

Cultivating Compassion on the Day After the Inauguration

Sh'mot 5777

We gather in this sacred space, our Temple Emunah sanctuary, a place where we come to pray, to reflect on our deepest hopes and fears, where we come to learn, to be inspired, a place where we remember our loved ones who have left us, where we come to cry, where we come to be together and where we come to share our joys.

Today, we celebrate a wonderful *simhah* in our community.

But, when we look beyond this comforting and familiar space, today feels a little different. A little strange. In fact, the last few months have felt challenging. I have to say that I have never experienced such a time in my life and people who are decades older than I am, have said the same.

Yesterday, a new president was inaugurated and, while we all just prayed that he will lead this country utilizing the insights



of our Torah, many of us feel unsettled, insecure, and anxious.

That is not to say that we all feel the same. We are not a monolithic community – a few in our community are happy, feeling that the new president will bring change or jobs or economic prosperity or benefit to Israel.

But many others in our *shul* are afraid – afraid of a president who tweets all kinds of unsettling messages. People are frightened of his approach to foreign policy, of his selection of cabinet members, of the transition in general, about his approach to education, to [women's rights](#), to [the environment](#), to abortion rights, to [health care](#), [immigration](#), to [gun safety](#), to minority rights including the treatment of Latinos, African-Americans, Muslims, and [the LGBTQIA community](#), to nuclear proliferation, to foreign policy, to conflicts of interest, and to issues related to undocumented immigrants. And the list could go on from there.

Now these are not simple issues. Take the topic of Israel for one. Many of us believe that Israel's capital is in Jerusalem, as Israel has declared, and that should be recognized by our country. I, for one, agree with that in principle. I have long hoped for the day when the American embassy would be moved to Jerusalem from Tel-Aviv.



That said, there is a reason that every president for the last two decades has promised this move before his election and subsequently postponed it: without a more comprehensive peace agreement, it is the general consensus that such a move would lead to increased violence and bloodshed. Our tradition says that *pikuah nefesh* – saving a life takes precedence over land and thus, if moving the embassy will take Jewish lives and the lives of others, how can this be the moment to support such an action?

This is not an easy time.

I want to add another layer to this complex situation, a personal layer. I am your rabbi and being your spiritual leader is one of the greatest privileges of my life (along with being a husband, father, son, brother, and

friend, which are also up there!). So, I am a rabbi, but also a person – just like anyone else. Rabbi Fel and I have spent hours trying to navigate the multiple roles we inhabit, or in Jewish terms, the various *kippot* we wear.

So, for example,
when we post something
on Facebook about our
political beliefs, those are



Find us on
Facebook

our personal views. While we may re-post or put forth a view on an issue, that is not the official view of Emunah. We have a Temple Emunah Facebook page where we post communal information, videos, pictures, etc. And we are very careful not to violate our tax-exempt status. We never endorse political parties or candidates from the *bimah* or in our bulletin articles or other official communication. That distinction is critical. Although the boundaries for a pulpit rabbi in the 21st century are not 100% clear, we try to find the right balance.

Now, we do speak out on issues. When our tradition has an approach, we should teach and share that. For example, Judaism believes passionately in caring for those who are poor; furthermore, in our modern world, we must look after everyone's health needs. That is why I have

taught about how important it is to make sure that all Americans have affordable health care. That is a Jewish value. That is not merely a political issue, but a Jewish one. And if you want to read the *teshuvah*, [the religious responsum that requires us to ensure that all have healthcare](#), which I taught here almost a decade ago on the High Holy Days.

So, where are we today?

We are unsettled. I have been harassed on Facebook and have had to block people on social media and e-mail. That is sad.

We are concerned.

There were [over 1,000 bias incidents](#) in the month after the election. A large percentage of them were committed against Jews and Jewish institutions.



Those of us who feel disconnected from the new president and his followers have work to do. We must reach across the divide. While that is not easy, it is ultimately how we can find a measure of healing in our fractured country. While only a few people in our community have told me

that they voted for the new president, sitting and listening to them was a powerful experience. They did not “convert” me to their perspective and I did not try to sway them. But I did use deep, active listening, trying to understand a viewpoint that was quite different from my own.

Listening is a core Jewish practice and one we do not use often enough. One of the pillars of our *tefillah*, of our prayer is the *Sh'ma* – with its declaration asking us to listen. *Sh'ma* – hear, listen – is not always easy, but it is always worthwhile.

Over the last 18 months, we have not seen a lot of listening; it's been mostly yelling, tweeting, screaming without pausing or filtering our words. Judaism asks us to consider our words most carefully, and, even more importantly, to stop and listen. Then, and only then, can we ask the right questions, getting to a deeper truth, a deeper understanding.

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This morning, we began a new book of the Torah, the book of *Sh'mot* – the book of Exodus where we find a moment of profound listening.

As I have pointed out before, God breaks into the narrative in response to suffering. The Israelites are suffering, they are oppressed, they are enslaved and their cries reach the Divine.

This is such a profound teaching – God is moved by the pain of the Israelites and so we are taught that we, too, must be motivated to act on behalf of those who are oppressed. As we look around this country we see many who are suffering – people who feel marginalized, afraid, oppressed – and we must hear them.

But as I was rereading this passage, I noticed something in the Torah that I overlooked before. Let me read this section to you:

“The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered [the] (His) covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”
(Exodus 2:23-25)

The verbs present a progression: “*VaYei'anhu* – the Israelites groaned, *VaYizaku* – they cried out, *VaYishma* – God heard, *VaYizkor* – God remembered, *VaYar* – God saw, *Vayeida* – and God knew.

Most of this follows quite simply: the people groan, they cry, their cries reach heaven and God hears them, God remembers the covenant, God remembers that the covenant calls for justice and compels God to act, to care for the people and so, God sees their pain.

But the final verb is strange: why does the Torah add “*VaYeda Elohim* – and God knew?” God knew them or God took notice of them, as our *Etz Hayim Humash* translates it.

If God already heard them and saw them and remembered that the Almighty had to act, then why does God know them? This is a strange verb to find culminating this passage that occurs just before God calls on Moshe to be the Divine’s partner in redeeming the Israelites.

Rashi notices this additional phrase and comments: that God “*natan aleihem lev, v’lo he’elim einav* – God paid attention to them – literally, gave God’s heart to them and did not avert God’s eyes from them.”

That’s a powerful notion. When there is oppression, when there is a pain, it is hard to go to that place of suffering. When we see someone begging in the street, we want to turn away, to avert our eyes.

But here, God models a very different type of behavior. Don’t turn away. Don’t close your heart. Place your heart on them – open your heart to the needs of those in pain.

Rashi says it succinctly, but so beautifully. Keep your heart on them and don't look away. When you look away, you do not see the person; when you look away, you can close yourself off to another person.

God sets the bar high – place your heart, your *lev* on them.

What does that mean?

To me, it means to approach them with a profound sense of compassion.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the great *Hasidic* master, points out that God is mindful of their suffering with the word – *VaYeda* – the root being: *yod*, *daled*, *ayin* – to know intimately, to connect with, to feel in concert with.

That is what our tradition demands of us – to really know those who are in need. My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater, who will be our [Glatzer Scholar-in-Residence](#) during the first weekend in March, elaborates: “Having taken note of their suffering, and having realized both the nature of their limited awareness and also having connected with their hearts, God experiences something new.”



That is deep compassion. “Sylvia Boorstein, the noted mindfulness teacher, is wont to say: ‘The natural response of the awakened heart ‘[*natan aleihem lev*’ in Rashi’s words] is compassion.”



At a moment that is as fraught as this, “we might turn our attention to the ways in which we experience limited consciousness, constricted awareness, closed-heartedness.”

But this *parashah* is all about God’s cultivation of compassion and that is just what this moment calls for. We need to cultivate compassion towards ourselves. Be gentle with yourself. When we make a mistake like slamming your finger in the car door , be forgiving and gentle.



Take a breath. Practice mindfulness and meditation. Join us for an [Emunat HaLev](#) meditation session. Practice yoga, *daven* in our *minyan*, join me for a meditative *ma’ariv* or a spiritual Sunday *shaharit*. Sit at home or download a meditation app like [Insight Timer](#).



INSIGHT
Peace in our Timer

But it does not end there. Not at a moment like this. Once we cultivate compassion towards ourselves, we MUST turn it out toward others.

There are 18 million Americans who may lose their health care. That calls for action. There are undocumented immigrants who may need our help, who may need a place of sanctuary. As we heard from representatives from [LexRAP](#) last week, there are refugees and asylum seekers including unaccompanied minors who need homes right now! We may be called to act, to cry out for justice, just as our ancestors did thousands of years ago.

We must cry out against incivility, against words of intolerance toward others from Muslims, to Latinos, to the [LGBTQIA community](#). We are called to act.

This is a moment unlike any other – a moment when we need to cultivate kindness and compassion in ourselves, radiating that into the larger world.

Let's all practice compassion, "*natan aleihem lev*" – God placed the Divine heart upon them – we all need that compassion and love right now and we need to share it with others.

May we cultivate the compassion we need to help us during this time and when we are called to act to help others, may we, like God, respond to those cries and let us ALL say: Amen.