

A student once asked Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi known as the Kotzker Rebbe, about the language of the *V'ahavta*, a central piece of liturgy that is recited twice a day. The *V'ahavta* says to place “these words”—that is, the commandment to love the divine—“upon your heart.” Why, the student asked, does it say *upon* your heart? Why not place the words *in* our hearts? The Kotzker Rebbe answered, “So often, our hearts are closed. When we place these words upon—on top—of them, they will stay there until one day, our heart breaks, and the words fall in.”¹

After sharing this story, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, in her parenting book *Nurture the Wow*, explains “There are truths—experiences of the transcendent, capacities for love—that are only available to us when our hearts are broken open. When we’re determined to stay on lockdown and not feel the hard feelings, we keep all that light at bay.”²

Why do we try to keep everything in? Why can’t we be who we are – cheerful and depressed, grateful and frustrated, excited and overwhelmed, sentimental and angry, passionate and scared – the variety of emotions that we as humans hold at the same time – all of which are valid? Why do we hide ourselves? Why do we ignore our emotions? Why do we remain indifferent with ourselves?

In Deuteronomy 22, Moses tells the Israelites about the various things they should be aware of as they cross into the Promised Land. The chapter starts by talking about lost property and how we must return it. Then Torah says: ³לֹא תִכַּל לְהִתְעַלֵּם *lo tuchal l'hitalelem* which is largely translated as “you must not remain indifferent.” From a modern, social justice point of view, it makes sense; we need to take care of those around us and should return the property. It is even translated from the BDB, or the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, as “you must not utterly neglect to aid.”⁴

Looking more into this concept, of *להתעלם*, *l'hitalelem*, I noticed that there are other translations of it. One of those is “to hide oneself.” *להתעלם* *l'hitalelem* is a reflexive verb, an action which we do for ourselves. So, when God reminds us to: ³לֹא תִכַּל לְהִתְעַלֵּם: *lo tuchal l'hitalelem*, it is also “you must not hide *yourself*.” But, we do it all the time.

¹ Ruttenberg, Rabbi Danya. *Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting*. Flatiron Books: New York, New York. 2016. p. 94-95.

² Ibid. p. 95.

³ Deuteronomy 22:3

⁴ BDB from

https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.22.4?ven=The_Contemporary_Torah_Jewish_Publication_Society_2006&lang=bi&aliyot=0&p2=BDB%2C_%D7%A2%D6%B8%D7%9C%D6%B7%D7%9D&lang2=bi

As part of my practice for premarital counseling, I do an activity in the communication session called “I wish statements.” This activity, which comes from Prepare/Enrich, a premarital assessment program, asks each partner to make a wish list of three things you would like more or less of in your relationship.

If I asked each of us to come up with this kind of wish list, that would be pretty easy and maybe hard to only stop at three. But the tricks are, the rules for this activity. 1) You cannot use the word “you” as we are humans, and it will automatically cause someone to put up their defenses and feel like they are being called out. This makes this inordinately more difficult because it is really about *our* wishes so has to be written in first person completely. 2) The statement must begin with “I wish...” and 3) continue with “because it would make me feel...”.

This last rule – the one about sharing our own feelings – that’s the one people really struggle with following.

In my experience, while one partner may be able to express the emotional side of it, I have never seen this be easy for both partners. This has become such a point of discussion that I have an emotion wheel⁵ printed off and accessible in my office so couples can easily utilize it. An emotion wheel is a colorful circle which has the words “I’m feeling” in the middle and then continues with layers of different emotions – starting with the most common used words like joy, love, fear, anger, sadness, and surprise. Each layer then expands that feeling getting into more specific and complicated ones. It allows us to comprehend our own feelings by giving us an option of words and stemming them from the most common emotions. Using this wheel – any of the varieties out there – allows us to dig deeper into what feeling we really mean to convey. And sometimes, the wheel overwhelms us with emotions that we’ve heard of, but aren’t always in our typical expressions, like “revolted” or “illustrious” or “bewildered” or “awe-struck”. No matter what, though, it causes us to think and extend our vocabulary of emotions to better express ourselves.

But why do we even need the wheel to help us? Why are we hiding ourselves and our true feelings? Our partners are supposed to be the people we can be most honest with and tell our true feelings to. But sometimes, that is really hard. And, the reality is, that society makes it seem like we *must* hide our emotions and just be able to respond to “How are you?” with an easy “Good.” Or “Fine.” We all do this and this translation of להתעלם *l’hitalem* goes even further to say, “you hide yourself *completely* from them.” By not telling our loved ones how we feel, we are hiding ourselves completely from them, we are not sharing our whole selves –

⁵ <https://www.dianaswillinger.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Emotion-Wheel-Junto-Institute.pdf>

which leads to us hiding from *our own selves*. This is incredibly difficult – to show our true emotions not only to others but to ourselves. But it is courageous.

Brené Brown explains in her book, *Atlas of the Heart*

We've found that across cultures, most of us were raised to believe that being vulnerable is being weak. This sets up an unresolvable tension for most of us, because we were also raised to be brave. There is no courage without vulnerability. Courage requires the willingness to lean into uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.... In a world where perfectionism, pleasing, and proving are used as armor to protect our egos and our feelings, it takes a lot of courage to show up and be all in when we can't control the outcome.... Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage.⁶

This courage resonates as one of the most powerful aspects of *לֹא תִוָּכַל לְהִתְעַלֵּם* *lo tuchal l'hitalel* because we must be vulnerable with others, but the hardest part is to be vulnerable with ourselves.

In modern Hebrew, *להתעלם* *l'hitalel* is translated as to ignore or disregard, again as a reflexive verb, it could then be understood as to ignore or disregard *ourselves*. This is much more active than hiding oneself or being indifferent, but to *ignore ourselves*.

In the book *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, HER Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed*, the author, Lori Gottlieb, chronicles her life as a therapist alongside her personal life in a genuine, honest, and hilarious way. As she shares her personal struggles while also maintaining her life as a therapist, she explains:

...I'm a card-carrying member of the human race... But revealing this humanity is another matter.... No matter how open we as a society are about formerly private matters, the stigma around our emotional struggles remains formidable. We'll talk with almost anyone about our physical health..., but bring up anxiety or depression or an intractable sense of grief, and the expression on the face looking back at you will probably read, *Get me out of this conversation, pronto.*⁷

I have definitely been on that end of someone's facial expression and felt defeated. I could almost see the face as I read that.

⁶ Brown, Brene. *Atlas of the Heart*. Random House, New York, New York. 2021. p. 14.

⁷ Gottlieb, Lori. *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, HER Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed*. Harper Publishing, New York, 2019. P. 7-9

But *why*? What *are* we so afraid of? Why can't we see beauty in our emotions – regardless of whether they are considered “good” or “bad”? Why do we even label our emotions in those categories? Aren't all feelings good? Don't we tell people “Let it out. I'm here for you”? Why do we feel equipped to help those around us when we can't even talk about our own feelings? Why do we ignore ourselves and our feelings so much that Torah finds it necessary to remind us not to do this?

In my opinion, it is because it's easy to ignore your own feelings. As parents we are expected to focus on our children and their feelings, to encourage them to express themselves but hold back our own emotions because those are for us to deal with, not the kids. I have to say, I'm guilty of this. I have put my feelings on the back burner because I think my kids don't need to know I'm sad, or frustrated, or mad. But happy? Proud? Those I'll share in droves. Why, then, do I expect them to share their emotions, whether categorized as good or bad? How is that fair?

Truly, I only came to this realization recently. Josh, our three-year-old, is...well... a three-year-old. He struggles to express himself, gets frustrated easily, and has a hard time calming down when he's mad. To be able to help him more, we started working with a behavioral therapist. At first it felt like we were admitting that Josh has “problems”, but really, he's three! In fact, we have now been four times to see the therapist – without Josh. She has gone and observed him at school to know where to direct him and give us tips, but everything thus far has been about us – as parents. Each session has been making me think about my emotions and how I can share them with Josh to normalize that we all have feelings. Now, when there are moments where I get frustrated—of which there are many, I have to admit—I will attempt to take time to calm myself down, using his technique of taking breaths or my technique of stepping away safely from the situation. But then, I come back and apologize for my behavior. Not because it was “bad” but because I may have let other things exacerbate my frustration and then taken it out on him – because the way I expressed it wasn't okay, it wasn't what I want him to take away and it wasn't what I want him to experience. When I apologize, Josh is surprised because it is new to him. And then sometimes, if I'm lucky, Josh will melt my heart and tell me “It's okay. I still love you.”

But why did it take me almost 7 years of being a parent to learn that I can be vulnerable with my children and not ignore my own emotions? Why did I think that I should put expectations on them that I couldn't meet myself? It hardly seems fair and so I am trying to **לֹא תִכַּח לְהִתְעַלֵּם**, *lo tuchal l'hitalel* to not ignore or disregard myself – and therefore others.

Brené Brown, in a different book, *Rising Strong*, explains,

You may not have signed up for a hero's journey, but the second you fell down, ...suffered a disappointment, screwed up, or felt your heart break, it started. It doesn't matter whether we are ready for an emotional adventure—hurt happens. And it happens to every single one of us. Without exception....

One of the truisms of wholehearted living is *You either walk into your story and own your truth, or you live outside of your story, hustling for your worthiness*. Walking into a story about falling down [an experience where you felt inadequate, or you messed up] can feel like being swallowed whole by emotion. Our bodies often respond before our conscious minds, and they are hardwired to protect—to run or fight. Even with small, everyday conflicts and disappointments, physical and emotional intolerance for discomfort is the primary reason we linger on the outskirts of our stories, never truly facing them or integrating them into our lives. We disengage to self-protect.

...You'd be surprised how many of us never recognize our emotions or feelings—we off-load instead. Rather than saying *I failed and it feels so [terrible]*, we move to *I am a failure*. We act out and shut down rather than reaching out.⁸

Or reaching in to discover ourselves. This, to me, is truly what it means to: **לֹא תוֹכֵל לְהִתְעַלֵּם**, *lo tuchal l'hitalel*, to not remain indifferent – not necessarily with others, but with ourselves.

We all know that when we fly on an airplane, we are told, especially if traveling with children, that in case of an emergency and the oxygen masks come down, we need to put ours on before we can help others. This is the same thing. We can't help anyone else until we are true to ourselves – until we: **לֹא תוֹכֵל לְהִתְעַלֵּם** *lo tuchal l'hitalel* – we don't hide ourselves, ignore ourselves, or remain indifferent with ourselves.

We all want to be seen as good people who help others, but if we can't help ourselves, we can't help anyone. I keep saying “we” but please know I'm including myself in that. I can't try to be super mom, super rabbi, super wife, super daughter, super sister, super staff member, superhuman, if I can't take care of myself emotionally first. This is not a lesson I have completed; I am still in the thick of it. I am one of those people who tends to not be vulnerable but to hide my true feelings from myself, to ignore my own needs and emotions, and to be indifferent to myself—constantly criticizing, jumping to that *I am a failure*, rather than reaching

⁸ Brown, Brene. *Rising Strong*. Random House, New York, New York. 2015. 45-47.

in to realize the emotions of it – shutting down instead of sharing how I feel or even trying to comprehend why I am shutting down.

I know I'm not the only one who does this. So many, if not all of us, are guilty of not taking care of our emotions – of להתעלם *l'hitale*m, hiding them, ignoring them, or being indifferent to them. But we are never going to get better at communicating with others or being courageous by being vulnerable or stepping out of our comfort zone if we can't להתעלם *l'hitale*m, if we can't remain indifferent with ourselves.

So this year of 5785, I implore each of us – myself included – to step outside of that safe space, to be able to be with others in a more intentional and exposed way. Let us be careful with ourselves, finding the capacity to nurture the cracks and flaws and emotions – to truly let ourselves come forward – allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and courageous. Let us remind ourselves of our folktale that I started with - that the only way for the words of *V'Ahavta* to get into our hearts is if there are cracks to let it in – that the extension of that is that we can only let love for God, others, and ourselves in if we let that heart break open to accept the words and express the emotions. Let us be vulnerable and therefore, courageous, in our abilities to not hide our emotions, especially with the people closest to us. Let us remember that we should show others what it means to not ignore or disregard our feelings—to do what we ask our toddlers to do. Let us not be afraid of our emotions or sharing them. For, as Lori Gottlieb says,

...what are we so afraid of? It's not as if we're going to peer in those darker corners, flip on the light, and find a bunch of cockroaches. Fireflies love the dark too. There's beauty in those places. But we have to look in there to see it.⁹

Turn on those lights. Look for the fireflies and the beauty. We can look, but only find it for ourselves.

:להתעלם לא תוכל *lo tuchal l'hitale*m We must not remain indifferent...with ourselves.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, may this be God's will.

⁹ Gottlieb, Lori. *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, HER Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed*. Harper Publishing, New York, 2019. P. 7-9