

Compassion as Womb-like-ness

Rabbi Esther Adler, Yom Kippur, 5781

In my neighborhood, we have a pharmacy called St. Paul Corner Drug. It is a real old fashioned neighborhood corner drug store. It even has an ice cream fountain. The owner, John, lives in the neighborhood, and a few years ago he opened up in the middle of the night to get my daughter some meds she needed. On the night of the riots after the killing of George Floyd, John's 20 year old daughter was minding the store while he raced out for supplies to board up the windows. She was in the upstairs office when she saw through the window that a group of would-be rioters had gathered out front. She went downstairs and told them that this is a family owned, neighborhood shop. "Please don't hurt us and all the people that need their medicines."

True story, and one that beautifully demonstrates Courage and Faith, the two character traits Rabbi Spilker has spoken about in his sermons during these holy days. John's daughter, in a moment of crisis, had the courage to face the rioters, and the faith that they would respond with compassion for her store and its customers.

Courage, faith, and compassion. You may or may not have noticed that these virtues headlined our High Holy Day bulletin this year, and for good reason. We desperately need them in these troubled times. Courage and faith help us confront the challenges we face so that they don't defeat us. Compassion, I think, serves a different function. Compassion enables us to help *others* confront those same challenges, and helps us when courage and faith aren't quite enough.

When Moses is up on Mount Sinai collecting the 10 commandments, he takes longer than the Israelites expect, and they have a crisis of both courage and faith. Feeling abandoned and afraid, they build the Golden Calf, which in turn makes God feel abandoned And perhaps even

afraid. This leads to disaster, as we know. There is death and destruction, and certainly even more fear and despair. So Moses goes back up the Mountain to plead with God to forgive the Israelites. Ultimately, God relents, and agrees to forgive the Israelites, exclaiming: *Adonai Adonai, El Rachum V'chanun* - I am Adonai, a compassionate and gracious God.

This verse is recited before the open ark only on the holiest days of the year. It is one of the last prayers we say during Ne'ilah Yom Kippur, one last request for forgiveness before the closing of the gates. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan explains why: "God said to Moses: 'Every time that Israel sins, *"Asu l'fanai et haseder hazeh"* they should do this litany before me, and I will forgive them.'"¹ It seems he is suggesting that when we've sinned, reciting this verse will remind God to be compassionate with us.

Listen carefully to the words: 'Every time that Israel sins, *"Asu l'fanai et haseder hazeh"* they should do this litany before me, and I will forgive them.'" It doesn't say we should "recite" the prayer, but we should "do" it. Perhaps we do need to remind God to be compassionate, but not with words - We have to enact these Divine qualities in our lives. We have to do them – to manifest them, to become them – and not just say them.²

In the words of Frederick Douglass: we have to "pray with our feet." If we want God to act like God, - that is to be compassionate - first we have to act like God by setting an example of compassion. So how's this for a radical theological paradox : Living *in the image* of God is really *role modeling for* God. Whether God is our role model or the other way around begs the question: What does compassion really ask of us?

You know that I like words, so I started looking into the meaning and etymology of compassion, which led me down a rabbit hole of apparent synonyms like sympathy and empathy and pity. What I found is that there is some agreement that there is a hierarchy of responses when we encounter suffering. Pity says, "I see your pain." Sympathy says "I understand your pain."

¹Rosh Hashanah 17b

² Rabbi Nancy Flam <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/start-with-compassion/>

Empathy says, "I feel your pain." Compassion says "I am with you in your pain and I will help."

Which is all interesting, and I agree with it, but all these English words stem from Greek and Latin, and roots which mean feelings and suffering. But the compassion I am interested in stems from Hebrew, and has a very different source. Compassion in Hebrew is *Rachamim*. *Rachamim* is a plural form of the word *Rechem*, meaning womb. I want to explore for a moment this connection between *rechem* and *rachamim*. I ask your forgiveness if the image raises anything uncomfortable or painful for any reason. Please reach out to me later if it does.

Our sages say that compassion is like a mother's love for her child. But I think that is completely missing the point. First, *Rechem* is "womb," not "mother." The womb does not love; the womb sustains and protects the unborn baby, simply because that is what it does. Also, the womb connects the baby to the mother in a most intimate way - perhaps the most intimate connection two separate beings can have. The relationship is not symbiotic though, the womb gives, the baby receives.

From this perspective, then, *Rachamim*, or being womb-like, means being connected to another being in an intimate, sustaining way, without expectation of anything in return. *Rachamim* is not a feeling, like sympathy or empathy; it is a deep connection to another human being that moves us to act in ways that are sustaining to that person. It is an expression of shared humanity.

Empathy and Sympathy are important, of course, and they can lead to compassion. But at the end of the day, feelings themselves do not have an impact unless they move us to do something. And feelings, frankly, can be fickle. We can't always control them. My feeling of anger is likely to overtake my feeling of sympathy or empathy and cause me to withdraw or lash out; but compassion can coexist positively with anger, and move me to *teshuva* - return, healing the breach in a relationship, or to *tikkun* - repair, addressing the ills in society.

Rachamim - compassion - is not a feeling; it is a choice. It is the choice to acknowledge our shared humanity, no matter how I may feel about you. Compassion is choosing to acknowledge that we are in this together, whether we like it or not, and, unlike feelings, compassion is within our ability to control. Even more, it is our mandate. We are commanded in Deuteronomy to “walk in God’s ways” (28:9), which is interpreted by our sages: “As God is compassionate, so you must be compassionate. As God clothed the naked, visited the sick, comforted the mourners, and buried the dead, so must you”³

Samuel Luzzatto, one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 19th century taught: compassion constitutes the basis of love, kindness, and righteousness...It is the medium by which we all might learn to live in peace.⁴ It’s a grand statement - “compassion is the medium by which we all might learn to live in peace,” but if you think about it, it might well be.

Imagine what would it be like if everybody was really able to fully appreciate that we are all in this together; if everybody committed to treating others as if their humanity really mattered irrespective of how we “feel” about each other, if we all made the choice to protect and sustain each other simply because we are human.

This afternoon we will recite *Adonai Adonai, El Rachum V’Chanun*, the verse that is supposed to inspire God’s compassion. The question is will we just recite it, or will we live it? Will we all wear our masks and physically distance to protect the people around us, simply because they are human? Will we all reduce, reuse, and recycle to sustain our planet, simply because we all live here? Will we all work to make black lives - and the lives of all people of color - matter, because for too long we didn’t? Will we all vote and do our part to make every vote count?

³ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a

⁴ Marc Gopin, Compassionate Judaism

<https://carterschool.gmu.edu/publication/view/494641#:~:text=Luzzatto%20believed%20that%20compassion%2C%20not,a%20way%20to%20move%20forward.>

If individuals and communities, religions, cultures and nations all engaged with each other from a starting point of shared humanity, acting with compassion, then perhaps God would take our cue, and forgive us for getting ourselves into this situation in the first place.

And so I pray: may our deeds and our lives be models of Rachamim - womb-like-ness. May we act always in ways that are sustaining to others and to ourselves, cognizant of our shared humanity, inspired by our shared divinity. And may this in turn move God to be compassionate with us. Amen.

If you are wondering what happened in the end at Saint Paul Corner Drug, in response to her appealing to their humanity, the would-be rioters left the store untouched. I don't know where they went next, but I would like to believe that wherever it was, they continued to act with compassion.