Week 1: Using Agency for important interpersonal change. What do the below stories teach us about the ways in which people with disabilities respond to interpersonal insult and how might we leverage the wisdom here to create communities and classrooms of care?

Source 1: Talmud Bavli/Babylonian Talmud Taanit 20AB

The Sages further taught in praise of the reed: A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar. An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi’s house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless [reika] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

The Sages

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He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar’s city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: If this man is a rabbi, my master, my master.

Rav Sheshet stood up and went along with them. This heretic found him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: One should always strive to run toward kings of Israel to greet them. And not only should he run toward kings of Israel, but also toward kings of the nations of the world, so that if he will be privileged to witness the glory of the Messiah (Rashi) and the World-to-Come, he will distinguish between the kings of Israel and the kings of the nations of the world.

The Gemara relates: Rav Sheshet was blind. Everyone was going to greet the king and Rav Sheshet stood up and went along with them. This heretic found him there and said to him: The intact jugs go to the river, where do the broken jugs go? Why is a blind person going to see the king? Rav Sheshet said to him: Come see that I know more than you do. The first troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: The king is coming. Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming. The second troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: Now the king is coming. Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming. The third troop passed, and when there was silence, Rav Sheshet said to him: Certainly now the king is coming.
This heretic said to him: How do you know this? Rav Sheshet said to him: Royalty on earth is like royalty in the heavens, as it is written with regard to God’s revelation to Elijah the Prophet on Mount Horeb:

“And He said: Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave” (I Kings 19:11–13). God’s revelation was specifically at the moment of silence.

When the king came, Rav Sheshet began to bless him. The heretic mockingly said to him: Do you bless someone you do not see? The Gemara asks: And what ultimately happened to this heretic? Some say that his friends gouged out his eyes, and some say that Rav Sheshet fixed his gaze upon him, and the heretic became a pile of bones.