

Rosh Hashanah 5782, R. Aaron Alexander, The Empathy Trap

A few days ago I was crying in the car. First day of school. I'm not usually not so emotional for these kinds of things, firsts--I'm more of a lasts cryer--but for one of my kids it was not only his first day in a new school where he knew nobody at all, but the first time he would ever be in a school or camp setting without either one of his brothers there--something he not only really loved, but relied on for emotional stability. My drive back home was needless to say, pretty distracted.

At one particular 4-way stop, after stopping--completely, I think, I began to pull forward, *and only then* saw out of the corner of my right eye that another car was also pulling out. I guess he was at his stop first, because his reaction to my mistake, and it was a mistake, was, well, very, very, big. All the hand motions, every gesture--some I've never even seen. All the anger words--those I've actually heard.

He was too far away to see my tears, but after my heart stopped intensely beating, you know the feeling, after my shock at his outburst somewhat subsided, I wondered: what would have been if he had known what I had experienced just minutes beforehand? If he had my story, would his reaction have been more measured? I don't know. I'd like to think so.

Then for a moment I imagined what his morning may have been like--what might have happened to him that such a small offense generated such an outsized response. Did he have a fight with his partner? Was he let go from his job? Did he hear about a friend with Covid? Did someone accidentally put milk in his coffee, God forbid? Who knows. But considering him for a moment helped me relax, refocus, and get back home with relative calm.

Rabbi Holtzblatt recently sent me a meme-like image. There's a man hanging over a cliff, hands tightly grasping the hands of a woman who is falling off that same cliff. What we can see, but the characters in the picture can't see, is that on the man's back there's a gigantic boulder, and from a crevice in the cliff, a snake is staring into the woman's face.

The caption reads: "The man doesn't know that there is a snake underneath. The woman doesn't know that there is a stone crushing the man. The woman thinks: 'I am going to fall! I can't climb because the snake is going to bite me! Why can't the man use a little more strength and pull me up!'" The man thinks: 'I am in so much pain! Yet I'm still pulling you as much as I can! Why don't you try to climb a little bit harder?!

The moral, written underneath the image: "You can't see the pressure the other person is under, and the other person can't see the pain you are in. This is life, no matter whether it's with work, family, feelings or friends. (I'll add or driving) So a little thought and patience goes a long way."

Dr. Martin Luther King said that: "Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see." x2

Back in 2006 then Senator Barack Obama gave a commencement address at Northwestern University and powerfully quipped: "There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit, but I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room." Amen. Still too true.

Dr. Elaine Scarry says it even more starkly: “the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.”

And, as of late, empathy’s been gnawing away at my pandemic-weary heart. As each day goes by, more and more, our culture exposes me to the widening gap between the kinds of decisions I make, and the kinds of decisions others make.

Health & safety, resource use, liberty and responsibility, freedom and obligation--the big dollars are made, it seems, by highlighting our differences and then asking us to immediately place the other into a camp, a boxed-in binary, of: smart like me and mine, or foolish like them & theirs. Moral, like me and mine, or immoral, like them and theirs. Socially responsible, or socially destructive.

Empathy may be popular to study, and to talk about, to ask for, but it’s increasingly difficult to muster *up-and-out* of our tired & hardened hearts.

Empathy. All the rage these days. Harvard professor Dr. Susan Lanzoni wrote a history of Empathy in 2018, and it is worth a full read--but here’s the general arc she draws: A little over 100 years ago in Germany, empathy was the study of how humans project their own image, or movements, into art. Imagine me seeing a picture of Michael Jordan gliding through the air, then imagining myself, with this body, doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way, nevermind its utter impossibility. That’s *Einfühlung*, in feeling, or feeling into something, and eventually becomes the English word--empathy.

The study of empathy transitions in the mid-20th century, Lanzoni writes, to the reigning in of the self, not the projecting out, to grasp another’s emotion, for a therapeutic goal or moral imperative.

Empathy, more recently, has been further broken down in three categories--

Cognitive, what I understand about your story, up here (my head).

Emotional--how I might share in your feelings, from here (my heart), and

Compassionate, how it all moves me to act--out there (w/ my hands).

Today when folks talk Empathy, they likely mean what social psychologist and 60's Civil Rights champion Dr. Kenneth Clark articulated: The essential aspect of empathy is the capacity of an individual to feel into the needs, the aspirations, the frustrations, the joys, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hurt, indeed the hunger of others, as if they were their own."

But here's the thing--as hard as empathy is to precisely define, and as important as it is for being in relationship with others, it's also quite complicated to navigate, it is hardly simple. We are often caught in an Empathy Trap, most often without even realizing it.

Here are a few of its challenges:

Is it really possible to actually insert ourselves into another's shoes? Dr. Diana Meyers stated (in her 1994 *Difference, Empathy and Impartial Reason*) that: "The metaphor of putting oneself in the other's shoes is misleading, for it is a mistake to assume that the other feels the same way as one-would-oneself feel in the same circumstances."

Rabbeinu Yonah, the 13th century Spanish sage, makes a similar point while commenting on Judaism's walk in their shoes teaching, taught by Hillel 2,000 years ago -- אַל תִּדְּוִן אֶת חֵבְרֵךְ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוּמוֹ : "don't judge one another until you are in their place." Rabbeinu Yonah:

When one sees their fellow in a high position and behaving poorly, they shouldn't say, "If I would fill their place, I would not do all that bad stuff."

לפי שאינך יודע וכמוך כמוהו בתואר בני אדם, ואולי המעלה היא מטה גם אותך.

For you both are both human, fallible. Perhaps the position of power would sway your behavior too.

אז כשתגיע למקומו ולמעלתו, ותעביר על מדותיך יהיה לך רשות להרהר אחר מדותיו:

[Only] when you reach that same place, that position, only then do you have the right to compare.

It's like when I say to an African American friend, and I've done this: yes, my people too have been oppressed. I too experience bigotry in the form of anti-semitism, I understand your life, your pain, your burden--we're alike!, should I be surprised when the response is... Really? You do?

In trying to employ empathy, I may actually be displaying insensitivity, if even from a place of sincere love & solidarity.

Rabbi Ovadia Bartenura, a 15th century Italian rabbi intuits this also:

אם ראית חברך שבא לידי נסיון ונכשל, אל תדינהו לחובה עד שתגיע לידי נסיון כמותו ותנצל:

“If you see your neighbor come to a test, and fail, do not judge them unfavorably until *a test, a situation, like it* comes to you and you yourself overcome [it].”

What’s interesting about these medieval commentaries, both Rabbeinu Yonah and Rav Bartnenua, is that they don’t ask us to *imagine* what it might be like to be in somebody else’s shoes before we compare ourselves, but that we shouldn’t even make the juxtaposition until we actually arrive in their shoes, and face the same, or at least very, very similar trials.

Empathy is complicated.

Furthermore, how do I learn which way to point my empathy--so often stuck in the middle of opposing & contradicting narratives? Can I trust my own sense of objectivity to tailor a response that is consistent with the shadow reality confronting me?

Israel and Gaza, and the reaction to the late spring conflict demonstrates this well. We all witnessed human suffering in bomb shelters *and* bombed away buildings. Amidst all the emotions--anger, frustration, indignation, sadness, pride, despair, whatever--the empathy wars were certainly raging.

But to not concede, from either side, any side, to not admit that our empathy is colored by an already implicit or explicit bias of who is right and who is wrong, who is considered family and who foe, that’s an empathy trap.

Empathy is never objective. It depends on the me, who sees, the I, who feels.

And what about empathy when I wish I didn't have it, when I'm disturbed by its presence? Should I have empathy for the plight of the insurrectionists? Do they deserve--based on our shared humanity and their national frustrations--any compassionate energy from me? Should I have empathy for those who make life-threatening decisions, like forgoing vaccines or banning mask-mandates to make a political point, endangering my family and community because of widespread but obviously foolish conspiracy theories?

We live together--should we not attempt to understand one another? Won't that lessen the growing chasm between us?

Maybe, probably, but are your reasons, is your story, always worthy of a share of my emotions, my softness of spirit? Doesn't there have to be a line for which your actions cross over and beg me to suppress my tenderness?

Here's another empathy trap: is empathy for a suffering, marginalized individual a potential distraction from the wholesale systemic changes that ought to happen? By directing my limited energy primarily to the plight of individuals, some claim, I avoid expending effort to end the structural injustices that lead so many to be in need of another's personal empathy.

Or, as psychologist Paul Bloom wrote in "Against Empathy" -- "To the extent that I'm an empathetic person, I'm a worse person." Why? Because I'm likely not tackling the underlying issues that pervade our society, thus allowing unnecessary suffering to persist.

Empathy is critical for any we to exist, and not at all uncomplicated.

When the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, the refugee/humanitarian crisis was & still is immediate. The image of human bodies hanging off an airplane ignited a world-wide response of outrage, then assistance. And, unsurprisingly, the Adas Social Action Network kicked into quick action developing a leadership team & amassing over 50 volunteers to coordinate a congregational response. That moment reminded me of that haunting picture of Alan Kurdi, the 3-yo Syrian boy, lifeless, washed up on the beach. An image that became the calling card of the Syrian, and world-wide, refugee crisis. Then, like now, our Refugee Response Team quickly regrouped and gained a new, large, cadre of volunteers to help shape the Adas israel organizing efforts.

Unrelated, kind of, this past summer Nyiah Courtney, a 6-year old child from Southeast DC, was killed in a drive-by shooting. She is one of [five children](#) aged 11 or younger who have been killed by gun violence in D.C. over the last few years.

The general theory is that physical proximity leads to a more engaged, heart-opening response. The closer I am to another's pain, their heartache, their tragedy, the more likely I am to show up for them.

Our sages make this proximity point, in Tractate Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud:

בְּזִמְנֵי שְׁהַצְבוֹר שָׂרוּי בְּצַעַר אֶל יֹאמֵר אָדָם אֵלָּה לְבֵיתִי וְאוֹכֵל וְאַשְׁתָּה וְשָׁלוֹם
עֲלֵיךְ.. אֵלָּא יִצְעֵר אָדָם עִם הַצְבוֹר

“When the community is immersed in suffering, a person may not say: I will go to my home and I will eat and drink, and peace

be upon you, my soul.” I care about you. Wish you for you the best. Bye! Eh, can’t do that.

Rather, a person should be distressed together with the community.

שָׁכַן מְצִינוּ בְּמִשָּׁה רַבִּינוּ שְׂצִיעַר עֲצָמוֹ עִם הַצְּבוּר.

As we found with Moses our teacher as he stood wielding God’s power during an early biblical skirmish with arch-enemy Amalek:

שָׁנְאָמַר וַיְדִי מִשָּׁה כְּבִדִּים וַיִּקְחוּ אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׂמוּ תַּחְתָּיו וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ.

“But Moses’ hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat upon it” (Exodus 17:12).

וְכִי לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לְמִשָּׁה כֶּרֶךְ אֶחָד אוֹ קֶסֶת אַחַת לֵישֵׁב עָלֶיהָ?

Our talmudic sages ask: But didn’t Moses have one pillow or one cushion to sit upon; why was he forced to sit on a rock? It’s Moses, give him at least as much as you give us at a Seder?!

אֲלֵא כֹּה אָמַר מִשָּׁה: הוֹאִיל וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל שְׂרוּיִין בְּצַעַר אֶף אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּהֶם בְּצַעַר.

Rather, Moses said in between the lines of our Torah text, this is Midrash after all: Since the Jewish people are immersed in suffering, I cannot sit here in comfort. I must also try to feel their pain.

Stay close, our tradition asserts. Direct your breaking heart toward the vicinity of your neighbor's pain. That discomfort you feel--acknowledge it--don't run from it, for it may point you towards justice.

But events in this city, like Nyiah's tragic death, didn't seem to really catch our collective communal attention on this side of the river--well, not until shots were fired outside Nats Park, or near Eaton Elementary School a few blocks away from here.

Even then, though, here's what didn't happen--I didn't receive dozens of emails asking how people could get involved with our Gun Violence Prevention work. Neither did Lois Fingerhut or Don Kates, or any of our core team members. Our gun violence prevention team, always active, remains the most difficult team for which to recruit new volunteers regardless of what's happening on the ground.

Look, what I won't do is sit here and judge those of us, myself included, who didn't reach out, or haven't yet reached out. That would make this the most hypocritical sermon ever given.

And I am so damn proud of our community, our Social Action Committee, for its Afghanistan response--It's refugee crisis response.

But I still find myself asking the question: why is it that events across the world, seen only in images, generate empathy--cognitive, emotional, compassionate empathy, in ways that are not-so-subtly absent when the pain exists just around the corner, or just across the river?

Proximity does matter. And yet, as I've learned again & again, too often proximity doesn't turn us outward, but deeply inward. To our own shame. Our own

complicity, maybe even some guilt, thus harder for us to engage. Proximity is scary, because sometimes directly encountering life's inequalities becomes a mirror, or a window, too hard to bear.

And we also have to at least consider--that just as we continue to be made aware of anti-semitism's eternal & never-ending insidious assault on our people, so too, there's a deeply embedded & uniquely Americanized anti-blackness always lurking, influencing the masses as to which lives matter more than others.

You might asking--why this, why now? Well, I truly believe empathy to be the cornerstone of our path forward as a community, country, world. And I'm afraid, like so many other critical words in our arsenal, that empathy has lost its textured, nuanced meaning. You know, kind of like the word "truth".

So where does that leave us? Complicating empathy is important, but so is each of us walking out of here with the tools to improve not only our own lives, but the lives of others. To *increase* our emotional connectivity and relational authenticity.

Here's where I'm landing. It's kind of where I always land--Unetaneh Tokef--that haunting prayer we'll sing in just a few minutes. Who shall live and who shall die--who by water and who by fire. After acknowledging the reality of life's frailty--after liturgically expressing the haunt of life's precariousness--the Mahzor adds:

***U'Teshuvah, U'tefillah, Ve-Tzedakah Ma'avirin Et Ro'a
HaG'zeira.***

But repentance, prayer and giving have the power to transform the harshness of our inescapable destiny.

Look, to be honest, this line often rubs me the wrong way. Life is hard, so do more mitzvahs! It smacks of the kind of overzealous, tefillin-hocking-at-a-rally-religiosity that denies people the time they need to just be in grief, or tragedy.

But in reality, while each of these three acts may not immediately diminish the harshness, the bite, of life's unwanted decrees, they do potentially elevate any moment into a more present, more grounded, more honest encounter--to deeper, clearer, more transparent relationships--here and now.

Through the regular spiritual practice of each, repentance, prayer, and giving, we train our hearts, our minds, and our hands to live with a sacred, Jewishly infused empathy that can meaningfully undergird what is, and recreate what might yet be.

Teshuvah is, if nothing else, a checking in on ourselves. An honest appraisal. It's digging a provisional tunnel-home to understand ourselves well enough to move forward together. Sincere repentance is critical for a reliable empathic posture, for preparing our hearts to draw closer to another's inner world.

Tefillah, prayer. A tapping into something bigger than ourselves. Reaching upward, vulnerable, prayer is an act of humility that requires we affirm our powerlessness, our own lack of control over the world. A recognition that each of our centers is never THE center. Empathy, without a regular practice which builds humility, leads to precisely the subjective pitfalls that lessen its potency.

And **Tzedakah**, reaching outwards--the quintessential Jewish act of self-sacrifice on another's behalf. Tzedakah is more than donating money, or giving away the

stuff we no longer need. Tzedakah, according to our tradition, is an act of empathic restoration. (MT, Hilkhhot Matanot Aniyim 7:3)

לפי מה שחסר העני אתה מצוה לתן לו. אם אין לו כסות מכסים אותו. אם אין לו כלי בית קובין לו.

One is commanded to give a person in according to what it is they lack. If they have no clothes, clothe them. No utensils, get them that. If they lost their home, or means of transportation, give them just that.

שנאמר (דברים טו ח) "די מחסרו אשר יחסר לו". ומצוה אתה להשלים חסרונו...

As the Torah teaches (Deut. 15:8) Give to them *sufficient for what they need*.

In other words, Tzedakah requires us to understand another person's actual needs before we make the gift.

Empathy and Tzedakah ask us to transcend the barriers of our own minds, our own stories, our own needs. And in doing so, we likely give more than goods--we restore basic dignity, we re-emphasize each other's humanity, and we may even come to refocus & direct our limited energy to confronting the pervasive conditions that create so much lack in our world.

Empathy. Without it, we simply don't fully know one another. It is essential. Will it get me into your shoes? Not exactly. It's impossible. But I might come to better understand why they've been tied together, causing you to trip, or why your wheels have been locked, impeding your motion. Will it cause me to always

choose correctly between conflicting narratives? Doubtful. Life, humans, too subjective for that.

But it may help me see what it is I've been myopically missing, caught up in my own story. Will it necessarily motivate my proximity into action? Not always. Our hearts are too messy for that kind of guarantee.

So let's just thoughtfully slow down & look for the boulders on other people's backs, the snakes threatening their bodies--grounded within our tradition's everlasting wisdom.

May there be some sweetness in this new year for all of us, and may we together transform the reality of life's decrees, the all-too-present suffering amidst us, with Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah--with an empathic well of self-awareness, humility, and self-sacrifice.

Shanah Tova.