JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

I Don't Know What Comes Next

By Rabbi Benay Lappe in *chevruta* with Laynie Soloman

My *chevruta* Eddie Harwitz once told me a story that I'll never forget. It's a story his father told him. And, now, it's a story I'd like to tell you. When Eddie's father Jay was a teenager, he got a job as a camp counselor at a sleepaway camp. He was assigned to a bunk of first-time campers, boys seven and eight years old. On the first day of camp, the young campers were warmly greeted as they got off the bus, led to a welcome-to-camp gathering, met their counselors and bunkmates, and were then shown to their cabins to get settled. After the kids had unpacked, Jay noticed one little boy sitting on his bed, crying. Jay tried to find out what was wrong, but the boy just kept crying and wouldn't speak. "Did you forget something at home?" He shook his head no. "Do you miss your family?" Again, still crying, he shook his head no. After several more failed guesses, the boy was finally able to eke out a few words through his tears: "***I don't know what comes next.***"

I've been thinking about this story a lot lately because it names so viscerally and accurately an emotional state that really doesn't have an adequate name. "Uncertainty" is probably the best we've got, but it hardly gets at the depth of what is actually a very real and profound trauma: not knowing what comes next.

We're programmed, I think, to feel more comfortable when we "know the schedule," when we can anticipate what tomorrow will bring, when we know what we'll find when we "get there," and what we'll then be called upon to do. Not knowing what comes next is deeply distressing, and it's real.

Not knowing what comes next. It's that mixture of fear, anxiety, and disorientation we feel when something is crashing in our lives – when we lose a job, or break up, or lose someone we love. Or when the world around us changes drastically and suddenly and we don't know when things will get back to normal, or if the old normal will ever exist again. When we don't know from one day to the next if we will wake up with symptoms that could threaten our lives, or get a call from someone we love telling us that *they* have.

And while this story certainly doesn't ever help me solve the problem of not knowing what comes next, somehow naming it helps me. And right now, in the presence of this virus, so many of us are feeling a very profound sense of uncertainty, an all-consuming I-don't-know-what-comes-next. And it's at times like these that we need our stories.

The Talmud (*Gittin* 56a/b) tells a story of the time when life was crashing for the Jews (*all* of the Talmud's stories are actually stories of crashes, but I'll save that for a different essay). It was the first century and the Romans had attacked Jerusalem. It appeared that the entire country would be taken from us and our Temple destroyed. We were about to lose our home and life as we knew it. And the only connection to God that we had, or that most could imagine, was about to be severed. While the priests and the leaders of the community were fighting the Romans to preserve their country, their freedom, and their Temple, a small group of – yup, you guessed it – queer (wink-wink), fringy, radical folk, led by their teacher Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, snuck out of Jerusalem – by carrying their teacher in a coffin!

They set out to recreate a new Jewish community, a new way of living (a Jewish) life, in a town called Yavneh, where they joined a handful of those for whom the old way of life had long since crashed, folks who had already settled there and who had already begun dreaming up new spiritual practices, new ways to gather, and new ways to connect to God – with learning at its center. They created a Judaism that would have been unrecognizable to their peers who fought, to the death, for Judaism as they knew it. You may know this story. You may have heard it many times before. For many of us, this story helps inspire and ground us in the courage, bold-ness, and confidence of our early sages as they set off to build anew amidst destruction.

But you may not know the *other* story that the Talmud tells about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. It is a deathbed scene. As Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai lay dying, his students are surrounding his bed and he is weeping. Why, they ask, are you crying? And he tells them. He is crying, he says, because he is worried: "What if I was wrong?" That is why he is crying. What if everything he did to radically rework the tradition would actually end up hastening its demise? What if, instead of *saving* the tradition, his efforts would actually end up helping to *destroy* it?

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai would not live to see his radical new Judaism thrive and eventually become the tradition that has lasted these last two millennia. From our vantage point, it's easy to see that he *saved* the tradition. But the tradition preserves that deathbed scene of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai in terrified uncertainty, I think, to remind us that at the core of our tradition is an awareness and acceptance of uncertainty. [And also that, when you're on your deathbed, if you're not just a little bit

worried that you got it all wrong, then you probably hadn't been bold enough during your lifetime.]

Our tradition resists certainty at every turn. Every spiritual technology we have is designed to help us be "crash-flex." Every story we tell – from *Lech Lecha* to *Exodus* to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai – is a story of uncertainty. To teach us that, even as we move through uncharted territory, to remember that we've been here before. To teach us that it's possible to get through it. Like now.

As my friend Dan Libenson says, the whole point of mythology and stories and wisdom is so you know what to do when you encounter something for the first time in *your* lifetime … but not in *our* lifetime. As Dan says, our ancestors told us what to do: When a plague forces you out of Egypt, you learn to live in the wilderness, you don't look for how to go back! You listen to the folks who *already* live in the wilderness!

We queer folk – all of us who know the brokenness of our societal systems – poor and working class folks, folks with disabilities, trans folks, People of Color, and so many of us on margins – we all know a lot about uncertainty, about not knowing what comes next. The economic and societal systems that are crashing right now crashed for *us* a long time ago. We've *been* in the wilderness. And that's not to say that the kind of profound uncertainty we're all feeling is any less traumatizing for u – -if anything, it can be re-traumatizing for us – but we know how to get through it. Because we've gotten through it before. As Jews. And as queer folk.

And we've done it in community. We've done it by holding each other's hands. By showing up. By being there for each other. By listening. By telling each other our stories. And learning our peoples' stories.

We are all on a journey of uncertainty. We're taking it day by day. For many of us, it's an hour-by-hour or even minute-by-minute spiritual practice. But we're not alone. Every day, when I see so many of your faces in *chevruta* and in our learning spaces (like our daily *Mishnah* Collective!), my heart is filled with joy and hope and the feeling that I am not alone. It reminds me that what is lasting, what will never crash, is the love we have for each other. The love we share when we show up. And open up a *sefer*, a sacred text, and learn our stories. Together.

That little boy on his first day of camp had his counselor to listen to him, to hold his hand, to tell him that he would be there with him the whole way. That he would accompany him on his journey of uncertainty.

Who and what are accompanying you on your journey of uncertainty?

May we be there for each other along the way, and may we find strength, together, as we live into and write our own stories of uncertainty which will remind those who come after us that they, too, will make it beyond the wilderness of I-don't-know-what-comes-next.

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