

Yom Kippur D'var 2024

Often this d'var is about Jonah, his trials and tribulations concerning his mandated prophesizing of doom and gloom to Nineveh combined with his attempt to avoid going to Nineveh all together. But that is not what struck me this year; I wondered why this parshat was combined with this haftarah. At first glance, there seems to be nothing really in common. One is a set of commandments; the other a story. One is a series of seemingly unrelated commandments starting with how long cooked food is safe to eat, followed by required social behaviors and finally meandering into justice while ending with not holding grudges; the other is a story of what happens when one obeys and/or disobeys the commandments both on the personal and community-wide levels. Then it struck me: compassion is the commonality between the two portions.

Just what is a really good definition of compassion? The word comes from Latin which means to suffer with and our pronunciation of the word is Old English. Compassion literally means the action of “to suffer together.” Another way to look at this definition is that it is also the emotion that is experienced when an individual sees in another person’s suffering and is inspired to alleviate their pain.

Rashi believed that G-d created the world with both compassion and justice because justice alone would not have been enough for the world to survive, which might explain why the reference to justice is included in the parshat.

The Talmud continues the definition with “a fellow-feeling or caring concern” that is considered to be one of the highest virtues in all of Jewish teachings. The Talmudic rabbis believed that compassion was one of the attributes that defined being Jewish along with justice.

Just where in Torah is compassion personified? We can start with Abraham, who demonstrated compassion in massive, yet sometimes subtle ways. According to Rabbi Sacks: “Abraham himself sought to be a blessing to others regardless of their faith.” Abraham also interceded on behalf of people of Sodom, negotiating from 50 righteous people down to 10 righteous people just to save the city and all that lived there. Lot continued with compassion when he protected the angels that he thought were just ordinary people from the mob that wanted to do them harm. Both Abraham and Lot entertained angels because not only because of hospitality, which appears that it was uncommon in the area, but because of compassion.

Another person personifying compassion is Sarah. How did Sarah exemplify compassion? She understood the personal and political ramifications of Abraham not having a son, so she stepped aside that Hagar might bear him a son.

Centuries later Moses would also claim the title of compassion by first seeing and then being appalled as to how the Hebrews slaves were being treated even though he was considered himself an Egyptian Prince and slaves were considered to be beneath him. In Exodus 2:11, Prince Moses found the strength and compassion to stop the Egyptian overseer from beating someone who was positioned beneath them both. He later continued to listen to what they needed which was freedom and with the help of G-d freed the Hebrews from bondage. At times he stood between them and G-d to protect Israel.

These are just a few examples of famous Biblical people that exemplify compassion, however, historically we are a people that are filled with compassion; as many that have shown just how compassionate we are, as we are the leaders of various causes such as environmental issues, justice, civil rights and other causes. While many do not become an example for others outside of their small circle, nevertheless, they also rise to the level of compassion as demonstrated by our fore-fathers and

fore-mothers. They, too, are worthy of praise; these individuals, who are unknown compassionate people.

Now to bring this something a bit more modern: Rabbi Chaim Stern wrote:

When evil darkens our world, let us be the bearers of light.
When fists are clenched in self-righteous rage,
Let our hands be open for the sake of peace.
When injustice slams doors on the ill, the poor, the old, and the stranger,
let us pry the doors open.
Where shelter is lacking, let us be builders.
Where food and clothing are needed, let us be providers.
Where knowledge is denied, let us be champions of learning.
When dissent is stifled, let our voices speak truth to power.
When the earth and its creatures are threatened,
Let us be their guardians.
When bias, greed, and bigotry erode our country's values,
Let us proclaim liberty throughout the land.
In the places where no one acts like a human being,
Let us bring courage; let us bring compassion; let us bring humanity.¹

While the poem does give us some guidelines as to how to proceed, it is deliberately vague as to allow some ambiguity and creativity in our actions. However, the mandate to improve the world around us with positivity is always essential but not easily seen as how to proceed in the most beneficial manner.

¹ Congregation B'Nai Jechurun, YK Healing Service, 5781, page 4 from Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe.
<https://images.shulcloud.com/3262/uploads/HHD/YKHealingService5781.pdf>

When I lived in Allentown, PA, I was a specialized foster care mother for up to three teenaged girls. When every single one of my girls moved into our home, their belongings were transferred either in a banker's box or a tomato box. They moved just like everyone else did; all belongings boxed up and labeled. Today in 2024, just how are these children who need our protection moved into foster care? All of their belongings are placed in a 13-gallon trash bag. This is a contemptible practice that is not only degrading but dehumanizing to a child that needs our care and protection. What can be done to change this practice so that the already maltreated children are not further humiliated or traumatized even more? My first thought that suitcases would be an excellent solution, however, many of the children do not have enough belongings even to fill a small suitcase. What these children need is tote bags or gym bags to transport their belongings with dignity, which as human beings they not only deserve but it is their right to be treated as people. Tote bags or gym bags also could be easily stored until needed again.

Just as we are instructed not to harvest a field until there is no more grain left, so we can also do when we find "good deals". When I was in a Dollar Tree, I purchased again an excellent nasal inhaler that works well for me; a woman next to me asked if it was any good as her daughter had terrible allergies. I shared that it really worked for me so she had her daughter buy one. She found me in another part of the store to thank me as her daughter discovered that she now could breathe thru her nose after using the inhaler. The mother had grabbed every single one that was hanging on the display plus a box that was waiting to be shelved. I asked her why she took all of them as others might need the inhaler as well, while sharing the lesson that I had learned as a child: "take some but leave at least one for others". She looked startled as if a light had just switched on as she realized something important. Smiling somewhat sheepishly, she thanked me and said that she would remember this as she had not thought that others, beside her daughter, might need these as well.

The injunction against not putting a stumbling block in front of a blind person or cursing the deaf, always bother me as I could not see why anyone would ever want to do either one. When I was taking Walter Kron home one year after this parshat was read, I mentioned my confusion to him. In his opinion, some people might have found slapstick humor to be rather funny as they were somewhat unsophisticated times. We agreed that it appears that humanity's sense of humor has not evolved very much in the last few millennia as we both ended up agreeing that not only were the Three Stooges not funny but they were three good Jewish boys gone bad!

As those who attend the minyon, all know that I love to ask questions when I give a d'var in order to facilitate a sometimes-rousing discussion. As this Yom Kippur there cannot be and will be no discussion but these questions are meant to allow for more private meditation on this day of reflection. Hillel the Elder once said: "If not now, then when?". I am going to expand on what Hillel said by offering these questions for personal meditation starting with: If not now, then when will I allow my compassion to grow to make me more understanding of others? If not now, then when will I become one of the myriad, uncountable people who came before me, so that I actively experience true compassion in all of my behaviors with not only people but all that inhabit this world? If not now, then when will I truly begin to understand just how blessed I am when I use the gift of compassion that has been bestowed to all of us by the Creator of All? If not, then when?

Shannah Tova.