

Impostor Syndrome in the Synagogue

Source Sheet by Tim Motz

1. **Definitions of Impostor Phenomenon**

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A feeling of phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable, or creative despite evidence of high achievement.

- Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, 1978, *The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention*, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*

Impostor syndrome exploits the part of the brain that fosters insecurity, telling us not only that we are inferior to others in our field of work or study, but also that we don't even deserve to be among them in the first place. That voice, while loud, is usually wrong – and we don't have to let it determine how successful we can be.

- C.E. Harrison, Union of Reform Judaism blog

2. Some years ago, I was lucky enough invited to a gathering of great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things. And I felt that at any moment they would realise that I didn't qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things.

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On my second or third night there, I was standing at the back of the hall, while a musical entertainment happened, and I started talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman

about several things, including our shared first name. And then he pointed to the hall of people, and said words to the effect of, “I just look at all these people, and I think, what the heck am I doing here? They’ve made amazing things. I just went where I was sent.”

And I said, “Yes. But you were the first man on the moon. I think that counts for something.”

And I felt a bit better. Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did. Maybe there weren’t any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for.

Neil Gaiman

3. “No matter how old you are, it always seems you’re never quite old enough to be a rabbi. No matter how devout, you’re never pious enough. Tough job, the rabbi thing.” .ג

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *I’m God, You’re Not: Observations on Organized Religion and Other Disguises of the Ego*

4. **Exodus 3:9-13** שמות ג' ט'-י"ג .ד
- (9) Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (10) Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” (11) But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?” (12) And [God] said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent
- (ט) וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלְחֹץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לִחְצִים אַתֶּם: (י) וְעַתָּה לְכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: (יב) וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ

you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” (13) Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers’ [house] has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is [God’s] name?’ what shall I say to them?”

וְהָלַךְ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי
 שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעַם
 מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־
 הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה: (יג)
 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים
 הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בֹא אֶל־בְּנֵי
 יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֵלֵי
 אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם
 וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מַה־שְּׁמוֹ מַה אֶמַר
 אֲלֵהֶם:

5. **Exodus 4:10-16**

(10) But Moses said to “, “Please, O my lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (11) And “ said to him, “Who gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, (12) ? ” Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.” (13) But he said, “Please, O my lord, make someone else Your agent.” (14) “ became angry with Moses and said, “There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. (15) You shall speak to him and put the words in his

ה. **שמות ד' י"ט-ט"ז**

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ בְּנִי
 אֲדוּשָׁם לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים
 אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁים
 גַּם מֵאִז דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי
 כְּבֹד־פֶּה וְכֹבֵד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי:
 (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֵלָיו מִי שָׁם
 פֶּה לְאָדָם אוֹ מִי־יְשׁוּם אֱלִים
 אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עִוֵּר
 הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי יְיָ: (יב) וְעַתָּה לֵךְ
 וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ
 וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר: (יג)
 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִי אֲדוּשָׁם שְׁלַח־נָא
 בְּיַד־תְּשַׁלַּח: (יד) וַיַּחַר־אַף יְיָ
 בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֹן
 אַחִיךָ הֲלוֹא יִדְעָתִי כִּי־דַבֵּר
 יִדְבַר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה־הוּא יֵצֵא
 לִקְרַאתְךָ וְרָאֶךָ וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ:
 (טו) וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשַׁמַּתְתָּ אֶת־
 הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה

mouth—I will be with you
and with him as you speak,
and tell both of you what to
do— (16) and he shall speak
for you to the people. Thus he
shall serve as your spokesman,
with you playing the role of
God to him.

עַם-פִּיךָ וְעַם-פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי
אֶתְכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּעְשׂוּן: (טז)
וְדַבַּר-הוּא לְךָ אֶל-הָעָם וְהָיָה
הוּא יְהִי-לְךָ לְפִהּ וְאַתָּה
תְּהִי-לּוֹ לְאֱלֹקִים:

6. **Impostor syndrome in a Jewish religious leader**

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I am an impostor. Yes, I am an impostor.

I have heard a calling that has caused me to climb up to the
top of the roof of a room – an outsider looking in, peeking
in, listening in, through thick glass. The voices are muffled,
and I can't hear all the voices. I can't see all the players. But I
know – deeply, intuitively – this is where I want and need to
be.

So I creep silently into the room. A room full of old men,
and old books, and old ideas.

Ideas about who is allowed to come into this room, what
they are allowed to think, and what they are allowed to say
and even how they are allowed to say it. Who one must be in
order to have access to these ideas. And at times, it feels like
such an exclusive club, it is almost as if there is a guard at the
door, checking credentials.

And even though these men have told me repeatedly, in their
books, their words, their stares –these are not the books for
you, this is not the room for you – I defiantly open the
books, with respect and trepidation, hands shaking. Their
mustiness brings tears to my eyes, and makes my nose
wiggle.

I push on, and I study, I devote many hours, and I fall deeply
in love. In love with the beauty and truth of a conversation
that spans continents, languages, generations, cultures,
classes, and maybe even genders, and lives on, continues on.
That invites in all of the voices, and all of the perspectives.

That fights back against the idea that there are acceptable and unacceptable voices.

And there are moments of pain when I learn the texts that reveal me as an impostor, that question my yearning to be part of the discourse and, in doing so, deny my very being by inherently viewing me as outside of the conversation.

And there are moments when I am simply missing from the text, not invited to the table.

To be sure, there are other alternative voices. Voices in the room and voices in the text, who say: Come on in, we want you, we need you! The Jewish people needs you to take up the reigns of leadership.

And I rejoice when I meet women just like me in the text, staking their claim. Taking power, and taking their place in Jewish tradition.

And my own voice says – yes! These are the books I want; these are the words I love. These are the students whose faces look to me – and I have an obligation to serve them, and to help them grow!

But, in addition to the voices in the text that exclude me and the voices that invite me in, there is another voice.

It exists only in my own head. It is the voice of self-doubt and it whispers quietly, insidiously – Impostor! Who are you to join the conversation, a conversation that has never let people like YOU in?

Ah, the impostor syndrome – it hits hard, and it hits home.

- Rabba Yaffa Epstein, *Speech to Yeshivat Maharat Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track*

7. **Impostor syndrome in a business leader**

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My senior year of college, I was inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. At that time, Harvard and Radcliffe had separate chapters, so my ceremony was for women only. The keynote speaker, Dr. Peggy McIntosh from the Wellesley Centers for Women, gave a talk called “Feeling Like a

Fraud.” She explained that many people, but especially women, feel fraudulent when they are praised for their accomplishments. Instead of feeling worthy of recognition, they feel undeserving and guilty, as if a mistake has been made. Despite being high achievers, even experts in their fields, women can't seem to shake the sense that it is only a matter of time until they are found out for who they really are - impostor with limited skills or abilities.

I thought it was the best speech I had ever heard ... At last someone was articulating exactly how I felt. Every time I was called on in class, I was sure that I was about to embarrass myself. Every time I took a test, I was sure that it had gone badly. And every time I didn't embarrass myself - or even excellent - I believed that I had fooled everyone yet again. One day soon, the jig would be up.

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This phenomenon of capable people being plagued by self-doubt has a name - the impostor syndrome. Both men and women are susceptible to the impostor syndrome, but women tend to experience it more intensely and be more limited by it. Even the wildly successful writer and actress Tina Fey has admitted to these feelings. She once explained to a British newspaper, “The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania, and a complete feeling of: ‘I'm a fraud! Oh god, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!’ So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud. Seriously, I've just realized that almost everyone is a fraud, so I try not to feel too bad about it.”

- Sheryl Sandberg, *Excerpt from 'Lean In'*

8. The day you were born is the day G-D decided the world could not exist without you. .n

- Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

The Death of Rabbi Zusya

Martin Buber, *Tales of the Chassidim* (with thanks to Sylvia Rothschild)

Martin Buber tells the story of the great Hasidic Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol. On his deathbed he began to cry uncontrollably and his students and disciples tried hard to comfort him. They asked him, “Rabbi, why do you weep? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are almost as hospitable as Abraham, and surely heaven will judge you favourably.”

Zusya answered them: “It is true. When I get to heaven, I won’t worry so much if God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Abraham?’ or ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?’ I know I would be able to answer these questions. After all, I was not given the righteousness of Abraham or the faith of Moses but I tried to be both hospitable and thoughtful. But what will I say when God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?’

