part of me still felt like an outsider enough to say no. And that’s imposter syndrome.

A feeling of inadequacy even in the face of demonstrated competence and success.

A feeling. Not backed by science or evidence. But a feeling that can take over. Imposter syndrome or a feeling of being an imposter in your own world pops up in many situations, many moments in our lives. Sometimes it is in professional settings. Sometimes in relationships; sometimes in who we fundamentally believe we are. When we don’t feel right in our skin. And sometimes when we’re just swimming.

But imposter syndrome is a FEELING of inadequacy even though we are competent and strong. Like my hesitance to call myself a swimmer in spite of my obvious competence and commitment to swimming.

The most challenging nature of imposter syndrome is that it is often most strongly triggered when we actually feel we are in a place where we do belong. Or when we feel that we have a right to be there. But then doubt kicks in.

I studied for many years and passed many academic tests, as well as interviews and screenings to get to stand in front of you today. I have earned my place. Does it mean that I never have doubts? Are there some days when I'm just hoping you don't figure out I'm an imposter? That I really have no actual right to stand in front of you speaking, teaching, leading. There are many days I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and hope you don't see right through me. Hope you don't call me out for the imposter I worry I am. But I stand up here every week, every year because I know, deep down, I'm actually NOT an imposter. I'm where I'm supposed to be doing what I'm supposed to do.

Can you relate? Have there been moments in your life when you worried about your own authenticity? Your own right to be where you were? This is an experience that many people have. Many people in our own communities. Many people in this room right now. A feeling of being an outsider in a space that should be yours.

Jews by choice often worry that they will be "found out" - that someone will call them out for not belonging; not being Jewish enough. That, no matter how hard they try, how many books they read or put on their shelves, no matter

how often they come to services, or how many menorahs they light, somehow they'll be caught - labeled as not Jewish enough. Not a "real" Jew.

But I also believe an equal number of born Jews worry that they don't belong here. Worry that they'll be found out - called out as not Jewish enough. This space that we tell you is yours. This tradition that you have inherited. Many born Jews I meet worry about their place in Judaism. Feel that they are imposters because they don't do it right. That they are "just swimming" - they are not swimmers. Many Jews by choice and many Jews by birth struggle with feelings, moments when they worry they are outsiders looking in, imposters in their Jewish community.

I can't tell you how many times I've met someone who, upon learning I'm a rabbi, immediately apologizes for some perceived inadequacy of their Jewish identity, practice, belief, heritage. Unsolicited apologies, borne from a sense of insecurity. They don't keep kosher, their dad wasn't Jewish, their mom wasn't Jewish, they never go to services, the list goes on and on. They are filled with worry and apologies. And they worry that as a rabbi, I will be able to see through them so they confess to me all the ways they aren't Jewish enough, good enough, before I can call them out as the Jewish imposters they are. Setting aside that I would never publicly shame anyone struggling with their Jewish identity, they are not imposters.

You are not an imposter. You are authentic, successful, competent Jews. By being here today, by logging in, you demonstrate your connection, your

commitment to Judaism, to your Jewish community, to Temple B'rith Kodesh.
You are not an imposter.

Our tradition is filled with people, stories of our ancestors experiencing imposter syndrome. All the way back to Abraham. When God promised to make him a great nation, he couldn't possibly understand why. He didn't believe it. He said, "who am I? I am only dust and ash." And when God chose Moses to be God's messenger, Moses, too, replied with the question "who am I?" Moses, who had been raised a leader, who would become a great leader, doubted his own leadership and the trust put in him by God.

In a learning session entitled "I am an Imposter", Rabbi Yaffa Epstein talks about imposter syndrome in Jewish tradition. She points out how Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Esther, Ruth, Hillel, Akiva – all were powerful examples of Jewish leaders who experienced imposter syndrome. Leaders who, in spite of their demonstrated ability and clear competence, believed at a time they didn't belong in that role. Didn't deserve to be leaders.

But they all found a way through the feelings. They started as outsiders, foreigners, looking into a world that didn't know them or accept them. And yet, they all became leaders, even paradigm shifters.

Each one heard a calling, and brought their true and authentic voices to the table. And each one of them changed the culture that they lived in, expanded it, opening it up to new perspectives, new ideas, new voices, and new

leadership. They changed their world specifically by being impostors. By being outsiders.

For every moment you feel like an outsider in the Jewish community, every moment you feel like an imposter in Jewish tradition, remember our ancestors who stood in similar places. Ruth - who converted to Judaism and pledged to honor and support her chosen people through good and bad times. Esther, who hid her identity in order to save her people at just the right moment. You are part of a long line of Jewish leaders and participants finding their places in this complicated but beautifully open tradition; you are part of a long line of Jewish imposters.

The word imposter comes from the Latin imponere – which means to place upon, or to impose. These historical Jewish impostors became imposers – they allowed themselves, and their outsider status to bring a freshness, and a newness to the tradition. They didn't stop in fear. They pushed through it to become stronger and make our tradition stronger. You can too. If you worry you are an imposter in this Jewish community, I have already told you you are not. Whatever ideas you have, perspectives on traditions, new ways we can practice, they are welcome here. You can be an imposer! I personally welcome the imposition and look forward to new voices, new ideas.

We are taught, *Lo aleicha hamlacha ligmor* - we are not required to complete a task. *V'lo ata ben chorin l'hivatel mimena* - but neither are we free to ignore it. The feeling of being an imposter can sometimes stop us short. Sometimes take the wind out of our sails. But we must choose to push through it - become

imposers. Face our fears and speak our truths. We can live with a certain level of self-doubt fueled by imposter syndrome but we must not let it keep us from fulfilling our life's tasks.

Because imposter syndrome is actually just an internal warning bell. A reminder that a certain element of self-doubt can be good and healthy. Just as long as it doesn't paralyze us. That's the key. Doubt, feelings of being an imposter, being in the wrong place. Those feelings can't take over. We can't let them.

Each of us has a place in this world. A place we belong, where our voices matter. Sometimes we doubt our right to be there, our right to add our perspectives. When we are competent and successful in our endeavors, we must not let the imposter syndrome stifle us. In moments of doubt we can choose. Choose to be paralyzed by our fears and doubts. Or choose to rise above them and shine through them and reshape our worlds with our unique perspectives. We can choose to be imposers and not accept the imposter label we give ourselves.

As you face the new year, I hope you will commit to facing moments of doubt, those moments when you feel like at any second someone will realize you're an imposter. Face those moments and in them, choose to be an imposer. Share your thoughts, your ideas, your perspectives. Be a swimmer, a teacher, a proud member of your Jewish community, a builder. Be true to yourself, who you are, and who you know you can be.