

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2025
Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

Shanah tovah and a happy New Year to everyone.//

This has been a difficult year of acrimony & division
all over the world.//

Here in the United States, the bitter divide
is between Democrats & Republicans,
liberals & conservatives, pluralists & nationalists.//

In Israel, it is between Jews & Palestinians,
the ultra-Orthodox & the secular,
those who are pro-Netanyahu
and those who adamantly oppose his government.//

Anger & disunity are everywhere & all-encompassing,
from polling places, to city council meetings,
to college campuses & social media feeds.//

We live in a time of disagreement & discord,
a time when most people don't listen to each other,
don't understand each other,
don't *feel* for one another.//

How many of us try, in a truly meaningful way,
to walk in the shoes of our neighbors & fellow citizens,
if only for a few moments?//

This pervasive absence of *empathy* in today's world—
particularly in America & Israel—
is deeply troubling,

and for us as Jews, tonight,
at the start of the High Holy Days, all the more so,
when we realize how *central* empathy is to Judaism,
how empathy is such a core value
in the Jewish religion & in Jewish life.//
Empathy is not just a “feeling,”
but an ethical & spiritual *duty*—
it means connecting with the experiences of others,
which transforms how we view the world
and, ultimately, our own role within it.//

It's not very hard to see how the concept of empathy
is a fundamental part of the Torah & of prayer,

and the very essence of Jewish identity.//

I would bet that all of us here have heard

the famous verse from the book of Leviticus,

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”//

For Jews, this is not a new idea—

it is a commandment as ancient as it is profound.//

Empathy is not just about tolerating, accepting,

or even respecting others,

but about truly *loving* them,

extending them the same care & compassion

that we desire for ourselves.//

And while this is a sacred obligation for every Jew,

it is not an easy one.//

In fact, empathy, especially in today's world,

is *radical*,

a mandate & an aspiration that is countercultural

and that forces most of us out of our comfort zones.//

Why is empathy so hard?//

In part, because many of us today are self-absorbed,

so busy & preoccupied with our own “stuff” —

work, family, travel, entertainment—

that we don't have the time or the capacity

to focus on, or care about, the lives of others.//

And frankly, we don't always *like* other people,

whether they're neighbors,

colleagues, or acquaintances.//

But our religious duty, we must remember,

is to *love* our fellow human beings,

not necessarily to like them,

to move past our society's culture of narcissism

and to see other people as part of an interconnected,

sacred whole to which we all belong.//

Centuries ago, Rabbi Akiva claimed that this principle

of loving your neighbor as yourself

is the most important in all of Judaism,

since it serves as the very foundation

of the Jewish moral & spiritual system,

which recognizes that each & every human being
is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God,
and is deserving of compassion, dignity, & support—
even, in a time of war, those we are fighting against.//

Another important, & ancient, teaching on empathy
comes from the book of Exodus,
and the Jewish experience
of being oppressed & vulnerable:
“You shall not oppress a stranger,
for you know the feelings of the stranger,
having yourselves been strangers
in the land of Egypt.”//

Jews remind ourselves of this historical reality
every spring during the Passover Seder,
when we read from the Haggadah
and identify with the suffering of the marginalized.//

Our collective memory of our dark, past experience
as slaves in Egypt,
of our people's vulnerability & powerlessness,
should have taught us to empathize with others—
to support the weak & the oppressed,
whether they are Jewish or not.//

The Torah brings up this teaching over & over again,
and urges us to use memory as the fuel
for our identification with, & compassion for,

those who feel like the stranger, the other, the *ger*
in our contemporary world.//

Judaism challenges us to extend our compassion
beyond our immediate circle,
to recognize the humanity in everyone.//

It urges us to care for the “other” —
the refugee, the orphan, the widow,
those, such as so many in Gaza,
who are homeless & hungry—
as we would care for ourselves.//

It teaches us to consider other people’s frustrations,
dreams, & emotions in order to identify with them,

and to prevent ourselves from self-isolation.//

In short, Judaism calls us to become more gracious,

more generous, & more loving—

not in spite of our difficult history, but *because* of it.//

Moses is a great example of a Jew who demonstrates

this quality of empathy—

and who becomes a leader as a result.//

In his first action as an adult, the Torah tells us,

“Moses went out to his brothers

and he saw their suffering [as slaves].”//

Moses felt a deep connection with his people’s pain,

and he steps up, kills an Egyptian taskmaster,
and ultimately leads his people to the Promised Land
and freedom.//

There's a passage in the Babylonian Talmud
that highlights how critical empathy is to leadership
and to moral character:

“When the community is suffering,
a person should not say to himself,
‘I will go to my own home, and eat and drink,
and imagine myself at peace.’

Instead, he should share in the community's pain.

So, we find that Moses our great teacher

shared in the pain of the community, as is written:

'But Moses' hands grew heavy;

so his people took a stone, and put it under him,

and he sat on it.'

Did Moses not have a cushion

or a pillow to sit upon?

No! Moses insisted to them, 'Since Israel is in pain,

I will be with them in their pain.' ”//

As this passage teaches us,

Moses exemplified the ability not only to “know,”

but to “feel” the pain of others.//

Moses identified with the suffering of the Israelites

to the point of sharing their burdens

and discomfort.//

He shows how empathy

is not merely a helpful moral guide—

it is a key, indispensable prerequisite for leadership

and an obligation for all of us.//

And it is a quality that is largely absent
from our American president
and the Israeli prime minister.//

I mentioned Passover a few minutes ago.//

And I want to share with you
that one of my very favorite memories of childhood
was when we'd drive up from Chicago
to my grandparents' house in Milwaukee
to celebrate the Seder with our extended family.//

My grandfather Leo, the patriarch,

who was from Ukraine & spoke several languages
even though he didn't have a formal education,
would always lead the Seder.//

A highlight for me was when we got to the recitation
of the Ten Plagues.//

As is, I'm sure, the custom of many of your families,
each person seated at our Seder table
would use his or her finger to place a drop of wine
onto our plates with the recounting of each plague.//

Now the meaning of this custom is quite profound,

and very much linked to the idea of empathy—

I understood that even as a young child.//

On this evening of memory, encased in ritual,

we recall the series of miracles

by which God vanquished Pharoah

and freed our ancestors from slavery.//

While each plague weakened Pharoah's resolve,

it was the final plague, the slaying of the first born,

that ended all resistance.//

Defeated & traumatized, Pharoah & the Egyptians

expelled the Israelites overnight.//

The drop of wine spilled at the Seder,

reminiscent of blood,

signifies a *diminution* of our joy.//

The practice reminds us that redemption for Israel

inflicted a loss of life on the Egyptians.//

In the spirit of a verse from the book of Proverbs,

“If your enemy falls, do not exult.”//

Jews temper their celebration every year

with a measure of *compassion*,

for each plague killed some of God's creatures.//

If only our leaders, & those on the extremes

and on social media, would adopt this attitude.//

This ritual of self-transcendence

likely derives from a midrash, a rabbinic story:

Pharoah's soldiers & their horse-drawn chariots

almost overtake the Israelites

at the shore of the Sea of Reeds,

but they will ultimately be drowned in it instead

because of a miracle that parts the waters.//

The angels on high sense Israel's imminent salvation

and they want to sing a joyful victory song.//

But God rebukes the angels, saying to them:

"My creatures are about to perish in the water,

and you want to break out in song?"//

No matter how cruel the Egyptians may have been,

they, too, bear an imprint of God's image;

Israel's triumph is tinged with sadness.//

This midrash projects onto God

a standard of human behavior, of radical empathy,

that runs counter to many of our instincts.//

And its message to us,

in our own, polarized, violent time,

a time of political assassinations on the left & the right

and, for some,

as in the case of Gaza, possible genocide?//

We should never perceive the other,

as completely other:

Democrat or Republican, ultra-Orthodox or secular,

Israeli or Palestinian.//

And no matter how necessary or just war might be,

it should always be conducted with sensitivity,

even *reluctance*,

and never with enthusiasm, or excess & overreach.//

As I've tried to show tonight, *empathy* is at the heart

of Jewish life.//

It means understanding & sharing another's feelings

and putting oneself in their place,

seeing the world from their perspective,

and allowing their experiences to touch one's soul.//

So, how can we translate this deep, ancient wisdom
into modern life?//

One thing we can do is listen, & see—

listen even when others will not

and see when others look away.//

We can also educate ourselves,

learn about the struggles & experiences of others,

especially those who are vulnerable,

or who face discrimination, poverty, or hardship.//

We can practice everyday compassion,

offer a listening ear, a kind word, or a helping hand,
even in small ways.//

We can remember our shared humanity,
and recognize that, despite our differences,
every single one of us experiences pain, adversity,
and loss.//

Finally, we can engage in acts of *Tikkun Olam*,
the repairing of our broken world.//

We do this by seeking opportunities
to care for those in need,

to support social justice initiatives,
and to work toward the well-being,
not only of our friends, families, & fellow Jews,
but of *all* people.//

In a world as divided & acrimonious as ours,
empathy can be a bridge that connects us,
that transforms conflict into compassion—
and serve as a call to see the divine image,
the *tzelem Elohim*, in every human being.//

On this Rosh Hashanah,
at the beginning of these Days of Awe,

may we open our hearts to the suffering of others,
strive to understand their perspectives,
and extend acts of loving-kindness.//

May bridges rather than borders
guide our personal relationships
and our public policies.//

And may the light of empathy
that shines from our sacred texts & traditions
illuminate our path to a more just, compassionate,
loving, & interconnected world.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon