EMPATHY

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Dan The Man. Dan-o. Vitz. Dapper Dan, the man with a plan. Danny Boy. Fred Flinstone. These were my nicknames when I was a teenager. The last one, Fred Flinstone, apparently when I had hair. Yes, for a brief period between the ages of two and 22 I had a hairline, and I resembled Fred Flintstone to my friends. Nicknames are important milestones in a person's life, and my friends you can tell how long they have known me by which nickname they call me by. But there are nicknames that we acquire in life, particularly as children, that we don't repeat, names that people called us to tease us and bully us. I have those names too, they are locked away in a very protected place, and I hope I never hear them again. Every parent when choosing a name for their child runs through the possibilities, how will children use this name to tease my kid, how will they torment my child with the name that I have given her? We know that no names are safe from abuse, and that every name is an invitation to a bully to torment or torture.

How many of you have ever endured being called by a nickname you disliked? Few things matter to people as much as their names. Judaism teaches that a person is known by three names in life, the one they are given at birth, the one they call themselves and the one that others call them by. But what if that third name, the one that others call you by, is source of abuse and pain? What if that name is too horrible to repeat in synagogue? Mine was.

Recently, a national magazine chronicled the case of an overweight teenage girl who committed suicide in response to taunting nicknames imposed on her by her peers. Two weeks later the magazine printed this letter by another victim.

"As a teenager, I too was tortured by my fellow students. I was an overweight teen from a poor family that lived in the wrong neighborhood and I was abused constantly. I could not escape it. Teachers witnessed this over and over again and did nothing. The principal told me her hands were tied. I thought of suicide but thank God I never did it… I wish all teenagers who tease each other could have it happen to them so they could feel the pain and humiliation they inflict. I am signing this letter with the name they chose to torture me with every day for six years. How would you like to be known by an entire school as: Big Bertha"[1]

Judaism teaches that to bully another person, to tease, mock or publicly humiliate another human being is a sin so great that it is considered a form of murder, because ultimately it can destroy a person's self respect; it kills their soul. Why does our tradition perceive bullying and public humiliation as such an offense? Because the person who is humiliated frequently becomes insecure, ashamed and embarrassed in the presence of others, they cease to be able to function as part of the community, they are alone in the midst of a crowd of people.

What makes this girl's story so painful to hear, is not only that it happened to not one but two 13 year old girls separated by a generation, but that it has happened to all of us. It is hard to imagine that there is a person in this room who has not been a target of a bully at some point in our life; at school, at work, or in our homes and community. Picked on and abused by those who don't even know us or perhaps most painfully by those closest to us, friends, spouses, family members. Whether you're 13 years old or 30 years old, we feel this girl's pain, for it is ours as well. We have <u>been</u> her, and because we have felt her pain we can't help but want to lessen it, to put our arms around her and protect her from the barrage, to stand in the face of her bully and scream, no you're not going to do this to another kid! You're not going to bully someone, like I was bullied! This can't happen to another person, I won't let it!

That reaction, that powerful, visceral understanding of what a fellow human being is going through so much so that it compels us to action on there behalf, that is **<u>empathy</u>** and it is the essence of what it means to be a Jew.

Empathy is why we fast on Yom Kippur; so that we will know the pain and the hunger of those who do not have a choice whether to eat or not.

Empathy is why this congregation, which exists in a desert, collected hundreds of boxes of relief items for those ravaged by a flood. Because we saw ourselves and our lives floating through the streets of New Orleans and we were commanded by empathy to come to their aid.

Empathy is the essence of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew means to feel empathy for the world, to understand its tragedies, because they have happened to us and we are commanded, Never Again!

Empathy is the very meaning of God's name that we proclaim on these High Holy Days. We say, *Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v chanun Adonai.* / "The Lord! The Lord! a God compassionate and gracious." It is a verse that comes from the book of Exodus and the story of the Golden Calf. When Moses is bereft and despondent over the betrayal of the Jewish people, when he feels as though he has been bullied and rejected by them at the moment he needed them the most, God comforts him and empathizes with him,

The name *Rachum*, or *Rachamim* is a lens into the importance of Empathy in Judaism and to the very nature of God. Its root is the word *rechem*, which means womb. Empathy in Judaism is to feel for another as though they were your own child. It is not enough to merely say, that person is a fellow human being and I should help them, it is not even enough to say that person is my brother and I should help him. No, our tradition commands us to see every person as God sees them, as though they issued from our womb, to say, that person is somebody's child, because every body, including the homeless person you will pass on the freeway off ramp on your way home today is somebody's child. *Rachamim* / Empathy requires that as a Jew, as an extension of God's paternal empathy, we must help them! For we are all have the same parent, we are all children of God.

We say on these High Holy Days that God sits on a throne of *Rachamim*, a throne of compassion and empathy for our sins and our travails. That before God moves to the throne of Din, of Judgment late in the afternoon on Yom Kippur, God first sit on the throne of Rachamin and feels empathy and compassion for our lot in life. Before God judges us, God tries to understand us. It is an amazing image.

Think about it for a moment, **(come off bema)**

from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur God comes down off of his throne, and sits down beside us, puts an arm around our shoulder and says, "tell me about how you feel, tell me about how you hurt, tell me about what you did, I want to understand, I care and I am listening." That is empathy. Before we judge another, we must understand them. How many of us are guilty of just the opposite of Judging first and understanding second if at all?

A story: When a nineteenth-century Eastern European *shtetl* was beset by a siege of freezing weather, the local rebbe needed to raise funds to heat the houses of the town's poor. He set off for the home of the town's richest man, and knocked on the door. The man, a follower of the rebbe, answered and invited him in. The rebbe declined and said that he only needed a minute or two of the man's time and they could talk on the doorstep. The rebbe then started to ask the man general questions about his family and his children, small talk. The man, who had come to the door in his pajamas, began to shiver and his teeth began to chatter. "Will the rebbe please come inside he asked again?"

The rebbe said no and began to ask the man questions about his business. The man was now visibly shivering from the cold and again said, "Will the rebbe please come inside and tell me why he has come to my house?"

The rebbe remained outside, but told the man, "I've come to ask you for one hundred rubles. We need the money to warm the houses of the poor."

"And if I promise to give it will the rebbe then come inside."

"Yes" said the rebbe.

"Then I'll give the money right now! Just come inside my home I am freezing!"

After the rebbe followed the shivering man into the house, the man opened his safe and gave him 100 rubbles.

He asked the rebbe, "if you knew all along that you were planning to ask me, why didn't you come right away and ask?"

The rebbe answered, "If I had come in as soon as you opened the door, you would have escorted me to a fine chair in your living room and brought out a glass of hot tea for both of us. We would have warmed ourselves by the fire, and when I would have asked you for money to heat the houses of the poor, you would have offered five rubles, maybe ten. But standing outside, you experienced for a few minutes the bitterness of the cold that the poor are experiencing all the time. I wanted you to be feeling that bitter cold when I asked you for the 100 rubles."[2] **(return to bema)**

It is a story of empathy, but it has a troubling subtext; for it is not until the man feels the bitter pain of the cold himself that he is compelled to act on behalf of the poor. He could not understand the needs of the poor, and therefore he could not empathize with them, only when he was victimized by the same cold was he moved to empathize. How many of us packed our cars with more intent in the recent wild fires because the images of the Gulf Coast helped us understand? It shouldn't take a forest fire to help understand a flood. We should not have to be victimized in order to empathize.

We shouldn't have to experience divorce, mental illness, death of a loved one, a disabled child in order to recognize that pain and provide comfort for others.

We shouldn't have to lack purpose and direction in our job's, our family life, our relationships in order to help our spouse when they feel lost and alone. It shouldn't take a fire to understand a flood.

If the standard for empathy is that we have to be victimized in order to empathize, then we will have a whole lot more poor and hungry, and wounded, and sick, and lonely, and depressed and bullied in our world before we can have fewer. Ghandi once said, "an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind."

The mitzvah of *rachamim*, of empathy, requires more from us. In my personal experience the hardest thing to do is to understand a situation from another person's perspective; but that is exactly what Judaism and empathy require. To see the person and the situation as though we were standing in there shoes. *Vahavtah l'reyecha kmocha,* you shall love your neighbor as yourself, why does the text say, *kmocha*, as yourself? Because they are as we are.

A familiar story:

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to God.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned God about it:

"God, you said you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

God replied:

"My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

The mitzvah of empathy is to carry another person on our shoulders at their most troubling times in life.

Our tradition teaches that God can't or chooses not to be everywhere and so God created us, human beings, his partners, to be in each other's lives as we would have God be in ours, to be present and to listen, to comfort, consul and to help carry the load.

For each person's lifetime is like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some, there are more pieces. For others, the puzzle is more difficult to assemble. But know this: you do not have within yourself all the pieces to your puzzle. Everyone carries with them at least one piece and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle. Sometimes they know it; sometimes they don't know it. And when [out of empathy] you present your piece, to another, whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, you become an extension of God and Godliness in this world, a supporting actor in the ongoing story of another person's life, and their is no greater mitzvah, there is no greater purpose in life, than to help another in there time of need.[3]

This Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur I am asking each of us to be <u>more</u> Observant Jews, not in terms of ritual and *kashrut*, though there is nothing wrong with that, but more observant Jews with regard to the lives and needs of others. Notice other people and the challenges they face in life, understand them before you judge them. Put yourself in their shoes, see the world through their eyes, treat every person you meet as though they were your own child and be an empathic expression of God in their lives.

To be a more observant Jews means that this Yom Kippur let your fast help you understand the hunger of those who have no food to eat.

To be a more observant Jews means that this Yom Kippur let your lost wages at work, remind you of those who cannot afford to miss a day of work to pray to God.

To be a more observant Jews means that we need to hear the insults and teasing and bullying that goes on in our society as clearly as we hear the sound of the shofar, and we should be called to action just as the shofar calls us to prayer.

To be a more observant Jew means that every time you encounter a person in crisis be they a friend, family member or a complete stranger, treat them as you yourself would want to be treated, *vahavtah l'reyacha kamocha*, love your neighbor as you your self want to be loved.

To be a more observant Jews means that in this New Year and in every year, stand in the shoes of the person beside you, see the world from their perspective, understand them before you judge them, walk beside them for a while, and from time to time make one set of foot prints, not two.

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[1] Joseph Telushkin, Moral Virtues
[2] Joseph Telushkin, Moral Virtues
[3] Larry Kushner