

Cultivating Compassion

Kol Nidre sermon 5779

When I was young, I was captivated by the *V'ahavta* prayer that says “you shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” I wanted to know, “Well, how do you do that?” When I discovered The Song of Songs, that earthy, sensual, dramatic, erotic, love story set in the glory of Spring, I felt like this was the answer to my question. Of course, we love God through this world that is right here before us. We love God through Creation. We open to the beauty and the suffering and the awesome scope of time and the glimmers of the infinite that are hidden in the world, and in the face of our beloved. I thought, “I can do this! I can grow this love... for beauty, for family, even for the whole wild world in all its contradictions.”

But the Torah wants to challenge me further. Over and over again in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Zechariah and Jeremiah, we are commanded to love the stranger, and we are specifically told to source that love in our own experience of being the stranger. The Torah sets us on a path of Compassion.

In constructing my curriculum of how to cultivate spiritual maturity, Compassion holds a central place. It is how we transform our own difficulties. It is how we deal with our own suffering. And it is how we serve the whole, calling forth the best in us. Why does the Torah need to repeat this concept so many times and in so many different places? Sorry to say, I believe our brains are wired for xenophobia, (the fear of the stranger), and it is only through our spiritual practice that we overcome the innate tendency to distrust or blame the “other,” and in fact embrace the other, the stranger, as our own larger family. Our spiritual path consists of ever-widening circles of relatedness.

So when the Torah commands us to love the stranger, we can ask, “How do we do that?” and we are stepping onto the path of cultivating compassion.

In my exploration of compassion, I came upon a term that was shocking to me because it was something that in my life has masqueraded as compassion but is clearly not. It's called empathic distress. My mother, may her memory be a blessing, was an expert in this. Whenever she witnessed suffering, she would say, “I feel so bad for... (this person, this situation, this terrible thing).” And I joined her

in feeling bad. One of my first memories is getting up early in the morning on a cold winter day, sitting on the floor next to the heater in the dark, and listening to what I was sure was the sound of the whole world groaning. I wondered why everyone didn't hear this sound.

It's taken me a long time to realize that feeling bad for others doesn't alleviate their suffering. It doesn't even motivate me to act on their behalf, because it is draining. It is isolating. And it closes me off from the world and shuts me down. I become numb and complacent, sealed off, afraid to face the world. Afraid that I'll be overwhelmed if I let too much in.

The neuroscience around compassion tells a different story. The state of compassion actually triggers the reward centers of the brain. Levels of dopamine that signal pleasure and oxytocin signaling a sense of connection are elevated. Compassion has been shown to be health promoting: lowering inflammation, reducing stress, strengthening immune response, helping us in recovery from illness. True compassion gives us the energy to engage with the world and act from that compassion.

So, I've been asking the question, "How do we take the journey from empathic distress to compassion?"

A friend of mine reminded me of a Tibetan Buddhist practice called Tonglen. In the practice, one visualizes taking in the suffering of oneself and of others on the in-breath, and on the out-breath giving recognition, compassion, and blessing to all beings. So on the in-breath you breathe in with the wish to take away their suffering; there's a short pause when the transformation happens, and then you breathe out joy, with the wish to send comfort and happiness to the same people, animals, nations, or whatever stranger has come into your awareness.

While this might seem outrageous and counter-intuitive for a sensitive person who has been trying to protect themselves from being overwhelmed by the suffering in the world... in fact what happened when I tried this, is that something in me relaxed. And instead of feeling drained, I was filled with energy. It turns out that it takes a whole lot of energy and armoring to keep the world out.

Breathing in suffering does not really mean burdening oneself with the misery of the world, but rather acknowledging its existence, softening your own protective defenses and accepting it, rather than trying to push it out of your awareness.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches a similar process of dealing with suffering and adversity, and it happens in three steps that are amazingly similar to the practice of Tonglen. The three steps are *Hachna'ah*, *Havdalah* and *Ham'takah*: Surrender, Discernment and Sweetening. I wondered whether this process might be helpful in finding our way to compassion.

We begin with *Hachna'ah* which is not just surrender; it's a radical yielding and being humbled by the Reality before us. It's like the in-breath of Tonglen — just taking it in without resisting or trying to protect yourself. What I am discovering is that all our attempts at avoiding pain always produce more pain in the long run. Facing pain and moving through it is the only path to inner stillness and access to the infinite.

The second step is *Havdalah* (Discernment), which is the moment when I become curious and ask, "Where is God in this?" Just asking the question and entering a process of inquiry changes my relationship to the difficulty that I'm experiencing or witnessing. I'm opening to the spark of goodness. I'm lifting up possibilities. I'm transforming the heaviness of suffering by sifting it through my heart's intention.

The third step is *Ham'takah* — sweetening. The relief of not having to protect myself from what is, leads to a perception of the Divine spark within all suffering, which leads me to the sweet sense of joy, blessing, and goodness radiating out from my center. It is like the out-breath of Tonglen. And this sweetness is what compassion feels like. Once you've tasted it, you'll want to make it a staple of your diet.

And we all have inside us a doorway to this path of compassion. That doorway is the memory and knowledge of suffering. Exodus says, "You know the soul of the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

As Jews we have a cellular memory of what it means to BE the stranger. That memory can either lead us to anxiety or to compassion. It's our choice.

Over the last year, the number of displaced people worldwide has grown by more than 3 million, with over 68 million people around the globe currently displaced by violence and persecution. After nearly two years of our government's continued attempts to limit the ability of refugees and asylum seekers to seek safety in our country, these statistics are particularly sobering. As we consider our commitments to healing the world over the year to come, let's call on our own

memory of being the stranger as we remember refugees and dedicate ourselves to taking action that is sourced in empowered compassion.

Let's make compassion a priority. Educating our children for compassion, voting with the consideration of compassion front and center. And cultivating compassion as a daily commitment, practicing with ourselves, each other and with every stranger we encounter.

The Song of Songs says,

שָׁם אֶתֶּן אֶת-דִּדְי לְךָ

Sham etayn et dodai lach.

There I will give you my love. (Song of Songs 7:13)

There, in the face of the refugee, the homeless one, the immigrant, the asylum seeker, the stranger. There, God, I will give you my love.