

Empathy
Yom Kippur 5772
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The world is getting smaller and smaller. We are drawn ever more closely together by the Internet and mass communications. We know instantly what is happening on the other side of the world. Our generation is more informed about current global events than ever before. I remember as a child, going to the library and looking up periodicals to learn what's happening in the world. Now, my children and I have almost instantaneous access to events on the other side of the globe. I can watch tsunamis and typhoons as they happen. We have more access than ever before and the results on our character are not all that pretty. All the disasters, natural and man-made harden us. We know what is happening, but often can't afford to feel anything, for it would completely exhaust us. We see the images, hear the words and tell ourselves that we get it. We know what's happening.

But do we?

Do we really understand what motivates a suicide bomber? Do Christians understand Jews? Do Jews understand Muslims? Do Muslims understand Christians and Jews?

Over the summer, I had a powerful moment at a Wissahickon Faith community Association meeting, when we were planning a symposium for the tenth anniversary of 9/11. As some of you may recall, I spoke about pain, despair, hope and healing. The Mostly Christian membership of the committee wanted to have Muslim representation on the panel. I agreed, but only if I knew who the Muslim representative was. I expressed concern that there is a tremendous amount of misinformation and anti-Semitism in the Muslim community and felt that I could not be candid if I did not have a necessary trust with and of my fellow speakers.

Fortunately most understood my position. One Christian minister, Sandra Ellis Killian from St. John's Lutheran Church in Ambler, began to speak on the topic. She began by recalling her recent visit to Israel. She remarked that one afternoon, after shopping in the Jewish section of Jerusalem, she found herself waiting at a bus stop. Suddenly the store merchant where she just made some purchases came out to where she was waiting and started yelling in a most agitated manner. He was screaming at her in Hebrew and she had no idea what was alarming him so. He pointed to a parcel just beneath her seat and motioned for her to step away quickly. Moments later the police sappers came to remove the package, which thankfully turned out to be harmless.

She paused and then commented, “Israelis live that way everyday. Fear and distrust are part of life in Israel. She paused again and said; “Now I get it. I understand what it must be like to live in a country that is constantly under siege.” We then had the most candid conversation about anti-Semitism that I have ever had with Christian Clergy. I told them about Jewish concern about world events as it impacted Israel and world Jewry. I told them about Jewish history and how security and trust can so easily be lost.

We each had an “aha moment.” And there was a sense of peace that permeated the meeting, that frankly I had never experienced in over 22 years of participation. As I left the meeting, I realized that more information does not lead to more understanding. Empathy does. Knowing is one thing. Caring is completely another.

We know so much. We are adept at building towering institutions with impenetrable walls. Our boundaries define us and help others to understand us. Defining lines around our communities are necessary in a pluralistic world, but not in all circumstances. We also need to build enough doors and windows so that we can understand each other. For, if we can understand where another person, with whom we may have little in common, is coming from, then we can bridge the gaps that often divide us. This is what WFCA is all about.

On this Yom Kippur we talk a great deal about forgiveness and that is indeed good and true. Forgiveness is essential for us to find emotional healing, but before we can forgive another, we must first be able to understand them. And the foundation for that understanding is empathy.

One of my favorite Biblical stories is about Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael. We learn of Abraham and Sarah who at first are infertile. Sarah suggests that Abraham have a child with Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant. Hagar in Hebrew means the stranger. Abraham does and she has a child, Ishmael. Then Sarah gives birth to Isaac and suddenly feels threatened by both Hagar and her first-born son, so she insists that Abraham banish them both to die. Abraham, the dutiful husband, obeys his wife and sends them out into the wilderness with one day’s supply of food and water. As Ishmael lay dying, Hagar, his mother, looks away as she couldn’t bear the pain of seeing his death, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” God sees this tragedy and opens Hagar’s eyes and allows her to see and to feel. As a result, she finds a well of water well, where they both drink.

We can’t help but be struck by Sarah’s cruelty and Abraham’s passivity. Where is the empathy, where is the compassion? Hagar is the first stranger in the Torah, who happens to be an Egyptian slave. Sarah seems petty, Abraham passive, and worst of all, no one, except God seems to care about the suffering of this stranger.

So, why is this story in the bible, which has so many lessons about caring for the widow, the orphan and the stranger? It's to teach us that Sarah and Abraham's lack of empathy can have disastrous effects. Hagar, the rejected stranger later travels to Egypt, not to Canaan, to get a wife for Ishmael and there once wed, Ishmael becomes the symbol of Egypt, Israel's ancient adversary. Ishmael later has twelve sons, which serves as a balance to Jacob and his twelve sons. Ishmael becomes the father of the Arab people, while Jacob is our ancestor. Here we find the biblical roots of the conflict between Jew and Arab? It starts with a lack of empathy, a feeling for one another.

The Rabbis in the Talmud note this lack of compassion well. Throughout our tradition there are so many rituals designed to teach us to not make Abraham and Sarah's mistake.

At the Seder when we drink a cup of wine in celebration of the Exodus, we are told to take ten drops of wine out, so that our joy is diminished because of Egypt's suffering. The goal is to teach us empathy. The Rabbis teach a Midrash about the parting of the red sea. When the Israelites made it dry land on the other side of Red Sea, and the Egyptians and their chariots were swallowed by the sea, the angels sang with jubilation. God, according to a Midrash, castigates the angels, "the Egyptians are my people too. How can you rejoice when they are suffering?" Again, as with the Hagar story, God is the empathetic one. The goal is to teach us empathy.

As we eat the matzah at the Seder, we proclaim, "Arami Oved Avi," "My father was a wandering Aramean," My father was without a home, was a stranger and we should empathize with those who are homeless. The key is empathy.

Those who can't or won't empathize with the suffering are very often insufferable. Those who cannot feel the pain of others can too easily inflict pain on them.

I spoke last night about the Kaddish d'rabbanan, a prayer in appreciation of Jewish scholars. Well there is also a blessing that traditional Jews recite when they see a non-Jewish scholar. "Barach atah Adonai eloheinu melech haolam, shnatan mechachmato l'basar v'dam." Blessed are you O lord our God, who gives wisdom to humanity." The goal is to teach us to respect the other for their truth and humanity. All of us are created in the image of God.

I wish to make a confession today. I read and cry over the news like a rabbi. I worry more about Jews and Israel and mourn their losses more than I empathize with the plight of some other communities, with whom I don't identify, but who may suffer just as much. Over the summer, I remember mourning for the family of Leiby Kletsky the Jewish boy from Brooklyn who was brutally murdered. I felt for him and for his family. I saw the family grieve

and I connected with them. Over the summer, we said kaddish at services for Leiby. Shortly, thereafter, I read of the Norway massacre. I read about the bombing in Oslo and then the shooting spree on Utoya Island, where youth from Norway's Labor Party were holding a summer camp. I read that 92 people were dead, most of them teenagers. I read that the terrorist was a right-wing extremist who hated Muslims (and apparently a lot of other people). I shook my head, muttered, "How horrible!" and continued on with my day. I chose not to say Kaddish for those 92 youths. Looking back, I wish I had.

The Kleitsy family received thousands of shiva calls and even more letters and emails of condolences. One in particular caught my attention. It came from an Arab woman in Qatar. It read:

"My deepest condolences to the parents, especially Leiby's mother. As a mother of 2 boys, I know what a long, long journey it is for a mother to bring up her baby to be 9 years old. To carry a baby for 9 months, give birth, struggle with sleepless nights, ailments, aches and pains, the first step, first smile, first fall, going from milestone to milestone, cheering with them, crying with them, worrying with them, wearing your heart on your sleeve every moment of the day. These are precious moments etched in our hearts forever. And then, suddenly, cruelly and horribly, your child is snatched from you, and in one second, your life is completely and utterly destroyed. I pray that God help you find inner strength to cope with this immense tragedy, for the sake of your daughters, your husband and all the others who need you in their lives. I cried for your son, and I cried for your heart that will forever have a piece missing. With deepest sympathy, Carmen Ali from Qatar."

What an amazing letter. Here is a Muslim woman who clearly has little in common with ultra orthodox Jews in New York, yet she could get out of her parochialism and feel for the other. Her response is what I should have felt when I read about Norway or so many other tragedies.

With a chill, I realize that too many people all over the world react to Israel's tragedies from terror, like I did regarding Norway's. While Israelis cry and bury their dead, the world shakes their heads, clicks their tongues, and go on to the next news item.

Of course, it's a defense mechanism, not to get too upset. How can we function if we empathize with everyone? There is simply too much information, too much loss, far too much pain. At times, it's just too much to bear. But that can't be our excuse for failing to care. It's just not good enough for me.

I resonate with the Zionist narrative. When I read the news, I see it through the eyes of a rabbi who loves the land of Israel. I see Jewish history through the lenses of the Holocaust and the inquisitions. It is for this reason that I support a strong Israel. But what if, I could see the narrative of Israel through a different lens? I once visited a special site in Israel on the border with Jordan. There I learned the story of the hydroelectric power plant, built by Pinchas Rotenberg, dubbed "the Old Man from Naharayim". Rotenberg had a vision of the creation of power plant, using the waters of the Jordan River, to serve the Jewish state in the 1920s. When you visit the old plant, currently a part Kibbutz Geshar in the Jordan Valley, you hear the story of the Jews who worked at this plant and had a joyous life, until 1948. You see, Israel was not able to hold this land and it was lost to the Jordanians in the war of Independence. Visitors are shown a very touching video of the Jews who lost their homes and their livelihoods. It contains stories about abandoned homes, photo albums left behind, dreams and hopes cut off. I walked out moved about the pioneer's story, but also wondering about similar places of interest in Palestinian communities. I'm sure they have equally moving narratives about lost homes, livelihoods and families. I couldn't help but wonder, "Can we empathize with their plight?"

I also wonder, "Can Palestinian's empathize with the plight of Israelis?" Can they see that we are not colonizers but returning home after 2,000 years of persecution? A terrorist must close his or her heart to empathy before they detonate a bomb or launch a missile into civilian population centers.

I would suggest that peace will only come when we can feel another person's pain and loss. Peace will come in the Middle east when Palestinian can empathize with Israelis and feel for their loss and pain at the hands of terrorists and do something to change it. And peace will come, when Israeli's can feel the loss of Palestinians and do something to change it.

I deeply respect the transformative message of Nelson Mandela. He was by no means perfect, especially on the topic of Israel, but he taught us a valuable lesson about empathy. He recently celebrated his 93rd birthday.

Nelson Mandela valued the power of understanding others, including his enemies. My son, Joe visited Robben Island prison this summer, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for eighteen years.

A major part of Mandela's strategy was to get inside the minds of his captors. To that end, he taught himself to speak and comprehend Afrikaans, and learned the history, culture and values of the Afrikaners. In order to best communicate what he wanted, he needed to truly know where his adversaries were coming from. Or as Mandela put it: "You must understand the mind of the opposing commander...you can't understand him unless you understand his literature and his language." This empathetic comprehension of those who were guarding him and his fellow inmates led to better conditions in an otherwise oppressive jail. When he was released after a total of twenty-seven years of imprisonment, he had ample reason to hate the Afrikaners, but instead, he chose to understand them and then built bridges between the two communities. Today, South Africa is a peaceful state, one that is thriving. And here's the stark truth, it is one of the only African states where Whites and blacks live together in peace and it's all because Mandela had the courage and will to empathize.

The Israeli organization, "Seeds of Peace," is modeled after Mandela's choices. They seek to put in more windows and doors into the walls that divide us. All across Israel and the West Bank, Israelis and Palestinians learn each other's languages and study each other's culture. And happily this program is spreading to hot spots around the world. Hope is on the horizon

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sets for all of us a goal. Defining empathy, he offers us a way out of our self-centeredness. "Empathy he writes, "is the pain a father feels when his child hurts his hand playing ball; the pang a mother knows when her daughter is not invited to the party she had her heart set on; the concern a lover has for the least concern of his or her beloved; the anguish which touches a person when someone bears their troubles to him; the tears a child sheds for the limp of his dog or the broken arm of her doll; the sigh a judge heaves when he must pronounce a strong sentence; the care a doctor exerts towards a patient in pain; the dull tug at the heart of a soldier when he sees the destruction he has wrought; the help a business owner extends towards a failing competitor; the forgiveness a person grants towards one who has hurt him; the pleading of Moses when people were to be destroyed because of their Golden Idol; the weeping of Rachel for the exiles who trudged by her grave on the bloody way to Babylon. It is the eternal mercy of God toward the folly and misery of humankind."

Forgiveness is essential to redemption, but before we can forgive, we must understand and care. We must be able to see the tears on someone else's cheek; to hear the sob in someone else's throat; to smell the bitterness of poverty in someone else's home; to taste the acrimony in someone else's life. Redemption lies in caring about another who is not a reflection of ourselves; who has the face of Hagar, the stranger?

I conclude with the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, our great American poet. He wrote, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough, to disarm all hostility." Empathy is the key to redemption. Our task is not just to be understood, our task is to understand.