

Looking into Each Other's Eyes: The need for compassion in Dark times  
Rosh Hashanah 5775

Compassion. Compassion!

If I were a prophet this is the word I would want to shout from the mountaintop, or the soapbox on the crowded street. Compassion, my brothers and sisters! You pained and frightened multitudes, compassion! This is our path to healing.

The story of Jonah, which we read on Yom Kippur, is the story of someone who has lost his compassion. God calls upon Jonah to tell the city of Nineveh to repent and be saved. But Jonah does not have compassion for the city, and he boards a ship to hide from his calling.

Of course, God finds the vessel, and turns the seas choppy and malevolent. The crew is alarmed, but Jonah just burrows into his bunk. The captain cries out to him, "How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish." Not only does lack compassion for the Ninevites, or for the shipmates crying into his ears, but it seems Jonah is unmoved to save even his own life. When the crew discovers that he is to blame for the seas' disturbance, Jonah responds dispassionately, "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you."

Jonah is in a deep depression, closed to the world and to life. But then, miraculously, he is saved from drowning in the belly of a giant fish. The miracle is not only that he is saved, but that he cares, and wants to live. Now desperate for the compassion of God, he realizes the importance of

compassion. Jonah promises to show compassion to the Ninevites, and God commands the whale to spit Jonah out.

Jonah then hurries to Nineveh to deliver his message. But when Nineveh does repent, and God removes the decree of destruction, Jonah closes his heart once again. “Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country?” he says in anger and self pity. “That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.” He says this as an accusation, as if God’s compassion were a defect. Once again he cries that he does not want to live. Once again, Jonah has lost compassion for others to such an extent that he finds no compassion for himself either. He flops down under a tree, which God then causes to wither and die. Jonah is furious, shouting at God, “how can you kill my tree?” God says, ‘You see? You are so upset over this tree that you love. Why shouldn’t I care about all the innocent people and animals of Nineveh?’

The story ends with a kind of question mark. We do not know if Jonah finally learns to be compassionate, or if he continues to wallow in self-pity and suicidal despair. Jonah may or may not have learned compassion, but the author of the story seems to hope very much that we will.

The story of Jonah teaches us that throwing ourselves into despair and self-pity will not save us. Indulging these feelings will only plunge us deeper into the darkness. Rather, compassion for other living beings is the only way to lift ourselves out of the sea of violence, back into the light.

The past few years have plunged us deep into the seas of violence, darkness and despair. From years of pandemic that made us isolated and ill, to a polarized and mistrustful American electorate that sometimes bursts into violence, to the outbreak of war in eastern Europe, to economic pains and fears that Artificial Intelligence will replace us, the world has been a frightening and painful place. And then, right at the end of last year's holiday cycle, the terrible attacks on our own people in Israel, translating to rising antisemitism and devastating isolation on an international stage.

This pain can cause us to draw ranks and retreat to the protection of our inner chambers, nursing our wounds and remaining wary of attack. Yet this compassionless state may be even more dangerous to us, preventing us from healing.

Our people have been wounded physically and emotionally, and we have made efforts to tend those wounds. But I worry, too, for how we have been wounded morally. How pain and despair have closed our hearts, taking away the spark of life. Golda Meir wrote in her autobiography, "When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons." Our moral wounds are serious, and if we don't tend to them and restore our compassion for others, we risk being swallowed up by the sea.

Today in our liturgy we call out to God, "El Rahum v' Hanun," God of mercy and compassion. Jewish theology teaches that many things are precious to God, but compassion and kindness are precious above all else. As we enumerate our sins, al chet she' chatanu, we ask God to be

merciful and compassionate with us, ועל כלם אלוה סליחות. סלח לנו. מחל לנו. כפר לנו:

And for all of these, God of pardon, pardon us, forgive us, grant us atonement.

Does God need to be reminded to forgive, to pardon, to be merciful? But these are God's most cherished attributes! Rather, it is we who need to be reminded to forgive, to pardon, to be merciful. **It is we who need to show compassion, to open our eyes to the suffering of others, to learn how to be with others in their joy and pain just as God is with us. In doing this, we will be serving God, and so serving ourselves.**

How do we do this? How do we move beyond a place of pain and despair to a place of compassion and wholeness? I will suggest three steps, parallel to the steps that God tried to show Jonah. First, we must learn to have compassion for ourselves. Second, we must learn to look deeply into the eyes of those close to us. Finally, we must cultivate compassion for those to whom we are globally connected.

This season we are in is often called a season of repentance. The word repentance invokes self-recrimination and self flagellation. But Rabbi Ami Silver of the Applied Jewish Spirituality institute says this is not the intended tone of this holiday. He parodies this inner voice as it tries to frighten us into repentance, saying, “You better do better! You better act more kindly, be more patient, be more thoughtful. There's judgment coming. Who knows if you'll make it through this next year. You'd better do better!”

This little voice may sound familiar. Many of us hear it all the time, a harsh narrator that keeps us running, telling us we are not good enough, trying to frighten us into working harder, achieving more, doing better.

But Rabbi Ami teaches that the intended tone of the holiday is much more gentle. The season of judgment is intentionally placed on the anniversary of creation, Rosh Hashanah. The story of creation teaches us that we are loved unconditionally, that God and our parents brought us into the world out of love and grace, not because we deserved to be here, or had something to prove.

And so in this season of repentance we must treat ourselves with compassion, not recrimination. Because anyway, it doesn't work. Anyone who has helped to teach or raise children knows that scaring them into good behavior doesn't work. Boundaries are good, but yelling and punishment trigger rebellion and stonewalling. Rather, children must be brought to the right path with kindness and compassion. Why treat ourselves any other way?

Let's take a moment now to close our eyes and imagine our inner child. Imagine yourself when you were young, less than ten years old. How would you approach this child, if you had done something wrong? As you take time on the days of awe to look at your life and where you may have strayed from the desired path, bring yourself back lovingly, as though speaking to your inner child. Cultivating self compassion is an important first step in healing.

Self-compassion is important, but if we stop there we may land in self-pity, which did not help Jonah. To truly heal we must be able to hear the cries of others around us. Our fellow sailors begging us to wake up

and save our sinking ship. To do this, we must look into the eyes of those around us.

Literally, we should look into the eyes of others. The psychologist Arthur Aaron did a study suggesting that if two people look into each other's eyes for four whole minutes they could fall in love. While we might not have the time nor desire to fall in love with everyone, how much more loving might we be if we connected with each other meaningfully through our gaze?

Rabbi Shai Held tells a story on his podcast about one Friday night when a man stopped him and asked for tzedakah. And Rabbi Held replied, I'm really sorry, but I don't have anything on me. And the man said, thank you for looking at me.

When I think about the possibility of healing through difficult conflict, I think about efforts to bring conflicting groups face to face. Recently, I initiated a conversation between a few women from Beth El and from the Hadee Mosque, because I noticed tension building between us over the war in Israel and Gaza. Women from Beth El attended an event held by the women's auxiliary, and several of the Ahmadiyya muslim women attended the Freedom Seder at Beth El. But despite our continued pronouncements and good faith efforts for allyship, I felt that there were unsaid things forming a block in our relationship.

So Diane Sand and I invited several leaders of the women's auxiliary to tea at her home. Over a beautifully set table, we shared our gratitude for one another and for the space to talk. And then we had what I felt was one of the most meaningful conversations I have had thus far about the conflict. It was cathartic to share the pain we felt for our Israeli family

and the pain of isolation here in the U.S. It was meaningful to listen to their pain over the destruction of Gaza, and the tens of thousands of lives lost there. Though we did not agree on policy or even naming aspects of the war, but I still felt healed. It was life affirming to listen and be listened to. To feel and to show compassion. We left with hugs and smiles.

When I think of the possibility of healing through compassion, I think of organizations like Braver Angels and the Search for Common Ground and Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom that heal polarization by providing templates for face to face conversations between people who disagree. Last year a group called Kulanu hosted such conversations here in Harrisburg, and we have used these templates for conversations here at Beth El.

Many of our hearts are hurting these days, grieving and wounded by war and polarization. If you want to heal, create an opportunity with someone whom you trust, and with whom you disagree, to have a serious, loving, face to face conversation about the issue. You will create an opportunity not only to help another heal, but to heal your own heart, and our society. This is the real purpose of teshuva.

Finally, our tradition calls upon us to be compassionate not only toward those in our immediate sphere, but even toward those in our broader, global circle. Like Jonah was called to elicit compassion for Ninevites, or for a tree, we are called to have compassion for our fellow living beings. A full 36 times, more than any other single commandment, the Torah tells us, “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.” The Torah specifically uses this language of

stranger, *ger*, to explain that your compassion is not limited to those whom you know, but even to those who are strangers to you.

Many of us read the headlines about the war in Israel and Gaza and we turn away in despair. We close down our hearts, too sore from pain over our own brethren's suffering to feel anything more for the stranger. We feel we cannot take anymore, and would rather hide like Jonah did. But in this closed place of despair, we cannot heal. We must return to the surface and try to look the other in the eye, even if it is through pictures in the media.

It is painful to look at the pain of others. Jonah fled from it. Hagar fled too, when she was banished into the desert with her son Ishmael, and they ran out of water. Afraid they were both about to die of thirst, Hagar placed her son under a bush and sat some distance away, so she would not have to see him suffer. But then God came to her and said, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

When there is pain before us, the temptation is to turn away, to cover our faces. But if we lift our eyes and hold the hands of those who are in suffering, we might find a well of water, a place where we can be nourished and healed.

Whenever I read the headlines about the war in Israel and Gaza and feel ready to plunge into despair, I think about the Parents Circle. The Parents Circle is a group of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians, who, in response to losing a dear loved one, a child, a parent, a sibling, a spouse, decided not to turn their back on the world but to turn their eyes outward, to seek out others in pain, and to try to end the suffering. In this



group Israelis and Palestinians grieve together, and find wholeness and healing by meeting and listening to one another's stories, and practicing compassion. This is the true meaning of compassion, which comes from the Latin words *com* and *passio*, meaning suffering together.

This practice of cultivating compassion towards those we don't know has been baked into our tradition since ancient times, and it still is there today. Rabbi Sharon Brous, in her book *The Amen Effect*, quotes a mishnah that describes a compassion practice in the ancient temple in Jerusalem. Pilgrims visiting the Temple Mount would enter the holy courtyard and turn right then circle through, counterclockwise, exiting close to where they had entered. But someone who was suffering, grieving, lonely or sick, would walk through the same entrance and circle in the opposite direction. "Just as we do when we're hurting:" Brous says, "every step, against the current." Those circling counterclockwise would then have an opportunity to witness those walking against the grain and ask "what happened to you?" They would look each other in the eye and offer words of support. "May God comfort you," "May you be wrapped in the embrace of this community."

Rabbi Sharon Brous calls this processing of witnessing "with-ness." Just by being with someone in their moment of pain, showing them even a fleeting moment of compassion, can bring them healing. We do not have to know what to say. We do not have to know what the tradition says. We just have to be present with another.

In this year of hopelessness, I have felt most hopeful when gathering with others in the Jewish and interfaith community. Last Sunday we had the Harmony Walk with our siblings of other faiths, and the Sunday before that Beth El hosted the Commonwealth Interfaith service. Sitting

together with diverse faith leaders offering words of peace from religious traditions around the world filled me with hope. This coming Sunday there is another opportunity to gather with our interfaith community at the Trinity Church of God for their End Gun Violence day. I know that standing with our community as we mourn lives lost to gun violence in Harrisburg can help us feel less alone as we mourn lives lost to violence in Israel.

And so I stand upon my soapbox today and like a madwoman, or like a prophet cry, “Compassion, compassion!” In this time of suffering, many of us are walking around with our heads down. In our despair, we are fleeing into the dark recesses of our hearts, as though God could not be found there. But God is everywhere, and God wants us to lift up our eyes and see one another. Because if we would lift our eyes, we would have the opportunity to see and be seen, and this could provide healing. And so as we call out to El rahum v’hanun, the God of compassion and mercy, let us call upon our own compassion and mercy, that it may rain down upon ourselves, upon our communities, and upon our whole world. And who knows? Maybe we will write a new ending to the book of Jonah.