

## Empathy

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One cold winter evening, the shoemaker's wife gave birth. The shoemaker suddenly discovered that he had run out of wood to light the stove for heat and had no money for wood or food. He went to see the rabbi. The shoemaker explained the reason for his visit. But the rabbi said, "I have dispensed every bit of tzedakah given to me this week, so I cannot help you. Perhaps one of your neighbors will be able to help."

The two of them walked to the house of the town's richest man and knocked at his door. "Who is there?" the man called. His voice sounded annoyed. And, in truth, he had been lying in bed, trying to fall asleep. "It is your rabbi," came the voice from beyond the door. The rich man grumbled, but he arose, dressed quickly, and opened the door. "Come in, rabbi, come in," he said, trying to sound friendly. "No," said the rabbi, "let us talk right here." "It is awfully cold outside and all three of us are shivering," said the rich man. "Won't you please come in?" "What we need to discuss is urgent," said the rabbi. "I do not have even the time to come inside." "Then, let us close the door," the rich man offered. "The cold is more than I can bear." But the rabbi stood firmly in the doorway and the door remained open.

Now, the rabbi was a well-known teller of tales and he began to tell one story after another. He spoke of Abraham and Moses, of Micah and of Jeremiah, of Rabbi Yochanan and of Akiva. He talked. He quoted. He taught. Time slipped on. "Yes, yes, rabbi", cried the wealthy man shivering. "I know these were all worthy Jews, but I am dying of the cold and you have still not reached your point." The rabbi said, "That is precisely my point. Meet my friend, the shoemaker, whose wife has just given birth. They have no money for wood or enough food. What you have experienced for just a few minutes, they are experiencing every moment.

"Dear rabbi," the man replied, "you have made your point well, and I will gladly provide for this man and his wife, and their new baby." As the wealthy man crawled back into bed he fell quickly into a restful sleep.

There is a debate, in the rabbinic literature, over which commandment of all 613 should be considered the most important. In the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Akiva declares, "V'ahavta Reiecha Kamocha" – love your neighbor as yourself, this is the greatest principle of the Torah. Those familiar with the Talmud will understand that this claim does not go unchallenged, but this line is often quoted as religious law – much of Judaism in the modern day does stem from this all important commandment, not merely to love your neighbor but to go one step further, and consider others in the same way we consider our own needs, wants, and loves.

During the High Holy Days we gather to celebrate the New Year with prayer and song. We see one another here, in our sanctuary, in a more complete way than we do any other time of the year. Last night I challenged us to approach one other with moral courage when

expressing what is most important to us. We know that this is but the first step on the road toward teshuvah.

We cannot celebrate Rosh Hashanah alone. We make the effort to sit together, in sanctuaries all over the world on this one day. Whether connected by the airwaves to those listening over the internet and radio, or sharing these pews, we pray as one, “al cheyt shechatanu” – we are all guilty of these sins, and we are all responsible for one another. So here is the place in which loving our neighbors might begin. Here, today, can we become more considerate of the people we share this community with – our friends and our families?

More often we imagine that God is compelling us, with this commandment to see those who are suffering, and help heal their hurt. But to love your neighbor you must do more than see their suffering. You must see their humanity. You must feel their hurt as deeply as your own, and understand the root causes of their pain. That is what we would do for ourselves, after all. There is a simple word to describe this kind of human connection – the ability to share in someone else’s pain and to see them as a full person through that pain. We call it empathy.

This commandment to feel empathy might be mistaken for common sense in the modern world. Empathy is the simplest of all human interactions, and the most fundamental. It is what allows us to feel a part of a community, as we do today. It allows us to see past our own needs and wants, and to take off the blinders that so often prevent us from a deeper understanding of one another. It is the mortar and the glue which holds us together, the mechanism by which we are helpful to one another.

We are living in a time when this simple idea, that to know someone you must walk a mile in their shoes, seems to have fallen out of fashion. Instead we feel more keenly the divisions between us, the tension and discord which grows between those on the right and the left, conservatives and liberals, those with brown skin and those who call themselves white, those with “more” and those with “less.”

Former President Obama, only a few years ago, said that our society has an “empathy deficit.” He helped us see how easily a deficit develops, when we live in neighborhoods with people just like ourselves, study in schools and work in offices with people just like ourselves. Our concerns remain extremely parochial and we become self-centered. This empathy deficit leads to narcissism, personal conflict, and a lack of healthy communication all around. We don’t give ourselves enough opportunity to step outside of our own experience, to try to understand what others are dealing with.

([northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2006/06/barack.html](http://northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2006/06/barack.html))

The tragedies playing out in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and now Maria have reminded us of the strength and also the fragility of our empathy. Empathy comes much more naturally to us when we are confronted with catastrophic stories of suffering and loss. We anticipate the need, we feel moved to help, and for a moment we become wrapped up entirely in the story of the “other.” But then it fades.

In a recent Time magazine article, Dr. James Doty of the Stanford University Center for Compassion and Altruism argued that, “Right now we are feeling like one tribe – one whose members will set out in the dark through filthy, treacherous waters to save someone they’ve never met. But absent a crisis, it’s all too easy to slip back into our corners, to see people of another state or ethnicity as a threat. You can already hear it in murmured resentments over the allocation of... funds. The narrative of distrust will return.” (Time, 9/7/17 p. 115)

Psychologists have long noted this downward trend in empathy. In 1980 Dr. Mark Davis created what he called the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to measure a range of emotional responses over a large group of college students. For thirty years, tens of thousands of students took the test, responding to statements like – “I often have tender concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.” This massive study and many others have charted the steady decline of agreement to such statements, mapping the loss of empathy among Americans in real numbers and over a generation. ([www.eckerd.edu/psychology/iri](http://www.eckerd.edu/psychology/iri))

We are losing our ability to see ourselves in other people, to offer a stranger the benefit of the doubt, or the courtesy of a respectful dialogue. We are so quick to judge, whether confronted with a stranger on the street begging for change, or navigating the difficult waters of family relationships, or the politics of a community. Over the past several election cycles we have witnessed our national leaders becoming more and more divisive and disrespectful. And whether that national culture has influenced our own dialogues, or the other way around, we have all felt the effects of this lack of compassion, decency, integrity, and empathy.

Rosh Hashanah is a day for the very personal work of Teshuvah- an inward focus which drives us to do some serious self-exploration, to review our past days, and to attempt to restore and revive our personal relationships. The danger is that we might be inspired to look inside ourselves and no further. While this type of introspection is critical, what is equally critical for us this year is to look as far and deep outside of ourselves as we can - to examine with the same intensity our relationships with those who are different, who look different, who think differently, to cast as wide a net as possible in our task of restoring and reviving relationships, even across great divides. Let us learn to listen to one another, and let that be our teshuvah.

The Torah implores us, “do not forget the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” At a fundamental level, we are obligated by our Jewish narrative to feel empathy for those with whom we might have nothing in common, those who we, ourselves, would call strangers – to recall our own alienation in ancient Egypt, and to identify with those who are alienated, ostracized, and excluded today. This stance transcends political ideology, and asks us simply to place ourselves in the position of the “other”.

It’s an idea we emphasize every year at the Passover Seder. We take the radical leap of empathy and say, “In every generation a person is obligated to view themselves as if they were the ones who went out of Egypt.” We imagine ourselves in Egypt. We feel the oppression, and commit ourselves to working for justice in our day. And just to make sure we get the point we fill our mouths with horseradish and taste the bitterness experienced by our ancestors, our brothers and sisters.

V'ahavta reiecha kemocha – love your neighbor, your fellow Hoosier, your fellow human being, your brother and your sister – as yourself. And the Torah does not mean that mitzvah as a metaphor. The ties that bind us to brothers and sisters, for those of us who have them, are deep and strong. Even when we vehemently disagree, or even stop speaking to a sibling, we remain aware of blood bonds that connect our lives to one another, connections that cannot be erased.

What would it feel like to imagine deep, strong, empathic bonds not only with our spouses, our parents, our children and close friends, but also with our neighbors and all those sharing our city with us? Even then we might naturally connect with and support the family across the street. But what if we also encountered a family across the city and considered their fortune and destiny as inevitably linked to our own? What if we witnessed an individual in Africa, Israel, the Former Soviet Union, or further, as family? What would our stance be on climate change, if we saw all people as our brothers and sisters? How might we address criminal justice reform, race relations, and healing our nation's political process?

The rabbi in my story asked his congregant to speak with him out in the cold for a single reason. No amount of coercion or inspiration would help that man understand why he was being asked to give, more than identifying with the need before him. The more comfortable we are, the easier it is to lose touch with those outside our walls, our “reiecha”, our neighbors, those who cannot escape the cold. The walls we build do not only keep out the cold. They insulate us from others with differing politics. They often insulate us from those we love, particularly when we don't see their emotional need before us. We build walls that sometimes need to be breached. This story reminds us that it is not sufficient to pay lip service to these ideas once a year and then move on. We need constant reminders that our lives are all connected, and that someone else's hurt or pain might trigger our own.

Of course, there are, and there should be limits to our empathic responses. We have witnessed, in the past year, a revival of the most reviled and dangerous ideas in human history. We have learned, time and again, that freedom of speech and assembly are not absolute, that those freedoms cannot extend to symbols which, when placed on a flag or an armband, incite its followers to hatred, intolerance, and inevitably to violence. In fact, Nazism and all forms of extremism result directly from a lack of empathy. It is the worldview that shouts – only my position, only my pain, only my experience matters. It is self-centeredness, taken to its natural extreme.

I have been encouraged by the interfaith solidarity felt so palpably in the past weeks. Neo-Nazis do not inspire my empathy, but feelings of connectedness do. These feelings emerged at an interfaith event we held the week of the Charlottesville rally, and during that very next Shabbat service, when we were joined at IHC by members of several nearby churches, mosques, including their clergy to simply be together and share the fear and resolve we felt. This was the right spiritual response to Charlottesville, and it was rooted in empathy.

In his personal memoir, [A Hoosier Rabbinate](#), our own Rabbi Morris Feuerlicht reflected on one of the great political crises of the 1920's, the strengthening of the KKK here in Indiana.

He was a vocal opponent of the group, and received threats because of it. He wrote: ...the rabbi is called upon to make peace between individuals outside of the congregation. Theoretically at least, and in their moral objectives, service and justice are not very far apart. In the Jewish tradition they are synonymous. This is America, and this may be claimed as one of the historic triumphs of Reform Judaism... (pp. 59-60)

Rabbi Feurelicht reminds us that when our Jewish lives only seem relevant inside the sanctuary, we are not being true to the heritage of our people. And at a time when anti-Semitism is again on the rise, his call to reach out to others beyond these walls, in service and in pursuit of justice, this is our very purpose as Reform Jews.

The rabbis wrote, when you see someone in the bottom of a dark and cold pit, do not stand at the top of the pit shouting, how terrible, how terrible. Rather get down into that pit with your brother, and find a way out together.

We have an opportunity in the coming days and weeks, to turn away from the patterns of the past which have left scorch marks on the year which ends today. Teshuvah, our idea of repentance, is better translated as turning towards truth and light, turning towards our better selves, and turning towards one another. May the prayers of our service today inspire us to embrace that spirit of turning in our lives. May we learn to hear one another, and then to care for one another, and through that caring, may we remember our responsibility to one another. For all those who celebrate Rosh Hashanah today, and for our "reiecha" our fellow human beings who are our neighbors: may we learn to feel their pain so that they may understand ours. And together we might make this a year of blessing, of happiness, and of peace.