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Rosh Hashanah I**

“It’s Not that We Lack Empathy...”

I’ve long believed that one of the best ways to understand what’s really going on in the world is to listen to comedians. News reporters, advertisers, political leaders, many of the others we turn to for please, some small quotient of honesty, so often have too much of an agenda to tell us real truth. When I was a kid, I discovered Mad magazine. Looking back, I don’t know how I could have made it through adolescence without it. Today, I don’t know how any of us can make it through this crazy world without comedians, those of sharp wit (still many of them Jews btw) who puncture the pious fraud speech that blares at us day and night.

Even T-shirts can be a form of comedy and I saw one recently that got my attention. “It’s not that I lack empathy...Okay, maybe it is.” I wanted to buy it--but right away there was a problem. Where would I wear it? Who would see it and get the joke--and not take me for some kind of jerk? I couldn’t answer so I didn’t buy the shirt. But the phrase stuck with me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it might have been more than just comedy--it might have been profound. When you think about it, who couldn’t wear that shirt? Who doesn’t lack at least some empathy? Who has it--and demonstrates it--as often as needs be? Anyone? The truth is that most of us could wear that shirt. We may not want to because we too don’t want people to think we are a jerk. But that doesn’t mean the shoe--or in this case the shirt--doesn’t fit.

Don’t feel guilty yet. Part of the reason we lack empathy is that we have to. If we were as empathetic as circumstances called for, if we showed our caring, concern and compassion to everyone and everything that was deserving of it, we would have no time, energy or heart for anything else, including our own well being. That would be neither good nor a *mitzvah*.

So we parcel out our empathy as best we can--and that’s okay. What matters is that we follow up at least some of it with action. In Judaism we don’t get *mitzvah* points for feeling.

Ours is a faith of doing.

On the other hand, if we really do lack empathy,
 but nevertheless act to relieve suffering and distress,
 (it's tricky but there are people who pull this off)
 we get to stand erect before the heavenly court on Rosh Hashanah.
 As the Rabbis taught, *Lo ha-midrash hu ha-ikar, eleh ha-ma'aseh*—
 It is not the words, or the thoughts, that matter—it is the deed. (*Avot* 1:17)

There's another facet.

"It's not that I lack empathy...okay maybe it is."

Yes, sometimes it really is.

Often when we others are suffering we respond with judgment,
 instead of empathy.

Frequently the judgment is critical and negative.

We wonder, maybe even aloud, what they did to deserve that,
 or how they managed to bring it upon themselves.

The Mishnah may say, "Don't judge a person
 until you have come to his place (stood in his shoes)." (*Avot* 2:4)
 But we don't all honor this teaching as well as we might.

Maybe it's because we're scared and

we need to reassure ourselves that it won't happen to us.

"Well, what did you expect, she was drunk."

Or, "He never took care of himself." And the like.

We want to tell ourselves that we're smarter and know better
 than to ever put ourselves in such a position.

"It's not that we lack empathy...okay maybe it is."

We do it show it more readily when a victim is clearly innocent.

Puppies, kittens and young children get our empathy.

So do members of our own "tribe."

That's not necessarily in the Jewish sense—though it can be that too;

Our tribe are the people we think of as being "like us"—
 however we define that.

When something happens to "one of our own,"

we're more empathetic than when it happens to someone who's not.

This is why, when bad news hits, we tell family, close friends, loved ones, first.

These are the people we can rely on to be less judgmental,
 when judgment is the last thing we need to hear.

"It's not that we lack empathy."

We show it whenever "people like us" need it.

"Okay, maybe it is."

Judgment lives in tension with empathy,

and of course judgment is central to the high holy days.

We stand before God and ask to be judged favorably—
 i.e. with empathy.

“Avinu Malkeinu chaneinu...be gracious to us.”

**But can we really ask God to show empathy to us,
if we're being stingy with it when it comes to others?**

**Ari Shavit in his recent book, “My Promised Land” (highly recommend it)
described the Arab evacuation of Lydda (now Lod)
during the War for Independence in 1948.**

The Arab community was trapped and under siege.

The Israelis sent a delegation to negotiate.

The Arabs, fearful and powerless, were trembling in their shoes.

“What are you going to do to us?” they asked.

Israelis said, “We will do to you what you would have done to us.”

They went from trembling to terrified. “No please don't do that!”

They didn't. Peaceful evacuation ensued.

**If God said to us, I'll show as much empathy to you as you've shown
to others, we might say the same thing those Arabs did,**

“No, please don't do that!”

**Yes, Judaism considers action more important than emotion--
but emotion shapes character and character shapes action.
So lack of empathy is a serious matter.**

Let's take a look in the mirror.

When we saw the suffering in Gaza this summer, how did we respond?

Was it with empathy or with judgment?

I'm guessing for most of us it was both but what was the balance?

**Was it mainly, “What a horror—all those innocent men, women and children,
who have done nothing wrong, getting their houses destroyed,
their lives ruined, and in more than 2000 cases, ended.”**

(Yes, we know they weren't all “innocent,”

but even according to the Israelis most of them were.)

Or was it, “They brought it on themselves, we had no choice, sorry.”

**I'll confess to you. My own balance leaned more towards judgment. I'm not
necessarily proud of it but that was my response. They were shooting at us, for
heaven's sake. With real rockets. They built real tunnels, to kidnap and murder
real people. I had seven cousins called into uniform this summer. And dozens
more running for shelter and their lives at the sound of every siren. Not to
mention that a strong and safe Israel is one of the things I've devoted my life to.
So I can't stand here and pretend that I was mostly empathetic--even though the
suffering of the innocents was tragic. Is this what war does to us? “It's not that I
lack empathy...okay, maybe it is.”**

Is there any other way?

**During the High Holydays we are supposed to make
what the Rabbis called a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*.**

It's tricky to translate but

***cheshbon* means “accounting” and**

nefesh, can refer to our spirit, our soul.

Put them together and it means to take account of our inner being.

Just as we take a financial account once a year when the IRS asks for it,
we take a spiritual account at the new year when God asks for it.

The purpose is to help us refine our character.

So *cheshbon ha-nefesh* is a beautiful, even holy concept.

And we do practice it.

The only problem is, we practice it on others more than we do on ourselves.

For example, most of us have made a *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* for Hamas.

We've pretty much decided what we think about them.

<Btw, if you haven't done it recently or at all, read their charter.

Look it up online. There's a link at rabbiagler.net.

You'll see the language is right up there with *Mein Kampf*.>

We've made a *cheshbon* for ISIS. We've made one for the leaders of
Syria, Turkey, Russia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

We've made one for the Saudis and Qataris. And so on.

If you're like me, every one of them is critical in the extreme--
for lots of good reasons.

"It's not that we lack empathy..."

There are some very bad actors out there.

We've also made *cheshbon ha-nefesh* for people closer to home.

We've made them for Congress, the Administration and the Supreme Court.

We've made them for Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives.

We've made them for the banking sector, the health care sector,
the regulatory and enforcement sector.

Most of these are pretty critical too.

"It's not that we lack empathy."

We happen to be not well served by many of our institutions these days.

We'll talk about that more next week but for now isn't it true that
we enjoy pointing out other people's faults?

Especially when a) they are real and

b) it keeps us from facing our own.

But that's not what *cheshbon ha-nefesh* is supposed to be about.

That is like going for counseling and complaining
how someone else is constantly aggravating us.

Any therapist worth his or her salt is going to tell us,

"We have no power over them. We only have power over us.

We cannot control what they do. We can only control what we do."

So this Rosh Hashanah morning, let's control what we do.

Let's leave aside the nasty people who the media puts in front of us 24/7.

Let's for a moment stop looking at all the terrible things they are doing.

Let's look inside.

I heard a statement this year from a Holocaust survivor,
 whose name I unfortunately do not have.
 He, or it might have been she, said,
 “Suffering is part of life. Misery is a choice.”

Let’s work that for a minute. Suffer we must--no one gets through life without it. But it doesn’t mean we have to be miserable at the same time. If we are, it’s a double victory for them and a double loss for us. The original hurt, the suffering, may come from them. But if too much misery follows, that’s our own doing.

If you read something like this in a self-help book, it would be one thing. Coming from someone who graduated from Auschwitz, it’s another.

Clearly others can inflict suffering. They can behead a journalist, shoot an unarmed teenager, use civilians as human shields, fire rockets at kindergartens. They can be arrogant and petty with their power, they can deny people their basic human and civil rights. All of that they can do. But this side of clinical depression, no one can make us miserable without our partnership and consent.

There are at least two ways we can avoid giving that consent. The first is by attitude. We simply resolve not to be victims. Yes, we’ve suffered. But we can refuse to be defined by it. Done. It may not be instantaneous. We may need help and there’s no shame in getting it if we do. But with resolve and with empathy, human and Divine, we can escape from the misery that suffering can bring.

The second way to avoid it is through action. Let’s take our *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* and kick ourselves where we need to. We can all work, in some way, to bring the *mashiach*--the messianic age of decency, kindness, justice and peace—even a little bit closer. This has been the foremost Jewish response to suffering since Jewish time began. It is one of our finest traditions. We would do well to embrace it. It begins by putting misery behind us and empathy in front of us.

I don’t mean to suggest it’s easy. It’s difficult enough keeping our everyday relationships going, not to mention our relationship with whatever higher power we answer to—the one in here we call God—without becoming empathetically drained.

There is also inertia and distraction--which may be greater today than ever before. There are billion dollar industries whose entire purpose is to grab our eyeballs for the next 30 seconds—and they are good at it. (More on this next week.)

So we can be forgiven for wondering, in the face of it all, what chance does a soul have to show, much less grow, in empathy? The answer is a fighting chance. That is all we can ask for. And that is all we need.

This may help. How many of us, if we could, would agree to start life all over again, on condition that we would be born into any random family on earth? Most

of us wouldn't take it. It's a bad bet. Through no fault of our own we would likely end up much worse off than we are. But of course these are the circumstances that most human beings are born into. Through no fault of their own, they are much worse off than we are. It's not that we lack empathy—maybe we just have to appreciate how incredibly fortunate we are.

This is not meant to be a guilt trip. It is meant to be a challenge. And pretty much every response that points us towards a more decent, to say nothing of a more consecrated life, has empathy at its center. “Okay, maybe it does.”

May the shofar we are about to hear inspire us to find empathy within and show it without--and in the process create blessing for ourselves, our families, our community, our nation and our God in the new year.

L'shana tovah.