

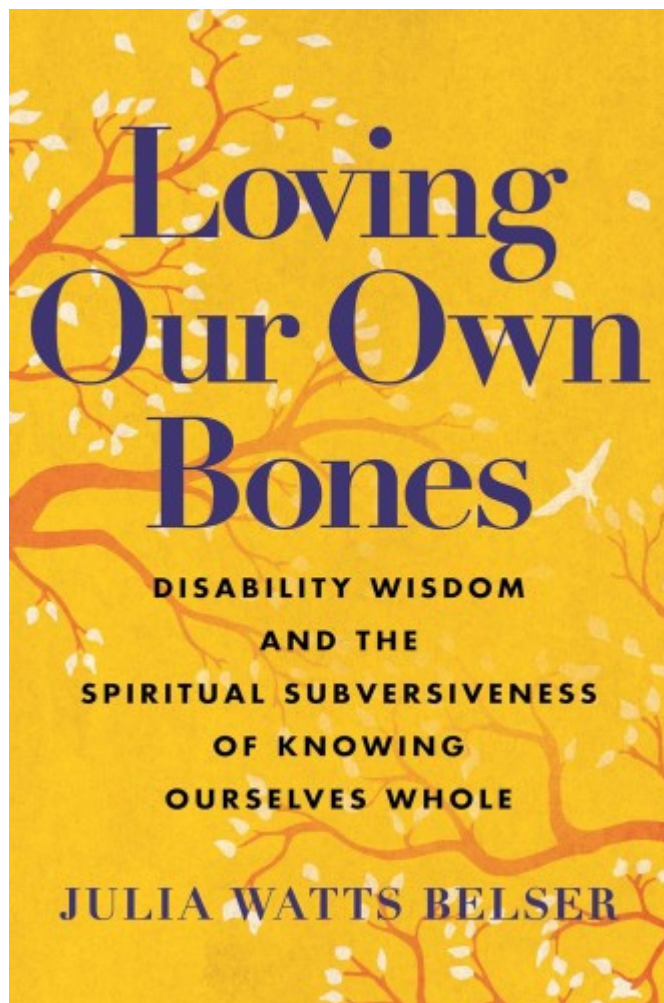
Reading scripture through the experience of disability

Julia Watts Belser sees in the Torah a God who is in love with the creative possibilities of difference.

by [Emily Soloff](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Loving Our Own Bones

Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole

By Julia Watts Belser

Beacon Press

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Julia Watts Belser has written a book about joy, a political manifesto, a cry from the heart, and a spiritual companion. A queer and feminist rabbi, spiritual teacher, scholar of disability in both Jewish and Christian traditions, and disability activist, Belser carries all of these identities with strength, grace, and determination. Her writing is both intimate and eloquent.

Disability politics are a provocative challenge to prevailing notions of human value, according to Belser. Disability is a normal fact of her life and an essential part of her being. She was born with cerebral palsy, and her life has been shaped by structures of exclusion. Disability, she writes, is a dimension of human diversity worthy of acceptance and respect, especially in religious spaces.

Religious communities often treat disability as a problem to be solved rather than as a dimension of human diversity. She describes an encounter with a visitor at her synagogue who demands, “What’s wrong with you?” She has often parried the same query from curious passersby and congregants. “What’s wrong with me has more to do with exclusion, objectification, pity, and disdain than with honest muscle and bone,” she writes. When it comes to religious life—and all of life—Belser simply wants equity and access.

Reading sacred text through the lens of disability experience can transform our understanding of theology, she writes. “Open the Bible, and disability is everywhere.” Moses stutters, Isaac is blind in old age, Jacob wrestles with an angel and is left limping. She challenges conventional readings of the Bible, which she calls a crucial book and a powerful force in America’s public policy.

In approaching the Bible, Belser does not start by asking what the text says; she first asks how it is understood. She also freely critiques texts that portray God as discriminating against people with disabilities. Such texts witness the deep human disdain for them that runs through history, culture, and sacred narratives, she notes. In a discussion of the priestly blemishes enumerated in Leviticus 21, for example, Belser analyzes God’s instruction that priests with certain defects cannot offer sacrifices. She sees that passage as a powerful testament to the way humans endow God with our own prejudices, a reminder of how easy it is for humans to press our

assumptions on the Divine. Such texts demonstrate how religion gets intertwined with the practice of power, she writes.

Our “cultures mark certain bodies and minds as *normal*, while designating others as deviant and defective,” she contends. The latter get shut out of public space and religious space, discarded. Rejecting that reading, Belser hears the text as a sacred call to “reconsider the kinds of judgments we make about bodies, to probe why those we judge imperfect are also judged unworthy.” She questions why normalcy is prized above all else. Who pays the cost when such judgments are projected onto God?

Belser relishes the implications in Exodus 3 of God’s impatience with Moses, who initially declines God’s call to go to the enslaved children of Israel. “I’m bolstered by the honesty of divine frustration, by the fact that Moses’s disability isn’t fashioned into an opt-out clause on spiritual responsibility,” she writes. Rather, God adds Aaron to be Moses’ spokesman to Pharaoh, possibly the first accommodation to disability in the Bible.

Belser chooses to view God as a brilliant artist and capacious creator, in love with the generative possibilities of difference. “For me, the Bible is a text that offers windows onto the sacred, that reveals the imprint and echo of divine presence. But it is never a straightforward communication, an unmediated chronicle of encounter between the human and the holy,” she writes. “The God I know has made a world brimming . . . with difference, has fashioned minds and limbs that unfold in their own particular ways.” She goes on: “The Torah is a chronicle of divine delegation. God needs human hands to lift and build, to make and hold.”

Disability can be a generative force, a goad to creativity, a source of embodied knowledge. “Reading Torah through the lens of disability experience invites us to rethink the nature of divine power,” Belser writes.

Her book is for all believers as well as for those who reject religious belief. She weaves information about Jewish approaches to text throughout, and she provides a glossary of Jewish terms and extensive footnotes. When she quotes from the Christian Bible, she is cautious to temper her criticism.

Too often in religious spaces, Belser writes, people see disability as an opportunity for a certain kind of prayer: a prayer that the person be made “whole” or “normal” and be “healed.” Belser is interested in action—action that would make spaces

accessible to those who live with disability. “That’s the kind of prayer I’m looking for, the kind of solidarity that’s simultaneously bold and imminently practical,” she writes. “That bears witness to the wrong and commits to reconfiguring the facts of exclusion.”

Belser prays for a world to come that is accepting of disability and diversity, that welcomes the stranger and the strange, and where prayer is action and action is prayer. In this world, all are welcome because the practices of interdependence, mutuality, love, and care embrace everyone.