

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
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Empathy is all the rage these days.

Or I should say the *study* of empathy and the *teaching* of empathy. I just joined the listserve for my daughter's elementary school and I've started getting all these emails from parents who want to implement an empathy curriculum at the school. It made me wonder: Since when do we teach empathy, and why is it that we would want to teach empathy?

It's sort of a radical question these days. We take it as a given that not only should we should teach our children empathy, but that we should use empathy to guide our decisions and behavior in the public sphere.

We're in what psychologist Steven Pinker calls an "empathy craze." Do a quick Google search and you'll find loads of books and articles advocating, researching, cultivating, and teaching empathy. There are empathy foundations, institutes, initiatives, classroom programs, and toolkits.

The word empathy comes from the German term, *Einfühlung*, and it means "feeling into." If we can "feel into" other people's lives and experience the world as they do, so the thinking goes, we can improve our relationships and create a better society.

President Obama says our society has an "empathy deficit." We care too much about material possessions, status, money, and getting ahead. We're self-centered. Our empathy deficit leads to narcissism, personal conflict, and a lack of healthy communication. We don't step outside of ourselves enough. We don't see the world through someone else's eyes. We don't grasp what other people are experiencing. It's our inability – or maybe our refusal – to walk in someone else's shoes that leads to bullying, divorce, crime, racism, and war.

Maybe. But I think it's a little more complicated than that.

When I took my daughter to the first day of kindergarten I was very empathetic to her. She was, like all the other five year-olds, a little nervous. I put myself in her shoes, I felt her anxiety as if it was my own, and I reflected it right back at her. We both had tears in our eyes. It wasn't a pretty sight.

My friend, David, also has a five year-old. Now David isn't always such an empathetic guy, but he knew that his son was anxious, and he knew that his son needed to be prepared for what would happen on the first day of kindergarten. So the day before school started he woke his son at 6:30 in the morning and dragged him to an empty school building to help him picture what his first day would be like. And what do you know – his son was much less nervous than all the other kids on that first day of school.

Clearly David gets all the parenting points on this one. Now, psychologists who study empathy might argue that David was more empathetic than I give him credit for. And they might say that my problem was not that I was empathetic but that I had “empathic distress” and let it unnerve me.

Fair enough. But it’s Rosh Hashanah, and I always say that this is an opportunity for us to reflect on how we can become more compassionate, to ask for forgiveness, to set things right, and to work for justice. So I’m wondering whether empathy belongs anywhere in that list. Or maybe, would empathy lead us to become more compassionate, to ask for forgiveness, to set things right, and to work for justice?

Jewish tradition has all sorts of texts that argue for empathy. My favorite is from the book of Exodus: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”

This empathy for the stranger that’s rooted in our historical experience has been at the heart of the Jewish commitment to social change. Rabbi Joachim Prinz spoke these powerful words at the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights:

. . . From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is, above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions, a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

This is the epitome of empathy – complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

It’s an idea we emphasize every year at the Passover seder. We take a radical leap of empathy and say, “In every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if he were the one who went out of Egypt.” We imagine ourselves in Egypt. We feel the oppression of Egypt. We 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 that our ancestors experienced.

Some of my most moving experiences of practicing Judaism have happened at Passover seders. Passover is a brilliant holiday. It gets us to reflect each year, sitting around a table with friends and family, on the challenges of oppression and our role in social change.

It’s moving, but does it actually work? Can we *really* know the souls of other people? Just because our ancestors were oppressed, does that give us any special insights into other people’s oppression? Does that identification necessarily lead us to work for justice? Especially when our own lived experiences – at least for most of us – have been grounded in so much privilege?

I'm not sure that the teachers of empathy today would say that we need to draw on a history of oppression in order to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. But they would say that we should try to imagine what it's like to be someone else, and to try to know the soul of someone else.

Psychologists talk about two kinds of empathy – cognitive and emotional. Cognitive empathy is similar to “perspective taking,” or seeing what life is like for someone else. This makes a lot of sense to me. We should try to honestly understand what other people think and believe and feel. What is life like for someone who is African-American? How do the experiences of racial profiling and stop-and-frisk lead to insecurity and fear in the African-American community? What's it like to have to deal with racism on a regular basis?

I don't think we spend enough time trying to understand other people's experiences or looking at the world from their point of view. We assume that we just know what they need, as if we have all the answers.

Sometimes even when we try we can't understand. The philosopher Nomy Arpaly says though that we must try to “imagine another person's life” but also “accept evidence of another person's suffering even when one's imagination fails.” How often do we judge people without having any understanding of what they're going through? How often do we dismiss their experiences when we can't imagine them? Our friend goes through an ugly divorce. Our sister struggles with depression. And we blow it off because our imagination fails us. That's when we need to cognitively accept the evidence. And the evidence is clear: divorce stinks. Depression stinks.

The second kind of empathy is emotional empathy, which is all about feeling what other people feel. When we feel empathy towards our loved ones, we connect with them in a real way. We become less selfish and less indifferent because we can feel their pain or their fear in a genuine way. This ability to relate to other people is the foundation for healthy relationships.

Empathizing with other people's pain, even if they are strangers, can really help them. Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*, describes an event where the autobiographical writing of incarcerated men was read. Knowing that other people had imagined their experiences didn't set these men free but it did “mitigate [their] sense of invisibility.” They needed to be heard and understood.

It's what I found so powerful about doing chaplaincy in a hospital many years ago. There were so many people there who were deeply overwhelmed and lonely. They had no visitors, no one to talk to. It took me a while to learn that my job was just to listen, not to try to fix things or offer advice. And sometimes my job was just to sit there quietly and to witness and *feel* someone else's suffering. My most vivid memory was sitting with a teenage girl after she gave birth. There were doctors and nurses and social workers who had plenty to say to her. But we just sat together, and I think I did feel her pain, overwhelm, joy, and fear. I think, in some small way, I did mitigate her sense of invisibility.

Of course we can overdo it, as I did on the first day of kindergarten. But more seriously, too much empathy does come with costs – burn-out and exhaustion for sure, but also depression and anxiety.

We might know people who are excessively concerned with other people's needs, always placing them before their own. Remember the children's story *The Giving Tree*? The tree just gave and gave and gave until she literally didn't have anything left. I think the tree had an "empathy surplus" – in order to be happy she had to make other people happy. She had no idea what she needed. Even though she seemed happy when the boy came to take her apples or cut her branches or sit on her stump, I suspect she was probably depressed.

So cognitive empathy is important because it helps us understand other people's perspectives. And emotional empathy – as long as we don't drown in it – is also important because it helps us be present to other people and really feel their emotions.

But what about emotional empathy as a moral guide to action? When faced with so many problems that plague our society and our world, should our responses be rooted in empathy? Or even determined by empathy?

Many people would argue we should. Economic and social theorist, Jeremy Rifkin, for example, calls on us to develop a "global empathic consciousness" to save our planet from climate change. The more empathy we have, the more people we can be empathetic towards, the better off we will be.

But empathy has some "unfortunate features," argues psychologist Paul Bloom. It's "parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate." It can lead us to make decisions that are biased and unfair.

Take the criminal justice system. People tend to be empathetic to victims of crime, especially when they are young, vulnerable, attractive, and share our race or ethnicity. But our empathy with victims – people with names and pictures and stories – can easily lead us down the road to revenge without considering the long-term consequences. It's this impulse for retribution that has led to harsh and unjust mandatory sentences and the disproportionate incarceration of racial minorities.

The Torah and later rabbinic tradition really struggle with how to create an unbiased justice system. It's really difficult to achieve, argue the texts, so there has to be a strong emphasis on maintaining fair systems of judgment.

From Deuteronomy: "You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just." (Deut. 16:19)

In making judgments and pursuing justice we can be easily swayed – through bribes, through speech, through dress, through skin color, through a person's wealth or character. That's why we need a system of justice which is fair, impartial, and universally applied. Unlike empathy, which prioritizes feelings, justice transcends our feelings.

When shocking or devastating events happen – like a hurricane or mass shooting – we naturally feel empathetic towards the victims. We're moved by their stories. We've put ourselves in their shoes. We feel their pain. And we likely want to do something in response. The problem, though, is that empathy leads us to make decisions based on subjective criteria. As the philosopher Jesse Prinz writes, though, "The crucial question is not whose suffering touches us most but who needs us most."

We tend to act with empathy towards certain victims of heartbreaking situations, but we ignore issues like global hunger or preventable diseases that cause far more deaths. We become sensitized to the statistics. They fail to capture our attention. Instead we get captivated by events like the Sandy Hook massacre and want to do something – anything – to help. But this isn't always such a good thing. The town of Newtown was flooded with so much charity that officials had to recruit eight hundred volunteers just to deal with the gifts that people sent. Even when they said they couldn't use the gifts and asked that the charity be directed elsewhere, it kept coming.

In discussing our desire to help these children, Bloom writes, "We felt their pain; we wanted to help. Meanwhile—just to begin a very long list—almost twenty million American children go to bed hungry each night, and the federal food-stamp program is facing budget cuts of almost twenty per cent."

When we are faced with such disastrous problems, empathy can pull us in the wrong direction. To counter that we need reason, calculation, and deliberation. We need justice, systems that ensure fairness, impartiality, and accountability.

But not only that. We also need compassion, which is rooted in kindness and concern for the welfare of other people. Compassion is a little more distant than empathy, but a little distance can be a good thing.

As Prinz says, we should "We fight for those who have been mistreated not because they are like us, but because we are passionate about principles." Principles matter. And our passion for principles, when rooted in reason and compassion, have the potential of making real change, change that is sustainable and based on real equality.

If I were to send an email to the listserve at my daughter's school, I think I would say: Empathy is great in many situations, but let's teach our children the principles of justice, fairness, and compassion to help guide them to be future decision-makers.

At this new year, let's cultivate empathy but temper it with reason and compassion, let's fight passionately for our principles, and let's work together to make a more caring and just world.

L'shanah tovah – may it be a good year.