

Eliminating our Empathy Deficit A Call for Radical Empathy

Rose and Morris have been having a lot of challenges in their marriage lately. After several days of silence, Morris asks what's wrong. "The problem," Rose says, "is you don't have any empathy." Offended by the accusation, Morris calls up his friend Jon. He explains what has been going on and asks Jon for his advice. "Morris, we have been friends a long time. Do you trust me?" "Of course I trust you," Morris replied. "Ok, the problem in your relationship is that you don't have any empathy." With that Morris is fit to be tied. He gets in his car and drives directly to the synagogue to speak with the rabbi. Morris sits down in the rabbi's office and over the course of an hour explains the entire saga. "To sum it all up," he said, "my wife has accused me of not having any empathy." The rabbi looks at him and says, "So...what do you think?" Morris looks up, "To be honest Rabbi, I don't understand why she feels that way."

Years ago I was in Central Park with some friends on a rather chilly autumn afternoon. As we sat on a bench chatting we saw a guy running barefoot and doing somersaults on the Great Lawn. We also saw a rusty sprinkler sticking out of the grass. And then...he landed on the rusty sprinkler and my friends and I collectively gasped [oyy...and how many of you just did that?] Crazy barefoot guy was suffering physically and just by seeing him we all suffered as well. We were all feeling something that he was feeling. That is empathy.

We all have the ability to experience empathy. Think about all the times you have caught someone doing something embarrassing. And these days, with zoom, who hasn't seen someone do something embarrassing? You forgot you were not muted...you thought you turned your video off...that private chat went to the whole meeting. What did you feel when you saw your *friend*

embarrass themselves? You were probably embarrassed too. Isn't that strange? Why were you embarrassed? Because you were feeling their feelings. That is empathy.

Every year we beat our chests on Yom Kippur: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*...we abuse, we betray, we are cruel, we destroy, we embitter. We can all rattle off examples of the ways we hate and insult and transgress. But have we ever stopped to think about why? Why do we neglect? Why are we unkind? The answer, I believe, is empathy. Without empathy, the door is left open to inflict pain on others *and* ourselves. Our nation is suffering from an empathy drought. Our souls are parched and our hearts are cracked. We need a flood of radical empathy to saturate our land before it is too late.

In a commencement address at Xavier University in 2006, then Senator Barack Obama, remarked: "You know, 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 the eyes of those who are different from us..." Philosophers Adam Smith and Baruch Spinoza, in different ways, said that empathy is the engine of morality. When you see someone suffering, and you are suffering in response, you want to make sure that person suffers less. When there is a federal deficit there may not be enough money to sustain an advanced economy. When there is an empathy deficit, there may not be enough love to maintain a *functioning* society. On this Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement, I want to think about our individual and collective contributions to our empathy deficit and, more importantly, the antidotes for creating within ourselves the radical empathy our nation so desperately needs.

Many scholars suggest that one source of our empathy deficit is the rise of digital technology. Great! Now we're really doomed (or zoomed). The psychologist Daniel Goleman

argues...is that your phone? Go ahead and reply. It's OK. I'll wait. What was I saying...oh yes...the prerequisite for empathy is *paying attention*. If you are walking down the street and you are *not* simultaneously texting or talking on the phone or checking email, and your mind is *actually* open, you might notice the individual suffering on the side of the road and you might go out of your way to help. The greatest predictor for empathy is not your education, it's not your religion, it's not your politics, it's simply not being distracted. Of course, we have a major problem right now. We all have in our pockets little machines that are literally designed to distract us. If attention is a condition for empathy, then a world with less attention is a world with less empathy. When you are in the presence of another human being...put the phone down. When you are in a meeting on Zoom...put the phone down. When you're in shul...put the phone down. The first antidote to our empathy deficit is: pay attention.

The second cause of our empathy deficit is the problem of tribalism. Peter Bazalgette, in his book *The Empathy Instinct*, describes an experiment with a group of students watching a stranger play roulette and receiving an electric shock every time he guessed the wrong number. When the students were told that the stranger had a similar background to theirs - same kind of city, same kind of education, same political views, same socioeconomic level - they responded empathetically to his suffering. When they were told that he comes from a very different background, they were unmoved by the pain they saw. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: [indifference towards] the one-not-like-us is capable of disabling [our] empathy response. The consequence often promotes racism, chauvinism, and other expressions of hate. Think about our own society. America, like many nations, has a majority culture and numerous minorities. Most minorities generally share two characteristics: 1) they are usually weaker, more desperate, and

more vulnerable; and 2) they are almost always very different - they have different accents, they come from different places, and they have different beliefs. Herein lies the problem. The people that need our empathy the most are the people who receive our empathy the least. This paradox of empathy is born out of our tribal nature. If your devotion and love for your group blinds you towards people from outside of your group, then belonging to your group, whether it is a tribe, a nation, or a religion, is the problem. The antidote, as John Lennon put it, is to “Imagine there's no countries...and no religion too; Imagine all the people living life in peace.” The antidote *seems* to be universalism.

Jewish tradition challenges this assumption. The biblical story, as you all know, is a story about slaves escaping Egypt, wandering the desert, entering Israel, building a monarchy, and expanding that monarchy. It's a story about a powerless people that became powerful. *That's* the story. Yet, that's not Jewish memory. Think about it. Are there any Jewish holidays that celebrate the monarchy of King Solomon? The victories of Joshua conquering the Land of Israel? The greatness of King David? The entire infrastructure of Jewish culture directs our minds to one moment in our story - not the moment we became powerful but the experience of vulnerability. There is a gap between memory and story and that gap is used to cultivate empathy. When you are powerful and you see someone powerless, remember your past. Love the person that is radically different from you - the person who dresses differently, speaks differently, and thinks differently. Why? Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt, and every stranger is a part of your story.

I remember reading a post that circulated around social media some years ago about a couple that went out to a restaurant. The service was terrible. It took 20 minutes to get water, 40

minutes for an appetizer and over an hour for their entree. It became evident that the problem wasn't the server, the restaurant was short staffed. Nonetheless, everyone in the restaurant was angry. But then something happened. The couple remembered that 20 years ago they were students and they used to wait tables. They left him an enormous tip and wrote: "We've both been in your shoes. Paying it forward." That's the power of memory. The more connected we are to our past, the more connected we will be to people who are different. If the second threat to empathy is tribalism, the antidote is deepening our connection with our sacred story.

The third cause of our empathy deficit is the problem of ideology. In our tradition this is best illustrated by the book of Job. Job was that perfect individual who feared God, avoided evil, and then bad things started to happen. He lost his wealth, his children died, and to top it all off he got very sick. When his three close friends heard what happened, they came to comfort him. Together with Job they wept, tore their clothes, put dirt on their heads, and sat on the ground for seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word for they saw how much Job was suffering. They saw Job's sorrow and they were filled with sorrow. They saw his pain and they experienced pain. After some time passed, Job started talking. He cursed the day he was born and cried out that he did nothing wrong to deserve such tragedies. After all, Job was a respected judge in the community and displayed true empathy towards even the weakest members of society. Imagine how Job felt when his friend Eliphaz got up and declared, "You are evil Job and there are no boundaries to your sins. You robbed the poor; you took food from the hungry. You are corrupt and you have abused your brothers." Why does Eliphaz say all of this? Why can't Eliphaz see the truth about Job? I think we know the answer. Eliphaz has a theory. His theory is that God is fair and God controls the world. Good things happen to good people and bad things

happen to bad people. There is a symmetry between your biography and your destiny. With this as his theology, it is easy to see why Eliphaz justifies the legitimacy of Job's suffering.

What happens when theology blinds us? When we can't even see the people living next to us? This isn't just theology but any ideology, any theory we have about the world. As a proud member of the US Armed Forces, I am extremely patriotic...most days. But I also realize that if I look at our country through the lens of patriotism I will only see people through one question - are they patriotic or not. I have to understand that I can't reduce people to one idea. That is what ideologies do to us. Feminism can do this; communism could do this, socialism, capitalism, liberalism, vegetarianism...any "ism," any ideology that we use to understand the world can block our ability to see the actual people in the world. While the connection to our stories helps us understand other people, it is our attachment to our ideologies that frequently separates us. Our tradition calls on us to put aside our ideologies so that we can truly see the humanity in all people.

The fourth and final challenge to empathy that I want to share this evening is political polarization. A healthy political debate is a conversation between two people that are wrong. I think you're wrong and you think I'm wrong. What happens when I don't think you are wrong, rather I think there is something wrong with you. Political polarization, according to the sociologist Robert Putnam, is when we hate other people just because of their political views. Think about what happens when you listen to someone with an opposing point of view. The tendency is to see that individual as threatening or damaging. In this political climate, every side feels like the victim. When politics are so polarizing and we all feel victimized it is almost *impossible* to experience empathy.

Jewish tradition, through the Talmud, teaches us something very important here. The Talmud expects all Jews to do two things: 1) study Talmud; and 2) obey halakhah (Jewish law). If you have ever studied Talmud you know that if you have a question about Jewish law, don't open the Talmud. You won't find the answer, you will only find an argument about the answer. As the Talmudic Scholar Moshe Halbertal put it, the paradox of the Talmud is the canonization of disagreement. To study Talmud *and* obey Jewish law means to live according to one position while reading and understanding dissenting points of view. Imagine a progressive reading books written by conservatives and conservatives listening to podcasts by liberals. This is the model of the Talmud. In fact, when the Talmud delineates what it takes to be a member of the highest rabbinic court, the Sanhedrin, it teaches us that you have to be a person that can find 150 arguments to prove the purity of a creeping animal's carcass. What does it take to think of something that you know is against your world view and find 150 reasons why it is a legitimate way of thinking? Obviously it takes serious intellectual sophistication. But it doesn't only require cleverness and depth. It requires a mind that is elastic and flexible. This intellectual flexibility, according to the great feminist Carol Gilligan, is called radical listening.

Typically when we are presented with a world view different than our own we respond with judgment. When we are liberals and we hear conservatives we respond with judgment. When we are conservatives and we hear liberals we respond with judgment. What happens, Gilligan says, when we replace judgment with curiosity? There is an interesting relationship between judgment and curiosity. They are both a response to the same thing: otherness. Judgment declares why I think a person is wrong. Curiosity asks why a person thinks he or she is

right. Jewish tradition calls on us to escape our own views for just a minute so we can understand the world through the lens of someone else, radically listening to people who are different.

There you have it - four causes of our empathy deficit: technology, tribalism, ideology, and political polarization. The antidote to technological distraction is paying attention, focusing, shutting off your phone (just not now, I'm not done yet). The antidote to tribalism is deepening your connection to your national story. When the distance between you and your past shrinks, the emotional distance between you and other people shrinks as well. The antidote to ideological distance is learning to see other people, not letting strict ideologies blur your vision of reality. Finally, the antidote to political polarization is radical listening. Focus, remember, look at the world clearly, and listen radically. Our world and our nation is in need of radical empathy. It is a big ask - I know. But perhaps this Yom Kippur, we can begin with those of us here, or maybe just ourselves - to allow for the possibility that it is not always about me, to lessen our egos and thereby enlarge our hearts.

A few weeks ago I had the honor of officiating at a small wedding at a local park. The couple was originally planning a large celebration in Charlottesville, and the world being what it is right now, that was no longer in the cards. The experience was certainly different. The groom had a lovely tuxedo mask and the bride's mask matched the fabric of her wedding dress. What struck me most, as it often does, is the most identifiable ritual act of any Jewish wedding - the breaking of a glass. Tradition teaches that the act reminds us, that even at the height of our joy, we must recall moments of great challenge - the shattered glass strewn over our past and even our present. And then the couple, who have declared abiding concern for each other, take a courageous step over those broken shards, as if to say, "We see the brokenness and we choose to

respond, to march forward in the only way, the most powerful way we can, with empathy, love and mutual concern.”

On this Yom Kippur, we see the broken shards of empathy all around us. And yet we step forward, we step over, courageously, cautiously and most of all, filled with love, concern and radical empathy for our common humanity, all of us created equally in the image of God.