

## **ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2001-5762 COMPASSION**

Last month, the newspaper reported this story from Seattle's Ship Canal Bridge. A woman driving down a commuter-packed interstate came to a halt in the middle of traffic, walked to the railing of a bridge 160 feet above the water, and perched there, contemplating a suicidal dive. Traffic became snarled, both next to the abandoned car and next to the jumper. The police had to reroute the traffic, causing even worse congestion. And despite the efforts of the police and the woman's boyfriend, she jumped anyway, surviving with serious injury. We might wonder what was going on in the woman's head as she stood poised on the precipice of eternity but I wonder more what was going on in the heads of those people who shouted obscenities at her, teased and taunted her, and urged her to jump. Anger and frustration clouded their judgment and they were going to be late for their destinations, but they were going to get there. By contrast, this week in New York, drivers and passengers were patient about their delays. Tragedy made them aware of life's preciousness. It clarified their priorities and allowed them to respond with compassion. But as an Israeli writer experienced in tragedy warned this week, "For a while you will try to savor each precious moment, taking each day at a time, but soon the trivial and the routine details of life will rise up to distract you and you will push the last attack a little further back in your mind. And so it should be. As much as we feel for the victims, and for their families, and as much as we know that these attacks were not the last, life does go on. It has to go on." The question for us at this new year is: when that moment comes, how can we allow life to go on without letting our feelings of compassion fade away? At this time of year, even had we not experienced last week's disaster at the World Trade Center, we would live with heightened awareness of how urgently human compassion is needed both on earth and in the heavens. Jewish mystical tradition

teaches that how we conduct ourselves here on earth has the power of opening up the same quality in the heavens. When we deal compassionately with each other, we human beings open up the flow of divine compassion in the universe. At this very moment, we are told, God is sitting poised between the throne of judgment and the throne of mercy. The strength of our compassion can cause God to move from judgment to mercy. We are even taught that God so wants us to succeed in having that impact, that God prays this prayer:

May it be my Will that my mercy suppress my anger and that it may prevail over my attributes of justice and judgment and that I may deal with my children according to the attribute of compassion and that I may not act towards them according to the strict line of justice.

We are used to thinking that *we* are in need of *God's* help; this mystical approach turns that idea on its head and says that it is *God* who is in need of *our* help, *God* who needs *our* mercy in order to fully manifest God's own mercy. But achieving a life of compassion requires discipline and training. It involves changing your thinking, focusing on the good in people, believing that your small acts of compassion matter, and keeping your human priorities clear long after the present crisis is over.

How do you change your thinking? You first have to believe that it is possible to retrain yourself. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev was said to have an *ayin tova*; he trained himself to see only the good in others. Once on the eve of Rosh Hashanah Levi Yitzhak was heading to synagogue to Selichot services when a sudden downpour forced him and his personal assistant to seek shelter under the awning of a tavern. The assistant peered through the window and saw a group of Jews feasting, drinking and reveling. Growing impatient, he urged Levi Yitzhak to see for himself how the Jews inside were misbehaving when they should have been in synagogue praying to God for

forgiveness. Instead of looking, Levi Yitzhak rebuked his assistant for finding fault with the children of Israel. “Surely,” he asserted, “they must be reciting blessings over their food and drink”; instead of passing judgment on them, Levi Yitzhak proceeded to bless them. The assistant then peered into the tavern once more and overheard two Jews talking to one another about thefts they had committed. He told this to the rebbe, yet once more Levi Yitzhak refused to judge them and instead concluded: “They must be very holy Jews since they are confessing their sins to one another before Rosh Hashanah.”

Would that we could teach ourselves to judge others with an ayin tova like Levi Yitzhak. This story made me remember a scene I witnessed last year in a subway station. As I got off the train, a young man who got off with me wadded up an empty cigarette package and tossed it onto the platform. Just as I found myself judging this man’s carelessness and wondering whether to say something to him, I saw him turn to a young mother in distress and offer to help carry her stroller up the steep flight of stairs. I stood there, embarrassed at my haste to judge. In that kind of situation, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav offers this advice: “Always tip the scales of judgment towards the side of mercy – by selectively focusing on the little bits of good that exist in each person, you actually enable those bits of good to expand and slowly overcome the bad. By choosing to focus on what is right and pure in people, instead of what is wrong, you have the power to lift them up.” Even if you see a person is evil, says Reb Nachman, you must search to find some goodness – some area where the person is not evil.

While it seems a bit presumptuous to think that your or my focusing on the good in someone might allow those bits of good to expand and overcome the bad, I offer you

an historical example that demonstrates the truth of Rabbi Nachman's advice. The story is about Walter Rathenau, a Jew in Germany, who had succeeded his father at the helm of the family business, the German General Electric Company. He became one of Europe's major economic leaders. In 1922, 11 years before Hitler's rise to power, he became German Foreign Minister at a time of terrible economic turbulence. He was used as a scapegoat; within a few months of taking office, three young men conspired to kill him, claiming he was one of the 300 elders of Zion intent on taking over the world. He was 54 when he was killed. When the police caught the assassins, two committed suicide, leaving Ernst Werner Techow the sole surviving assassin. Three days after Rathenau was murdered, his mother Mathilde Rathenau wrote the following letter to Techow's mother:

“In grief unspeakable, I give you my hand – you of all women, the most pitiable. Say to your son that, in the name and spirit of he whom he has murdered, I forgive, even as God may forgive, if before an earthly judge your son makes a full and frank confession of his guilt and before a heavenly judge repents. Had he known my son, the noblest man earth bore, he would have rather turned the weapon on himself. May these words give peace to your soul.”

Techow was released from prison after 5 years. In 1940, he smuggled himself into Nazi-occupied Marseille where he helped over 700 Jews escape to Spain. It was just about at this time that Techow met a nephew of Rathenau and confided that Mrs. Rathenau's letter had triggered his repentance and transformation. He put it this way: “Just as Frau Rathenau conquered herself when she wrote this letter of pardon, I have tried to master myself; I only wished I would get an opportunity to right the wrong I've done.” Her focusing on the little bits of good in Techow lifted him up and helped him see himself differently.

It is acts of compassion like that of Mathilde Rathenau that move God from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy on these holy days. Another such act of compassion is etched into our public memory as a nation. I think that Pee Wee Reese's actions would have had that same divine impact in 1948 when baseball's color barrier was being broken. I've always wished I could have been there the day the Cincinnati Reds were hosting the Brooklyn Dodgers, They say that a chorus of boos filled the stadium, punctuated by taunts and the most vile curses, all directed at the Dodger first baseman. Jackie Robinson stood isolated, not only from the hate-spewing opposition fans, but from most of his own teammates as well. Then something extraordinary happened. Pee Wee Reese, the Dodger shortstop, who had been raised in the nearby southern city of Louisville and was not immune to the forces of racism, began to move across the diamond toward the first baseman....As Reese approached, the grim pain of isolation on Robinson's face began to melt. Peewee Reese paused and then placed his arm around the shoulder of his teammate. A hush fell over the crowd. The boos and curses tailed away. Amidst the silence of the crowd and the serene calm of the green grass stood two human beings, one black and the other white, the arm of one draped over the other.

We have been privileged in recent days to witness many heroic acts of compassion. But not all acts of compassion need be so dramatic in order to inspire compassion in the heavens. Think of those times in the checkout line at the supermarket when the checkout person seems inordinately slow or out of sorts. Everyone is always in a hurry at the supermarket, hoping to run in and run out. Recently an elderly woman ahead of me in line couldn't find her checkbook; she had no cash and she didn't know how to use a credit card in the machine. She became so flustered, she didn't know what to do. The

young checkout man behaved with patience and respect; when I complimented him afterwards, he shrugged and said, “I have a grandmother; I know how hard it can be to be old.” This young man didn’t know the confused woman at the checkout. And yet he treated her as he would have his own family; he looked at her through an *ayin tova* when he might easily have reacted instead to the impatient customers waiting behind her.

If you think about it, it’s the people you *don’t* know or *don’t like* who offer both the greatest challenge to your compassion and the greatest opportunity. They are the drivers who sit on your tail on the highway. They are the restaurant patrons who feel entitled to cut in line ahead of you. And they are the very people you have to try hardest with, particularly if they belong to your community. We as Americans have felt the importance of community in untold ways this week. We have seen clearly that this world is too small for people not to treat each other with compassion. And if this world is too small for people not to treat each other with compassion, this congregation certainly is too small for people not to treat each other with compassion, and our classrooms are way too small for our students not to be taught that lesson. That is why I reminded our *b’nai mitzvah* students just yesterday that they are to invite all of their classmates to join them at their *b’nai mitzvah*, whether or not they like them. Our children have to be trained in compassion as do we all. This training is not a matter merely of having a day of sensitivity training and rope climbing and being done with it; it involves a daily education, as frequent and repetitive as brushing your teeth and combing your hair.

If you are not yet convinced of the impact of even one simple act of compassion, listen to one final story. When I was a student rabbi in Victoria, Texas, in the fall of 1979, the first question I was asked was: Do you know the story of Rabbi Henry Cohen? I didn’t and they were horrified at my ignorance, so they told me. Henry Cohen was a rabbi in

Galveston, Texas in the early part of the century. You may remember that Galveston was a main port of entry for the immigrants and refugees who were flooding the United States at this time. Among these immigrants was a Russian who, when he landed at the port, was immediately arrested by the police and had an extradition order issued against him at the request of the tsarist government. Rabbi Cohen visited the prison, and hearing of the man's plight, interviewed him and became convinced that he was not a criminal but a political refugee. He intervened with the authorities and argued that the man deserved political asylum, but to no avail. He took the case to the Governor of Texas and to the state Supreme Court but all with the same result. Finally he got on a train and went all the way to Washington where he was at last granted an interview with President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt listen to Rabbi Cohen's story and at the end, shook his head. "I'm sorry, rabbi," he said: "Much as I admire the way you Jews stick together and try to help one another, I can't see any reason for intervening." "Jew?" said the rabbi, "Who said he was a Jew? He's not a Jew; he's a Russian Christian." "A Christian?" asked the shocked president; "But then why are you concerning yourself with him?" Rabbi Cohen answered, "He's a human being, isn't he?" The president was so impressed that he cancelled the extradition order.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," says the book of Leviticus. That's what Rabbi Cohen did and that's why President Roosevelt in turn took compassionate action. It has been many years since that story took place, but the retelling reminds us of the power of one person's compassion. So when this national nightmare is forgotten – and it will be – and your lives settle again into a routine, don't let your sense of compassion recede along with the pain of tragedy. When you find yourself caught in traffic, or stuck in a long line at the supermarket, or tearing your hair out over someone or something, or losing patience with those you love most, remember Pee Wee Reese – and Mathilde

Rathenau – and the checkout boy at the supermarket - and Rabbi Henry Cohen - and *your* grandmother. Look at the world with a generous *ayin tova* like Levi Yitzhak. Make God's prayer a reality. And remember that the smallest act of compassion has the power to create a thunderous shift in the cosmos as the Almighty moves from the throne of judgment and settles on the throne of compassion.

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