

Parshat Tzav
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Self-Compassion

Lea was driving home from school one evening when she noticed her car was overheating. As she arrived in front of her building, the engine stalled completely. It was 5PM on a Friday, she was blocking the bike lane and the traffic was backed up behind her. Cars sped by honking their horns, a cyclist waved his fist at her as he rode passed her window.

As Lea illuminated her hazards and dialed AAA, her inner critic started raging, “Why didn’t you notice earlier that the car was overheating? You’re in everyone’s way. You’re an inconvenience! You’re taking up too much space!” She was startled out of her self-disparagement by a sudden knock on her window.

She knew it. A local business owner had come to yell at her for being double parked. Reluctantly, she lowered her window. “Hey,” he said. “I work at the cafe right here—do you want a latte or a chai or something? We’ve also got hot chocolate and tea.”¹

Drowning in a torrent of recrimination, Lea was rendered speechless by this stranger’s kind offer. He saw quite plainly that the car had failed her. He saw that the other drivers were utterly impatient. He saw that Lea could use a warm beverage while she waited for a tow truck. And Lea? Why couldn’t she harness this same gentleness toward herself?

Why is it so hard for all of us, when we face challenge or setback, to find our inner barista and offer ourselves a soothing cup of tea? Evolutionary psychologists have studied what’s called the “negativity bias,” that instinct in us all that makes negative experiences seem more significant than they really are. We’ve evolved to give more weight to our flaws, mistakes and shortcomings than to our successes.²

Jewish tradition is keenly aware of our inclination to raise up failures over triumphs. In *parshat Tzav* we read four times in seven verses that serious transgressions performed by priests in the act of ritual sacrifice will result in being “cut off from one’s kin.”

Traditional commentators understood being “cut off from one’s kin” as a penalty inflicted by God: death by divine agency, the denial of a life in the world to come, or the eventual total extinction of one’s line, by whatever means God sees fit.³ But “being cut off” might also refer to extirpation from the community or social exclusion.

¹ Story adapted from Lea Seigen Shinraku, “A Powerful Lesson in Self-Compassion: Are You Allergic to Honey?” [accessed 21 Mar 19] <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/a-powerful-lesson-in-self-compassion-are-you-allergic-to-honey/>.

² Charlotte Lieberman, “Why You Should Stop Being So Hard on Yourself,” *The New York Times*, 22 May 2018 [accessed 22 Mar 19] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/smarter-living/why-you-should-stop-being-so-hard-on-yourself.html>.

³ Adele Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, New York: 2004).

Too many of us know the feeling of being ostracized. We wall ourselves off from friends and loved ones when we err. At the moment we could use a comforting comment or a cup of coffee, we lock ourselves away in psychological dungeons of self-rebuke.

Dr. Kristin Neff, a professor of human development and culture, believes that we tend to give compassion to others much more readily than we do ourselves.⁴ Dr. Neff is the leading researcher in an emerging field of mental health called self-compassion. Self-compassion is a practice that encourages a stance of gentleness in the face of setbacks.⁵

Three primary behaviors of self-compassion can counter the self-criticism we have long relied upon to drive us to improve: the first is self-kindness, which entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we fail or feel inadequate. The second is common humanity, recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience – something that we all go through rather than something that happens to “me” alone. And the third practice is mindfulness, a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them.⁶

In a lunchtime self-compassion workshop at Princeton University, one skeptical athlete asked, “So you want me to be nice to myself when I mess up? Doesn’t that mean that I’ll just sit in my room all day in my pajamas and watch Netflix?”⁷ So many of us bully ourselves into higher scores and superior achievements, but research shows that self-reproach elevates symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁸

While the Princeton student snarkily wondered if self-compassion would lead to indolence, studies prove that it does not diminish integrity or standards of accountability. Instead, self-compassion lets us own up to a tough moment without paying for it with your self-worth.⁹ We can be nice to ourselves and succeed.

In *parshat Tzav* God instructs Moses, “Speak to the Israelite people: The offering to Adonai from a sacrifice of well-being must be presented by him who offers his sacrifice of well-being to Adonai: his own hands shall present Adonai’s offerings by fire” (Lev 7:29-30). Long before we had the language for self-compassion, God affirmed that each individual has, within her own hands, the capacity to seek her well-being. This task cannot be farmed out to a priest or bathed in words of criticism. Yes, human beings are adept at isolating ourselves when we struggle, but

⁴ Tara Parker-Hope, “For Valentine’s Day, Try Being Nice to Yourself,” *The New York Times*, 14 Feb 2019 [accessed 20 Mar 2019] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/well/mind/for-valentines-day-try-being-nice-to-yourself.html>.

⁵ Rachel Simmons, “The Promise of Self-Compassion for Stressed Out Teens,” *The New York Times*, 20 Feb 2018 [accessed 20 Mar 2019] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mBsfnbU2_CBoppFIb1CGEjZZLxR5WG4K7C4QdAbABpE/edit#.

⁶ Kristin Neff, “Definition of Self-Compassion” [accessed 21 Mar 19] <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

⁷ Rachel Simmons, “The Promise of Self-Compassion for Stressed Out Teens,” *The New York Times*, 20 Feb 2018 [accessed 20 Mar 2019]

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mBsfnbU2_CBoppFIb1CGEjZZLxR5WG4K7C4QdAbABpE/edit#.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

God knows that we can draw upon deep reservoirs of compassion to drown out our self-criticism. *Yadav tavi'ehnah et eeshei Adonai*, God commands, “his own hands must offer the sacrifice by fire” (Lev 7:30). Each of us is equipped to seek out wellness for ourselves; no one else can do this for us.

On April 2, our mental health committee has teamed up with our religious school to offer a special program on self-compassion for parents of teens. Adolescence is a developmental moment of peak stress, when heightened self-consciousness cranks up the volume of the inner critic.¹⁰ We invite all parents of teens to join Dr. Reina Marin, Shari Steinberg and me in a learning session about self-compassion and how we can adopt some of its basic practices.

Dr. Neff acknowledges that many people assume, like the Princeton student, that self-compassion is weak or lazy. But, she asks, “When you’re in the trenches, do you want an enemy or an ally?”¹¹ Do we want a fist-waving biker or a friendly barista? So many of us are experts at scolding ourselves toward success. Self-compassion invites us to flex muscles of kindness, connection, and mindfulness as we seek to grow and strengthen our resilience.

Dr. Neff developed a self-compassion mantra for herself when she experiences negative emotions:

*This is a moment of suffering.
Suffering is part of life.
May I be kind to myself in this moment.
May I give myself the compassion I need.*

What a perfect prayer to take the place of the sacrifice of well-being. One each of us can offer with gentle hands placed on open hearts, right before we sip that much-needed cup of tea.

¹⁰ Rachel Simmons, “The Promise of Self-Compassion for Stressed Out Teens,” *The New York Times*, 20 Feb 2018 [accessed 20 Mar 2019]

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mBsfnbU2_CBoppFIb1CGEjZZLxR5WG4K7C4QdAbABpE/edit#.

¹¹ Kristin Wong, “Why Self-Compassion Beats Self-Confidence,” *The New York Times*, 28 Dec 2017 [accessed 19 Mar 19] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/smarter-living/why-self-compassion-beats-self-confidence.html>.