

The period after I gave birth to my son, Yona, was much... harder than I imagined. Everything was just *more* in every way, for good and for bad, except for me: I felt like less.

Like my whole world-- which had previously involved meaningful work and travel and cooking elaborate meals and generally leaving my house-- shrank to my living room. In between trying to figure out how to feed him or convince him to nap, I watched *so much mind-numbing tv*, but I couldn't really focus on much more than that.

I learned how to crochet years ago and it's long been a habit that helps keep my hands busy and can quiet my anxious mind. I had already made Yona two blankets -- one before he was born and one that I started while I was in the hospital waiting for him to show up -- so I made a blanket for a friend who was expecting a baby shortly after Yona was born. It felt a little like acting -- like I was playing the part of a put together mom who could do things like keep a human alive *and* make blankets. Everything was totally under control! But the role-playing did kind of help. By sending her this blanket, I felt like I *did* have something to contribute, and maybe I *did* have a little perspective and experience to offer.

Around this time, my sister told me about a project called Welcome Blankets, which is a group that makes and distributes small blankets to refugees, they call it a "tangible crowd-sourced artistic action." Handcraft makers (like me!) make blankets and send them with a notecard about our own immigration stories to "create symbolic and practical gifts of welcome for new refugees coming to the United States."

I got some more yarn, found a new pattern, and started making a welcome blanket. And my world opened up again. A tiny bit! I crocheted and felt proud of creating something beautiful. I crocheted and learned how to make a new type of blanket. I crocheted and felt connected to the community of fellow crafters who were weaving and knitting and quilting their own blankets across the country. I crocheted and I felt like I was contributing to someone feeling a little less afraid or overwhelmed about transitioning to life in this country. I crocheted and thought about the people who helped ease the way for my own immigrant family members.

During those rocky early months of Yona's life, each stitch tethered me to myself, to my friend, to a community of people I'll never meet, and to people who might find connection and warmth through the gift I was creating.

There is so much in the world that is destabilizing. Whether it is a dramatic change in the microsphere of our own lives or headlines about any number of world-altering shifts. It can be hard to figure out a way to stay steady. This is not a new problem -- it's very ancient -- and I want to offer a story from our tradition that suggests two evergreen practices to help us find solid ground in turbulent times: strengthening your connection to others and pushing yourself to learn.

I imagine some of you have heard this Talmudic story before: a *ger*, a prospective convert, approaches the sage Hillel and asks him to teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot.

The story is set up to make us dismiss this seeker. It comes on a page of annoying questions, including this very same person first approaching Shammai, the sage who serves as Hillel's foil, with the same question. Without even uttering a word in response, Shammai pushes the *ger* aside. But Hillel *does* respond, and takes the request seriously. He answers: דַּעְלָה סְנִי לְחִבְרָה לֹא תַעֲבִיד What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah, the rest is interpretation. זֵיל גָּמור Go and learn.

The Hasidic teacher, Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, interprets this incident differently than I've ever considered it. Instead of impatience, he invites us to consider a different question the *ger* might be asking: not, "teach me a Torah while I am *literally* standing on one foot," but "teach me a Torah שהיא איזה אמונה חזקה לא יפול הנופל ממנה -- teach me a faith that is so strong that I will never fall from it." Hillel hears the question *behind* the question--the *ger* is not asking for a shortcut, it's a plea for help making it out of a storm.

In unpacking this commentary, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld understands the *ger's* request this way: "Teach me Torah that will keep me from toppling over--*she'lo yipol*. Teach me Torah that will enable me to keep standing when I feel wobbly... when I am buffeted by events of the world."

In this view, the *ger* is not a *nudnik* demanding to learn all of Judaism in a moment. Instead, he is a person looking for faith that will last him a lifetime, an idea or a practice that will ground him during life's challenges and help him endure. Hillel was able to hear his question and understand that the *ger* wants to build a stable structure of faith that can hold him up.

Read this way, Hillel's response is even more remarkable. Hillel tells the *ger*: the things that will keep you most stable in life are: being in relationship with others and a commitment to learning.

I. לְחִבְרָה

Hillel's first instruction is for the *ger* to consider his *chaver*, his friend and neighbor. To consider that he *has* a fellow and that this other person deserves to be treated well. He is telling the *ger* to see himself as connected to other people--as someone who is part of a community, something bigger than himself. Hillel tells the *ger*: when you feel unsteady, don't forget that you aren't alone--look beyond yourself. When you orient yourself this way, you will find you have at least one *chaver* who depends on you, but maybe even a *chevrah*, a whole society. Realizing you aren't alone in your experience of instability will help you understand that you have shoulders to lean on and people to stand alongside.

Right now the *ger* may feel wobbly and need the support of others, but in other moments, he may *be* that stable source of support. Connections tell us that we *matter*, we are depended upon, needed by someone else. Playing a role for other people *is* stabilizing. And the reverse is also true: we can then turn to those same people for support and community when we need it.

Hillel may also be challenging the *ger* to think expansively about who is his *chaver*, to widen the circle of people for whom he feels responsible. Perhaps Hillel is even modeling this expansiveness for the *ger*, who may well have been a Roman, the community that had brought so much instability into Hillel's own life. By responding to the *ger*'s question, Hillel essentially says, "I, too, find stability in treating others well, in seeing myself as bound to and obligated by my relationship to a broadly-defined *chaver*, which includes you; a person who might otherwise be my enemy! Even toward *you* I will not act hatefully, and," Hillel affirms, "That act of love stabilizes me."

This kind of response is borne out in sociological research about disasters. More often than not, people do rise to the occasion, they take care of each other, they step up and are resourceful and generous when their *chevrah*, their community, their people, need them most. Journalist Rebecca Solnit calls the relationships people form in the wake of a disaster "*a paradise of unbroken solidarities*." Hillel knew this intuitively and maybe experientially-- helping people, looking to others, recognizing the *chaver*-ness in the person next to you... all of this creates the foundation for unbroken solidarities. In other words, for stability when you feel wobbly.

We don't need to wait for a natural disaster or a Roman invasion to cultivate this spiritual practice. We follow this guidance every time we visit the sick or the grieving or the lonely; every time we feed the hungry or give someone a hug or send an "I'm thinking of you" text... or crochet a welcome blanket. All of these actions bind us more tightly to *chaver* after *chaver*, helping us feel a little steadier with each reinforcement of connection and purpose.

II. זיל גמור

Hillel's second spiritual practice recommendation is: "Go and learn." *Learning* will keep you grounded. Asking questions and seeking answers will help you feel stable and connected to this world. Here, too, Hillel is reminding the *ger*, you aren't alone, there are generations of stories and generations of seekers asking the same questions as you... some of them even found answers! Learning can draw you out of the narrow place where you stand to remember that this is not a permanent state, that there is more to your story than this period of wobbling. And that there is more to this world to discover... certainly more than you could learn while standing on one foot.

Hillel also reminds the *ger* that there are *generations* of commentary building on the Torah. Just as *l'chavercha* connects us to other people around us, *zil g'mor* puts us in conversation with people across time and space. Solnit points out that connections between people often become stronger following disaster, so, too, learning can be a path to stability when we are wobbling, a way to bind us to old ideas and new possibilities.

Rabbi Professor David Weiss Halivni's memoir is titled, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction*. One of the powerful themes of the book is what learning can offer a person who is living through a nightmare, and how learning kept *him* steady during the Holocaust. In one chapter, he describes how he and some of the other prisoners would

recite passages of *mishnah* out loud, whatever they could remember, correcting each other whenever someone forgot what came next. They would pass hours discussing halachic minutiae, a way to cling to that other world they were once part of. One day, he noticed that one of the guards had a sandwich wrapped in a greasy page of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the medieval Jewish legal code. Halivni convinced the guard to give him this ruined page. “The *blet!* [the page] became a visible symbol of a connection between the camp and the activities of Jews throughout history... We looked forward to studying it whenever we had free time...” As he later reflected, “It was learning that made my life as a child bearable... and it was learning that allowed me to resume my life after the Holocaust.”

What Halivni captures so evocatively is the way that learning was a lifeline for him, whether through conversation and recitation or through pouring over the same few lines of texts week after week. Learning allowed Halivni, allowed the *ger*, and allows *us* to draw on the wisdom and experience and resilience of the people who came before us, which, in turn, will remind us that we aren’t alone in this search for meaning and comfort in times of uncertainty. Their learning might be what we might traditionally think of as Torah, but, like our definition of *chaver*, it could be more expansive than that. Hillel models this orientation toward learning by being open to the *ger*’s question, curious about who he is and what he is asking. For us, *zil g’mor* might mean experimenting with a new challah recipe or trying out a new ritual practice or seeking out and honoring someone’s story of how and why they came to this country.

In the coming year, when we inevitably find ourselves teetering on one foot, may we find ways to look toward our *chaver*, our friends, and to go and learn; to remember that there is stability to be found in the connections we form, in the ways we obligate ourselves to others, and in the constant commitment to search for meaning.