

A New Sin: The Dangers of Empathy

Kol Nidre 5779

Rabbi David Kosak

It's the holiest night of the year, and I want to make a confession.

Nothing major, but still:

I read young adult fiction.

There—I've said it.

Young adult fiction is my naughty vice—my escape from everyday life. The stories are compelling, emotional and the style is usually relatively simple. I can tear through a book on a shabbat afternoon and no one's the wiser.

One of the books that I read last year really made an impression on me. It's called "Every Day," by author David Levithan. They botched the movie, so stick with the book .

The premise of Every Day is startling yet compelling. A teenager whom we only know as "A" wakes each day in another teenager's body. In other words, A isn't so much a person as a spirit or consciousness that moves to a different container "every day." While we never gain an understanding for the mechanism involved, every morning,

A wakes up in another body vessel. One day A wakes up as an attractive girl, another day as a very overweight boy. And so on.

The novel explores many interesting themes: the nature of sexuality and gender identity, and of appearance versus personality. Those themes are all quite valuable and the book has a lot to say on those contemporary issues.

What makes it worthy of a Kol Nidre sermon, though, is something more timeless.

There's no continuity to A's life—and therefore no responsibilities for the actions he/she/zhe takes on any given day. In a sense, A has a superpower that removes moral repercussions and consequences from their life.

If you could do anything, and never get caught, never pay a price—how would you live your life?

In a strange way, the internet has provided an answer to that. Under the cover of anonymity, large numbers of people say the most vicious things. They flame and ruin folks' lives and reputations.

Not A. A has chosen a moral code for themselves, which is to cause minimum harm to their daily host's life. Each morning, A awakens and looks around the bedroom of that

day's teen body—looking for clues as to who that person's friends are, what sort of a student the person is, and so forth.

That choice not to cause harm is not based on empathy—after all A almost never meets their host before hand. A has no emotional connection, real or imagined, with their host.

Rather A is dedicated to a compassionate existence for no other reason than it is the best way to live. For that reason, A has become a moral hero for me.

Moreover, I want to argue tonight that what the world needs is more compassion and less empathy. In fact, the premise of this talk is that empathy is actually responsible for a great deal of cruelty, ineffectualness and bad moral reasoning. Indeed, this sermon is my plea to each of you to feed your compassion and starve your empathy. I believe the world would be a better place if we each could do that.

That's a rather dangerous and counterintuitive topic for a rabbi to address, so to avoid confusion later on, let me state for the record that I am using the word empathy in a very narrow but specific way.

Empathy is the human capacity to feel what another person feels. Compassion, on the other hand, is the concern we have for the plight of others and their suffering. They are separate phenomena. They light up different parts of the brain.

I don't need to feel what you are feeling to have concern or compassion for your struggles. Similarly, my ability to feel what you feel does not mean that I have compassion for you or that I will be moved to help you. Indeed, the opposite is often the case.

To drive that point home, consider a comment by Dr. Anne Hamrick: a physician who allows herself to be empathetic—to feel her patients' pain—will become less effective at caring for them. Her empathy will prevent her from acting on her compassion. Sometimes empathy can actually be paralyzing.

Empathy also doesn't illuminate the reasons for suffering. Empathy doesn't explain what the best course of action is to address or reduce suffering. It is also innumerate, meaning that we don't have empathy for abstractions. We have empathy—we feel the pain—of a specific person or a small group. It is literally not possible for our brains to feel the pain of thousands, let alone millions. In fact, we often feel the pain of one the same way or more strongly than the pain of thousands.

You need compassion to care for large numbers of people. Empathy, in other words, doesn't allow us to carefully analyze a situation and determine how we can have the largest impact on the greatest number of people. Relying on empathy actually causes us to weigh matters incorrectly. As a result, it often causes more harm than good.

For example, the media will spend inordinate time covering mass shootings, while they neglect to cover the 99.9% of homicides that are not mass shootings. If our society cared about protecting the innocent from being murdered, we wouldn't focus so much of our attention and our resources on mass shootings.

As Paul Bloom convincingly writes in his book, "Against Empathy," empathy is a spotlight. That may sound like a good thing, but a spotlight shines on only one small area. It neglects all the other suffering occurring in the world. That leaves it subject to bias and liable to manipulation.

I learned this lesson in a particularly painful manner this year.

Many of you know that our community invests substantial time in interfaith work. It matters that Neveh Shalom and the Jewish people has a caring face. Moreover, it is

important that we stand with well-intentioned people of faith because that sends a powerful message to those who trade in fear.

It is so important to me that the day after Yom Kippur—when rabbis and cantors are supposed to sleep—I will be occupied in a planning meeting for a retreat that will bring together Oregon faith leaders from across the political and geographical spectrum. The day after Yom Kippur! Gevalt!

Thus it was that last May we hosted the Open Iftar project of the Ramadan Tent Project (RTP). This international event is organized by Muslims in their 20's who wish to bring their local community together for an evening of presentations, good will and a shared meal.

We were excited that this interfaith and intercultural event was being hosted at Neveh Shalom. Several hundred people were in attendance. Our community is dedicated to building bridges. We can each take pride in that.

I had been asked by one of the two main organizers to touch upon the “elephant in the room.” In the wake of the recent and bloody events in Gaza last summer, the organizer thought we had to at least make some sort of

mention of the historical enmity between these two peoples.

For my address, I touched upon three topics all of which would point to how we in Portland could live together and be a force for changing perceptions about the intractable conflict between two peoples who are cousins in religion and geography.

My first topic explained how there are sections in the holy scriptures of Muslims, Christians and Jews that, when read on a superficial surface level, promote hatred or violence. Yet each of our traditions have denominations that wrestled and evolved to develop a more tolerant understanding of an otherwise disturbing verse. Religions and their practitioners have a choice to hear God's word as compassionate speech.

Second, I shared the story of Darryl Davis. He is an African-American blues musician who became known for sitting down with Klu Klux Klan members. The first time it happened by accident, but he then took it upon himself to speak with any klansman he could. Because of his compassionate dialogue work, over 200 klansmen renounced their affiliation with the Klan. They rejected their bigotry, relinquished their hatred, and walked out of their

narrow spaces into a more expansive way of viewing the world.

Third, I told the story of the terror attack I experienced while sitting in the Frank Sinatra cafeteria at Hebrew University, an attack planned and executed by a small Palestinian terror cell. I stated that although I was blown up—and although my friends were killed in the blast, I refuse to use that as permission to hate. No life goes untouched. Everyone suffers tragedies and trauma. There is no rational, compassionate way to cast judgment on an entire people based on one bomb blast.

Finally, I concluded by stating that if our three traditions could reinterpret verses of holy scriptures; and if a black man could befriend Klansmen; and if in my own small way I could refuse to hate and instead build bridges between Jews and Muslims—then each of us has a choice in how we live and think. *We* decide if we will be compassionate—not fate. Not geography. Not our enemies.

Most of the people in the room were positively moved by this message of compassionate unity.

But a very small minority were deeply offended. A handful actually.

They accused me of saying that all Palestinians were terrorists—which I did not. Or argued that Palestinians can't actually be terrorists, because they are responding to Israeli violence, power, apartheid. *As if only the powerful can be terrorists?* Or said that my “white male privilege” blinded me to the suffering of the people in Gaza—even though we've been building bridges, and even though we've been trying to get one of our US Senators on board to address the suffering in Gaza.

These same individuals took to twitter and facebook with their allegations.

I was shocked. Incredulous. Wounded. How could people hear the complete opposite of my message? How could they turn my plea for unity into one of hatred?

There are many ways to understand what happened.

Here's how I see it. These well-meaning individuals were blinded by their empathy for the Palestinian people—just as many Jews' empathy for Israel blinds them to Palestinian suffering. At some point or another, we are all guilty of the moral blindness which empathy causes.

Their indiscriminate loyalty deafened them to what I was actually saying. Rather than recognizing someone who wished to work with them in a compassionate way, I suspect that their empathy slowed the medial prefrontal cortex, the section of the brain that deals with social reasoning.

Let me explain. Studies show we feel empathy more often for people who are just like us. One European study tested male soccer fans. “The fan would receive a shock on the back of his hand and then watch another man receive the same shock. When the other man was described as a fan of the subject’s team, the empathic neural response—the overlap in self-other pain—was strong. But when the man was described as a fan of the opposing team, it wasn’t.” (p 69)

That we feel greater empathy for those like us means our brains actively turn off when we see those who are not like us. When shown pictures of drug addicts or homeless people, the medial prefrontal cortex, the section of the brain that deals with social reasoning, slows down. If we rely on empathy to make moral judgements, we will have no recourse or reason to care for those we dehumanize in this way.

During the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, for instance, two groups of heterosexual test subjects were shown photographs of a person they were told had contracted AIDS. One group was told that the person was infected from a blood transfusion. The other group was told that the person in the photograph got it from an intimate partner. The heterosexuals could identify with the blood transfusion individual and expressed empathic concern and likability for the person, but little or negative concern for the individual who was infected from a same-sex partner.

Empathy for those like us creates repulsion for those who are different. That is one of the dangers of empathy. It's why a small group of people tried to paint me as an evil oppressor. The spotlight of their empathy blinded them.

This might lead you to imagine that what is needed is more empathy and for more people, not fewer. Yet studies have shown that there is no connection between empathy and moral behavior. Sometimes there is even a negative correlation. Like Ann Hamrick explained, empathy can cause doctors to deliver worse care to their patients.

I am certain that as I've been speaking, one objection after another has popped into your head in defense of empathy. That's understandable. We've been trained to associate empathy with all that is good. It's just that the facts don't square that way. If you'd like to learn more, I encourage

you to pick up a copy of Paul Bloom's "Against Empathy." I started the book a skeptic, but he powerfully argues that rational compassion is a far better way to change the world than empathy.

Our Talmudic sages once noted that, "if you are empathetic when you should be cruel, you will end up being cruel when you should be empathetic." I think what they are getting at is that our emotions are unreliable guides. Feeling what another person feels may be part of the human experience. It can be remarkably enjoyable, and often helps us connect with others. But as a moral guide, it fails again and again. It actually misguides us.

On this holiest day of the year, each of us reflects on last year's shortcomings. Most of our failings occur when we don't muster sufficient compassion and concern for others.

In this coming year, I'll be thinking about A—the teen who could have gotten away with anything without ever being caught, but who instead chose a life of compassion.

What makes this a Kol Nidrei sermon? Why is the difference between empathy and compassion significant enough for this sacred evening? How is this relevant?

Our society is breaking down. 25% of millennials say that democracy is a bad or very bad form of government. The

social contract is splintering. Our sense of cohesiveness is coming apart at the seams. Something must be done!

In this polarized world, people have empathy primarily for those just like them. Those who look like us, or think like us or live like us? How's that working out for us?

Our tradition demands something more. It teaches:

As God clothes the naked, so we must clothe the naked.

As God visited the sick, we should visit the ill.

As God comforts mourners, we should comfort mourners.

Our Sages didn't specify that we or God need only provide clothes for those we like. That we comfort only our friends. That would be the message of empathy.

Instead, they understood that our obligations are to society as a whole. To all of God's children. And that we better use our resources effectively to help the greatest number of people. That's compassion.

And that's what is asked of us on this holy night.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.