



Shabbat Chukat/6 Tammuz 5777
June 30, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

A week ago, our Israel trip participants, then newly assembled in Tel Aviv, studied the following Talmudic story:

Once upon a time, Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar came out of his teacher's home in Migdal Eder, riding on his donkey along the river. He came upon a man who was extremely ugly. The rabbi said, "Why are you so ugly? Are all the people in your town as ugly as you are?"

The man replied, "Go to the artist who made me and tell him, how ugly is this vessel you have made!"

The rabbi realized he had been in the wrong, and got off the donkey to kneel before him. He begged the man, "please forgive me!"

The man replied, "I will not forgive you until you have gone to the artist who made me and told her, how ugly is the vessel you have created!"

So the rabbi ran after him for three miles. The townspeople came out to greet him and they said, "Welcome, rabbi!"

The man said, "who are you calling a rabbi?"

They replied, the "man who walks behind you."

The man said, "if this is a rabbi, may there not be many like him in the People of Israel."

The people asked, "oh no, what did he do?" The man told them what the rabbi had done.

The people said, "even so, you should forgive him."

The man said, "I will forgive him as long, but he must not do this again."

It is a complicated text. It raised many questions for our group:

Why on earth would the rabbi say such a thing?!

Who was the rabbi and who the anonymous ugly "man?"

How do we forgive someone after they've wounded our hearts?

Where do we access compassion for all of God's creation?

In our world today, it has become increasingly easy-almost obscenely so-to throw about insults, to Tweet out hurtful words, to believe we are somehow greater or more important than others. As we sat with this story, we paused as a holy community to recognize the places where we've acted in ways that are ugly, insulting, careless with our words and other people's feelings. We held the ancient teaching, "Al tistakeil b'kankan, elah, b'mah sh'yesh bo: Do not look merely at the vessel, but what is inside it." We sat with the idea that we are morally implicated in how we treat each other; every one of us needs the loving guidance of a community to see when we've done wrong and to express forgiveness. We heard, in the words of this ancient story, the call to find beauty where others may see ugliness, that to be a Jew is to call out when we ourselves and other behave in ugly ways, and our moral responsibility is to honor all of God's creation.

Sometimes, the texts that trouble us the most can illuminate our best spiritual insights and call us to be our most loving selves in the world.

With prayers from Jerusalem that we each find beauty and seek holiness this Shabbat,

Shabbat Shalom,
Michael