

Common Human Compassion – Rosh HaShana Sermon, 5778
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This past year I had the pleasure of teaching high school religion courses at an Episcopal School. Steeped in the liberal arts tradition, Oregon Episcopal School offers a broad array of religion electives in its Upper School. Along with the Judaism elective, I got to teach a course called Religion and Social Justice. It was a semester-long curriculum that I had inherited, and in many cases, I was only a step ahead of the students in the course material. On the first day of the class, I asked the students to go around the room and share what brought them to the Religion and Social Justice class. I will never forget the student who very candidly remarked, “I was surprised to see Religion paired with Social Justice; when religion seems to be at the root of so many wars throughout history. I’m taking this course to understand how the two are related.” I was floored by his answer. A poster child for Reform Judaism, I grew up understanding that my religion demanded that I pursue justice, and that we each had a role to play in repairing the broken places in our world.

As we made our way through the course material, a few key words kept popping up *across* religious traditions: care, compassion, interconnectedness. We spent a lot of time addressing the ways in which religion informed action, and how action bred a sense of relationship and community amongst people. One student was fond of saying, “why, this just sounds like common human decency to me.” And he was right. While teaching this class, I came across a really moving internet ad for an at-home DNA test. Recently, the market has flooded with such tests, not only to determine paternity (although those are popular), but to learn more about one’s ethnic and national make-up. For as little as \$29.99 we can find out exactly where our ancestors came from, and while many of us think we know the stories that lie within our DNA, these tests are proving otherwise. The aforementioned ad for one such product, opens on members of a sample group introducing themselves by their nationalities, each praising their particular national and ethnic background. From the English football fanatic to the young Kurdish woman, they all claimed to be quite certain of their genetic make-up. Facilitators asked the participants whether there were any countries or nationalities in the world that they didn’t particularly like. The producers did not shy away from cultural stereotypes here; as age old national and ethnic enmities were named one after the other by the participants themselves. One

young man went so far as to say, “I don’t know you, but in my opinion I am strong and I am more important than a lot of people.”¹

Most participants were ardent in the assumption that their tests would reveal that they were 100% French/Bengali/Iraqi, and so on; but the actual results showed something quite different. One young woman’s test revealed ancestors of the exact nationality she had listed as disliking, and one young man dazedly asked, “So I’m a Muslim-Jew?” Another participant, teary-eyed from learning the results of her tests, exclaimed that they should be “compulsory,” extreme though that may sound. If they were, she said, “there would be no such thing as extremism in the world.”

What struck me about this commercial, other than its effectiveness (now I really want to take one) is how much easier it is to accept others when we can see ourselves reflected in them. One of the founding principles of the multi-faith communities in which I have worked has been that, simply put: it is harder to hate someone you can relate to. Psychologically speaking, we find it easier to connect with those who are like us; and in social settings, we love to be mirrored. Familiarity is a good starting point, but as we know, it is not enough to heal a fractured world. Only when we start to see just how interconnected we are, as this internet ad tries to show, can our minds start to change about how we interact with those who seem so different from us. When we see how closely linked we actually are as the human species, we can begin to appreciate our differences, rather than let them drive wedges of tribalism and superiority between us. When we can apply compassion to our encounter with one another, no matter how different we may think them to be, we come a step closer to bridging what divides us.

In our Torah service on Rosh HaShana, we insert the recitation of what are known as the “13 Attributes of God.” In them, we call God “*Rachum v’Chanun*,” translated as “Compassionate and Gracious.” This description of God first appears in the book of Exodus while Moses begs for pardon on behalf of the Israelite’s incident with the Golden Calf. In this moment of forgiveness, God reveals these 13 attributes to Moses; chief among them being compassion and grace. We read these words on Rosh HaShana, as we enter into the season of repentance, to comfort ourselves with the reminder that we are in the presence of a compassionate listener as we bare our souls and account our missed-steps. The Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim*, is perhaps better translated as “womb-love.” It is the kind of care and support that asks nothing of the recipient, while encompassing them entirely. The rabbis of the Talmud imagined that all who recite these

¹ <https://www.momondo.com/letsopenourworld>

Divine Attributes on the High Holy Days would receive a compassionate judgment, and in turn, know how to employ it with others.

It is one thing to understand that compassion is a common good. It is another to know how to translate it into action. Enter Karen Armstrong; a former Catholic Religious Sister who became disillusioned with her order and left her convent to become a scholar of world religions. She is author of numerous books, all circling around the idea that world religions share more in common than we might think. In an interview with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Armstrong expressed her appreciation of Judaism's emphasis on compassionate action, in particular she explains:

“I say that religion isn't about believing things. It's about what you do. It's ethical alchemy. It's about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness.”²

Such “ethical alchemy,” led to the creation of a global community in search of a common goal in The Charter for Compassion. In her 2008 TED talk, Armstrong put out a call for partners to join her in launching this international charter to address, “[the urgent] need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world.” The charter was “born of our deep interdependence, [recognizing that] compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity.”³

The charter's website is replete with resources for individual communities looking to become more compassionate and justice-oriented, as well as examples of compassionate text from every major world religion.

The Charter for Compassion is not only a means of increasing compassion and common human decency in the world, but of doing so by reclaiming the religious traditions that preach it. Contributors from all over the world participated in drafting the charter's definition of compassion. Compassion, literally translated, is to “endure something with another person.”⁴ Armstrong relies heavily on The Golden Rule, “which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever to inflict that pain on anybody else.”⁵ Her follow up to the Charter, a How-to book of compassion called, *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*, outlines the broad appeal of the Golden Rule by illustrating how many different religious traditions teach a version of it. From Confucius' teaching “never do to others what you

² “Voices on Antisemitism Interview with Karen Armstrong.” USHMM 5 July 2007

³ <https://charterforcompassion.org>

⁴ <http://charterforcompassion.org>

⁵ Armstrong, p. 9

would not like them to do to you,” to our own Rabbi Hillel who taught, “what is hateful to you, do not do to another,” Armstrong notes, “that this ideal surfaced in all of these faiths independently suggests that it reflects something essential to the structure of our humanity.”⁶

The charter describes another way of thinking about compassion: to be compassionate is to “dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there.”⁷ To *dethrone* ourselves makes the assumption that we need dethroning - that we’re all, mostly, self-involved actors. And to a certain extent, we are - we have to be. In the Hobbesian view of the world, “life is nasty, brutish and short.” But that is not our view. While yes, our tradition acknowledges the often harsh realities of life, it also teaches us that although “the whole world is a very narrow bridge; the most important part is not to be afraid.” Not to be afraid of what might happen if we extend a hand to one in need. Not to be afraid of what we might learn about ourselves in the story of another. Not to be afraid to step off of the throne at the center of our world and put another there.

While I want this description of compassion to be enough, and while I want the entire world to sign on to adopt these principles in reclaiming a common human decency, a look at the world alerts us to some potential limitations. How divisive our differences have become? How deep the fear of the other? This summer we were reminded of the elements within our own country that exist beyond the pale of decency. Charlottesville reminded us that not all of our fellow humans are interested in exercising compassion. Jewish tradition is not one that teaches us to turn the other cheek, and there are, it would seem, limits to our ability to extend compassion. But, being a rabbi, this seemingly hopeless situation reminds me of a story...

...There once was a sleepy little town situated along a river. One day, while the townspeople were enjoying a summer picnic, someone noticed a young child flailing in the water. Immediately all able-bodied men and women dove into the water to rescue the child. Days passed, and the incident was all but forgotten until a couple out for a stroll noticed yet another child in distress. The child was saved, and the townspeople agreed to take shifts watching the river, before creating an intricate system to more efficiently rescue these drowning babes. They were united in an earnest effort to ensure a safe environment for their young, and took great pride in the rescue systems they had put in
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⁶ Ibid, p.11

⁷ Ibid

place. Years later, a young traveler visiting the town inquired about the safety of the waterfront; the townspeople proudly displayed the intricate system they had developed. Alarmed, the young woman asked how it came to be that children were winding up in the river at all. The townspeople had no answer. “You mean, no one has gone upstream to find out how these children have wound up in the river?!” she exclaimed, “Why, no!” they replied, “we’ve been busy saving the children already in the river!”

We’ve got to be of two minds when it comes to compassion; and that is no small order. We have to take action, to be engaged in our broader communities (and as a reminder, we need look no further than our very own temple for opportunities to do so), and to lean into the places of our discomfort. AND we have to be looking upstream. To apply compassion to those who see, and indeed experience the world in a different way is to put ourselves in their place; to attempt to see their perspective, and to allow ourselves and our actions to be changed. We’re all here today because we know that to be true on some level. Whatever brought you here today, whatever tug - be it spousal, parental, or other - did so in the service of something greater than the self.

Today we are reminded that within our tradition exists an antidote to the hatred and enmity that has been allowed purchase in our world. As we pile into our sanctuaries and sacred spaces across the globe, we are each reminded, in our case by the words emblazoned above our Ark: *da lifnei mi atah omed*, “know before whom you stand.” On these Days of Awe, let us remember that we stand before a compassionate God who wants us to emulate that compassion by alleviating suffering, and reclaiming a standard of common human decency. As that Momondo commercial so powerfully illustrated, we have more in common with the world than we think. May 5778 be a year of reclaiming and reaffirming compassion – for our neighbors, both locally and globally, and our deeply interconnected human family.