

When Times are Tough, Bring Love and Empathy

Shana Tova. I was recently listening to a podcast by the famed author Brene Brown who told the parable of a man stuck deep in a hole. Surrounded by darkness, he had nowhere to turn. He was also too weak to climb out. Knowing it would at least be a day before the appropriate help would arrive, the man sat in solemn solitude.

Along came two friends. The first looked over the edge, and shouted down, “How you doing down there? You need anything? A sandwich? Water?” The two of them shouted back and forth for a while, but their voices grew tired. “Good luck” shouted this first friend, “I hope you get out of there soon. At least you weren’t injured in the fall.” He then turned and walked away.

The second friend appeared and, noticing the man in the hole, climbed down into the dark. “I’m sorry I can’t help you. I’m not strong enough to pull you up myself, but I know what it’s like to be down there,” she said. “Do you mind if I sit here with you until help arrives?” And there the two sat until help came.

These two friends each tried to help in their own way. The first through **sympathy**. The second through **empathy**. And there is a crucial difference between the two. While sympathy is telling someone you care, empathy is caring enough to feel what they feel. Its not peering into the hole and cheering up the person below; instead it is climbing into the hole and facing the fear that comes with being down there.

Empathy is hard because it demands something from us: Not just words; not only our attention; but loving concern that translates into **action**. Living at a time of such enormous stress and upheaval, acts of **empathy** may seem like a luxury that we can hardly afford when so many of us are struggling to get by. Yet it is at precisely such a difficult time that we need loving action the most.

Why? Because we are **all** suffering. Let me start with what is right in front of my eyes—the pain of looking out at row upon row of empty seats here in our Main Sanctuary. The three members of our clergy team are standing on the *bima* with a wall of plastic separating us to provide extra precaution against aerosols as we speak and as we sing. We are grateful for our new livestreaming equipment that will hopefully make what you are seeing a more vivid experience as you participate through your screens. But this is not what any of us would have wanted.

I know a feeling of sadness is present for all of you as well. We are all missing our family and our friends. We miss being able to hug each other; to put out arms around one another to console each other; we miss the handshakes and the high fives. Now everyone we meet is a threat—whether at a park, in the grocery store or getting gas—potentially a carrier of the virus. We humans, so deeply social at our core, now are keeping our distance from one another as much as possible.

I have seen the pain and I understand the loneliness. Some of you were forced to say a final farewell to a dying parent over FaceTime because you could not be in the hospital because of the pandemic. Some of you missed out on important lifecycle events: graveside funeral services with less than ten people present and no shiva; weddings that had to be postponed or conducted with just a few close family members; *B'nai Mitzvah* services conducted over Zoom with parties postponed. Not to mention the sense of loneliness and isolation for those who live alone; the pain that has been experienced by our children and grandchildren who are missing out on time with friends in school or at camp. And the fear that has been caused for those who have lost their jobs and whose economic future is filled with uncertainty. A pandemic not only brings fear; it brings so many losses as well.

Along with this virus, we have been forced to confront the problems that we face collectively: a nation that is still coming to terms with how different life is in this country for people with black and brown skin than it is for white Americans; a nation that is still so deeply polarized politically that families who vote for one party or the other cannot sit and have a conversation. With an election less than a month and a half away, many of us worry our democratic institutions will not withstand the rhetoric that divides us. Throw in rising anti-Semitism, environmental calamities like wildfires that are forcing hundreds of thousands of Americans from their homes, and many of us are feeling that we are, like the man in Brene Brown's story, living in a hole as we suffer in isolation.

Therefore, what we **don't** need right now are wishes for good luck; we don't need to be told to look on the bright side; or even given the sage advice *Gam zeh ya'avov*—this too shall pass. Why? Because even well-intentioned words are at best attempts at **sympathy**; they are not a path to **action**. Instead we need **empathy** that turn our best intentions into action, so that we are not all wishing each other "Have a nice day!" as we walk by one another alone in our holes.

Our ancient Sages understood the inadequacy of mere words or feelings when it comes to concretizing our duties and obligations to the people who matter most in our lives. It is noteworthy that **neither** for one's parents, **nor** for one's spouse, **nor** for one's children does the Torah command us to love them. A good argument could be made that the Torah *would assume* that we would love a parent, a spouse or a child so there would be no need for the Torah to command such love. And of course, we hope that we are all blessed to be members of families in which there is much love between parents and children, and love between spouses. But an equally plausible explanation for why we are not commanded to love the people closest to us is that the Torah and our rabbinic Sages place primacy on **actions**.

Although we are **not** commanded to love our parents, we are commanded to **honor** and to **revere** them. Our Rabbis teach us to **revere** a parent means that a child does not sit in her parent's place or does not publicly contradict her parent's words. To **honor** a parent means that a child gives parents food and drink and clothing, and helps parents get in and out when they are older and need a helping hand. Concrete actions are demanded—not simply words or the expression of feelings.

So, too, are we **never** commanded to love our spouse. If you look at the language of the Jewish wedding ceremony, *birkat erusin*, the blessing of betrothal, you will see that it does not speak of love. It speaks of maintaining faithfulness to the one that you are marrying. This one, and only this one is permitted to you. All others are forbidden to you. At the pivotal moment under the *chuppah*, the blessing is for exclusivity and monogamy, not for love.

Nor are parents commanded to love their children. Rather, the Torah tells us: *V'shninantam levanekha*, we are commanded to **teach** our children. But nowhere does it say to love them. Is love therefore not important? Of course, love matters. But actions matter more. As our ancestors stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and received the Torah, they said these two words: *Na'aseh v'nishma*—we will **do**, and from that, we will come to understand, and we hope, to love.

Surprisingly, though, the Torah **does** tell us that we must love those who are **not** in our inner circles. We **are** commanded to love our **neighbor** as we love ourselves. And we are commanded to love the stranger. In fact, the commandment to love the stranger is the single most frequently cited commandment in the entire Torah—we are told that we must love the stranger 36 times.

Why might we be commanded to love those who are at the outer edges of our circle of relationships, yet never be commanded to love those on the inside? Precisely because we might want to **ignore** the needs of those **outside** our inner circles, the Torah commands us to **love** them so that we are forced to turn our attention towards those we might otherwise turn away from. And from that place of seeing, we will be motivated to act. To do justice requires all of this.

A Hasidic tale illustrates why the commandment to love our neighbor—to love our fellow—is so crucial. A student once asked Rabbi Shmelke, “We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. How can I do this, if my neighbor has wronged me?”

The Rebbe answered: “You must understand these words correctly. Love your neighbor *like something which you yourself are*. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is wholly inherent in all souls, just as your soul is in all the parts of your body. It may come to pass that your hand makes a mistake and strikes you. But would you then take a stick and beat your hand, because it lacked understanding, and so increase your pain? It is the same if your neighbor, who is of one soul with you, wrongs you for lack of understanding. If you hurt him, you can only hurt yourself.”

According to this tale, the deepest transgressions we commit happen when we forget that we are connected to one another. For those in our inner circles, such reminders are hopefully unnecessary. But for those outside our immediate spheres of concern, that is much harder to do. Loving our neighbors means that we must see the humanity in them—and by so doing—come to recognize our inter-connectedness. Only

when we recognize the spark of the divine in our fellow human beings will we be committed to act on their behalf—and for their well-being.

And if this is true for our neighbor, how much more so is this true for the stranger. We, too, were strangers in a strange land. The experience of Egypt is the paradigm of powerlessness. We were at the whims and the mercy of a cruel Pharaoh who made our lives miserable. Our founding story is a story of pure vulnerability. We are redeemed by a God who loves the stranger and who takes pity on their suffering, and who, with Moshe as his disciple, leads them out of that narrow place to freedom. When you are in a position of power, it is difficult to love the stranger. Because the stranger reminds you of a time in which you, too, were powerless. But that is precisely the point. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik: “Invoking Egypt turns our compassion into a necessity, not merely a capacity.” Because we were slaves in Egypt, we simply cannot turn away from the oppression of others.

Over and over again, the Torah reminds us that when faced with injustice, pain, trouble, or trial in the world, the correct response is **empathy** that leads to action. We offer comfort to those who are suffering; we bring food to those who are homebound; we give *tzedakah* to those who are refugees. We don't simply **notice** the other person and feel bad for them; that is merely sympathy. Instead we are commanded to feel alongside her, cry next to him, meet her physical needs, the memory of our alienation in Egypt acting as inspiration to support those who are hurting.

The Talmud reminds us: *m'toch sheloh lishma, bah lishma*, actions that we *commit to* will eventually become ones that we *will want to do*. First do, then feel. This is the Jewish recipe for life. Only one question matters: What have you **done**? Ultimately, we are judged by our actions.

Here is my challenge to each one of us as we begin this New Year at such a difficult time: Commit to one concrete action that you will do in this coming year to bring more love into this world. Find one way in which you will turn your sympathy into a concrete act of empathy—especially for those outside your inner circles. One deed closer to loving the stranger. One deed closer to loving our neighbor. Because if we can do the harder ones, then the ones that are closer will become easier as well.

What is our life, if not a summation of all of our deeds? As we begin a New Year, the Book of Life remains open—and it will be filled in with our actions—not with our intentions. Now is the time for deeds of love and acts of empathy. Indeed, the very healing of the world is at stake.

Shana Tova Tikateivu