During the summer I visited a wonderful art exhibit at Massachusetts Museum of contemporary art called Walk in My Shoes.

Walk in my Shoes features artwork chosen to activate empathic responses and amplify awareness of one’s feelings and compassion towards others. It brings together emotionally engaging artwork as a tool to increase awareness of a two fold empathic response process. First, we feel what another person feels, second, we act selflessly and compassionately.

There was a very fun game, a call-and-response exercise called Mirror to Mirror which challenged each participant to remain completely focused on the other in order to follow along and remain in sync. The resulting synchronicity is what they called in this exhibit, empathic communication. Each participant is mindful of the other and reacts to what the other expresses.

On this first day of Rosh Hashanah, as we come together as a community in worship and plan to dedicate the next ten days looking inward at our lives, our choices, at what can we do different this coming year and how we can grow, I invite us to ponder our capacity to practice compassion. Toward our loves one, toward people we are not close to and even to people who we feel animosity.

Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef of Polnoye the Toldot Ya’akov Yosef teaches that “the path of compassion is to serve God through every aspect of every act, giving heed to the fact the Holy One is there too. Even when you see something ugly or unbecoming in another person, you should turn your heart to thinking that the Holy One dwells there too, since there is no place devoid of God’s presence”. (Toldot Ya’akov Yosef, Hayyei Sara 2, translation by Rabbi Jonathan Slater)

I recently took my daughter to see the movie “Inside Out” which is well worth watching, not just for children. The protagonist is Riley, a happy, hockey-loving 11-year-old Midwestern girl, but her world turns upside-down when she and her parents move to San Francisco. Riley’s emotions, which are animated figures in the movie -- led by Joy - - try to guide her through this difficult, life-changing event. However, the stress of the move brings Sadness to the forefront. When Joy and Sadness are inadvertently swept into the far reaches of Riley’s mind, the only emotions left in “Headquarters” are Anger, Fear and Disgust.

Ultimately, Joy learns that she must work together with sadness and other emotions. One of the teachings of the movie is that experiences are not led by one emotion, but by many.

There is no compassion character in this movie, but let us imagine it as a new character in the headquarters: If compassion would be the lead emotion in our own lives, how
different our lives would look like? How would our relationships look like? If compassion was the lead emotion of all human beings, leaders of countries and all those who make big decisions in this world, how would the world look like? We need compassion as a lead emotion in our headquarters, we need compassion as a lead emotion in all humans headquarters.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater referring to the text of the toldot Ya’akov Yosef that I just mentioned says: “I have loved these texts from the first time I studied them. It is so gratifying and inspiring to me to read a Jewish text that makes behaving with compassion towards all beings an unambiguous priority. (“A better way of being in the World, a Way of Compassion” by Rabbi Jonathan Slater on “Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life,” page 100).

Our High Holidays liturgy asks from the Divine presence to be compassionate towards us.

Kerachem av al banim rachem aleinu.
The way parents are compassionate toward their children, please be compassionate towards us.

As we ask today from the Holy One to be compassionate towards us, may compassion be a lead character in our lives. May we understand our ethical responsibility to develop compassion and compassionate solutions. May we learn to act compassionately towards all human beings.