

Brave, Not Perfect

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When I picked up Krystal she was wearing headphones. It seemed like she didn't want to talk at all. She didn't say a word while we walked to the subway. So, in an attempt to make us both feel at ease, I asked her a question. She took out one earbud to answer but I couldn't understand her Spanish. And she gestured that she didn't speak English so her earbud went back in. It felt like we were at an impasse. The subway arrived, and we sat down together. I opened my bag and took out my knitting. I'm used to people watching my hands when I knit on the subway, and Krystal was no different. All of a sudden, she stuck out her phone to show me the screen. It said, "Did your grandma teach you how to do that?"

So we began to talk using our phones. I would type into Google translate on my phone and she would type into Google translate on hers. I soon learned that this woman, just a few years younger than I

am, moved from the Dominican Republic 4 months ago and that she has nine siblings. She lives with her father in Brooklyn in a mostly Chinese neighborhood. She has no friends and all nine brothers and sisters are still in the Dominican Republic. Restrictive immigration policy means that it's hard to get here, and according to her message to me, it's only getting harder.

She wants to register for school so she can learn English, and get a job. She told me all this over the course of an hour as we rode from the city all the way to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I dropped her off at her house, wished her good luck, and left.

You might be wondering how Krystal and I met. I volunteer with an organization called Haven Coalition, which provides partners to accompany women who have just undergone an abortion at a New York City clinic and need to get home. Many of these women can't let anyone in their life know about their abortion, so they don't have a loved one or a friend to accompany them. About once or twice a month I meet a woman at the clinic after her procedure, and escort her on public transportation part-way or all-the-way home.

I have no idea what happened to Krystal, whether she's made any friends or registered for school, but I do know that she's brave. She wanted a better life, so she took a risk and came to America without knowing what the outcome would be.

Sometimes when I need courage I think about Krystal. I think about the challenges she faces every day. Buying groceries where she doesn't speak the language, looking for a job, living in a place where she doesn't have friends or family.

I think we can all find inspiration in Krystal's bravery. Bravery requires that we push ourselves out of our comfort zones and take risks. What prevents you from being your bravest self? In my life and in this community that I serve, I have observed that a relentless focus on perfection, ironically, prevents us from taking those brave risks. I think about teens who are afraid of taking the risk of true self-expression because it will get in the way of the perfect image that they want to curate on Instagram. I see people who get stuck in careers that tick all of the boxes of what our society calls success, but are afraid to go

out on a limb and pursue their passions. I think of kids who might want to take a gap year or pursue an unconventional academic track but are afraid to disappoint their parents. How many people, as they enter old age, are afraid to try something new, or are not living their fullest lives because they're afraid of their own limitations?

Seeking to be brave is more valuable than seeking perfection.

We don't learn from perfection. As a student, it's really important for me to remember this. When I accepted the rabbinic internship at WRT, I was more than a little intimidated. The idea of following in the footsteps of the famed rabbis and rabbinic interns who make up the history of this vibrant congregation, and joining this cadre of Jewish leaders was daunting. I had to trust that I was here for a reason, and now going into my second year at WRT I'm so grateful that I took that risk. I try to remind myself on a regular basis that I'm allowed, and in fact expected, to make mistakes. Bravery allows us to fail and then to learn from these mistakes.

Unfortunately, the cultural context we all live in encourages perfection. Our social media is curated, every advertisement we come across has been intentionally constructed and edited to look just so. When we are constantly bombarded with perfectly designed messages, it's no wonder that's what we learn to strive for.

The cover article of New York Magazine three weeks ago was a piece entitled "Who would Tavi Gevinson be without Instagram?" in which this American writer, magazine editor and actress discusses her reliance on the curation of Instagram and social media posts. She rose to fame through her social media presence and by sharing her personal life with the world. She writes, "Somewhere along the line, I think I came to see my shareable self as the authentic one and buried any tendencies that might threaten her likability so deep down I forgot they even existed." By spending so much of her time trying to construct a "perfect" version of herself, she lost the authentic self she was trying to present. Her definition of success became this perfect self, so I think we need to change this definition of success. Success doesn't look like perfection, it looks like bravery.

In Pirkei Avot, a 2000 year old Jewish guide to living an ethical life, we read- “אִיזְהוּ גִבּוֹר, הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יָצְרוֹ”, traditionally translated as “who is mighty? One who quells his bad inclination.” The word גִּבּוֹר here is translated as mighty. However, I prefer the translation that Maimonides offers. He considers גִּבּוֹר to mean *brave*, as opposed to mighty, changing the translation to- who is *brave*? one who quells his bad inclinations. I would argue here that the bad inclinations that Pirkei Avot refer to are fear and self doubt. We are most *brave* when we’re able to keep these inclinations, our urge to be perfect, at bay, and choose bravery.

We see a model for bravery in the book of Ruth, one of only two biblical books named after a non-Jewish figure, indicating its significance. Ruth’s husband dies, and her mother-in-law Naomi urges her to go back to her people, the Moabites. Ruth stands her ground, and says no, I want to stay here. You are my family, these are my people and this is my God. Ruth has no idea what the outcome of this act of bravery will be. She is גִּבּוֹרָה, brave, she sticks her neck out and stands up for what she needs. She just knows that this is the right thing for her to do.

During this season we evaluate this past year and look toward the next. This evening is called Shabbat Shuva, the Sabbath that falls in the middle of the week of teshuva, our process of returning to our true selves. As we engage in the process of teshuva, what if we made our goal for the next year, bravery not perfection? “אִיזְהוּ גִבּוֹר, הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת הַיָּצָר”- who is brave? one who quells the inclinations of fear and self-doubt. Yes, we can start the New Year with a clean slate, and strive to be the best we can be, but we’re not going to be perfect at it.

Judaism has known this about us, that we’re not going to be perfect. In fact, when we return to WRT on Tuesday night, the first prayer we’ll hear is Kol Nidre, in which we proclaim the idea that we’re going to mess up. All of these vows which we have made, we ask God to forgive us, because we know that this year we’re not going to follow through on all of them.

Keeping this in mind, instead of creating a goal of being a perfect version of ourselves, what if the goal was to be a braver version of ourselves? Instead of striving to create an instagram-perfect-self in

the new year, let's strive to stick our necks out on behalf of ourselves and others, to stand up for what we believe in, to take a risk and do something outside of our comfort zone. Each one of us has the opportunity this year to become a true gibor, to choose bravery. Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!