Sermon for Kol Nidrei 5786 October 1, 2025
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Empathy and Teshuvah

If your sibling, your mother's child, or your own child,
or the spouse of your bosom, or your friend who is like yourself
entices you in secret, saying, "Come let us worship other gods"—
whom neither you nor your ancestors have experienced —
do not assent or give heed to any of them.
Show no pity or compassion, and do not cover up the matter,
but take that person's life.
Let your hand be the first to put that person to death,
followed by the hand of the rest of the people.[1]

I am bringing you this piece of Torah tonight because even though it is part of our tradition, it represents a stark contrast to the mindset of the holiday we are beginning together. It is shocking to read it on Kol Nidrei, when we chant three times that even the solemn vows we take during the year can and should be set aside so that we can start again. On this night above all nights we insist again and again that no one is so mistaken, no one is so sinful, no one so far away from God, no one so lost that they cannot come back to what is right and true and just. We begin this evening with the words of Isaiah: "Shalom, Shalom—Shalom to those who are far off and Shalom to those who are near, says Adonai."[2] Whether we are far or near, God knows all of us, God welcomes all of us, God stands ready to forgive all of us. God is *Rahum v'Hanun*, merciful and compassionate, and we recite tonight God's attributes of mercy again and again as models for ourselves.

We plead tonight for forgiveness for ourselves, but we also strive to offer forgiveness to others, even to those who may have wronged us in ways that caused us real pain, because we know that what they have done wrong, like what we have done wrong, is not all that they are. They and we are more than our worst moments, and in imitation of God's limitless compassion we offer compassion and forgiveness to others because we know what it is like to be human, we know what it is like to sin, to miss the mark we set for ourselves. With those closest to us, who of course also have the greatest capacity to hurt us, we know even more. We know something of the turnings of their minds and the complexity of their hearts, we know some of how their past has shaped and constrained them. We are able to forgive them because we understand them from the inside. We are able to forgive because we have, in a word, empathy.

The piece of Torah I started with, though, from the Book of Deuteronomy, pushes back against all of this. It insists that the intimate understanding and compassion we have for those closest to us can actually be a barrier that we must overcome if we are to follow the divine. In the face of such a grave sin as idolatry, we must, like Pharaoh, harden our hearts, and we must turn against even those whom we love most. If people make mistakes that are grievous enough, we must turn off the spigots of pity and compassion and deaden our understanding of how and why they could have gone so wrong. Not only that, we must be the instruments of their destruction, the very hands of punishment for their turning away from the path of God. This piece of Torah suggests that if we were to open ourselves to even a little bit of the understanding and compassion that we tonight channel from God, we would only

[1] Deuteronomy 13:7,9-10.
[2] Isaiah 57:19.

make ourselves accomplices in their terrible sins. Our empathy for them, far from saving them or ourselves, would doom us both. Our empathy would turn toxic.

"Toxic empathy" has become a popular concept among some groups of people in the US, finding a particular home in pockets of conservative Christian nationalism. Christian evangelical influencer Alisa Beth Stuckey explains this by arguing that empathy has been "co-opted by the progressive wing of American society to convince people that the progressive position is exclusively the one of kindness and morality."[3] This is what she calls "toxic empathy." She asserts that those who advocate for reproductive choice, for LGBTQ people, or for immigrants prey upon the compassion of Christians to induce them to get to know the people involved, to understand their stories, and thus to be persuaded to advocate for them as well. What is "toxic" about this, in her view, is that it leads Christians away from what she says are the Biblical principles that mandate NOT doing the opposite of what these people might want. An "enlightened" understanding of the love preached by Jesus makes clear, she says, that it is actually more "loving" to oppose abortion, rights for immigrants, and LGBTQ rights because that is what God wants, no matter how our feelings of empathy for the people involved might get in the way. We must overcome our instinct toward compassion, reject this "toxic empathy," and hold tight to fixed Biblical principles in order to faithfully serve God.

Now, if you're saying to yourself, "Wow, I'm no expert on Christianity, but that's not how I understand what Jesus preached," you are in very good company. Plenty of Christian theologians and pastors have strongly critiqued not only Stuckey's book but also the entire idea of "toxic empathy" as being precisely the opposite of their understandings of the teachings of Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. The idea that Jesus would oppose caring for the poor, for example, seems to strain the words of the Christian Bible to the breaking point.[4] But I didn't bring up Stuckey's arguments about "toxic empathy" just so we could feel good about disagreeing with them. I brought them up because, as much as they may disturb us, I think that passage from Deuteronomy is not so foreign to us as we may think. We also sometimes try mightily to restrain our empathy, to draw limits around pity and fight against our instincts toward compassion. In fact, I think the reach of our empathy is rather narrow. It doesn't take much to empathize with people who are "near," who are much like us, who share our outlook on life and our views on how to live it. But what about our empathy for those who are "far off," who are different, sometimes very different from us? What about our empathy for those who believe things that we do not believe and have very different views on how to live? How much do we extend empathy to them? And don't we sometimes justify our lack of empathy by saying that it might be dangerous to empathize with those who are too different from us?

The danger of constraining our empathy too much, of finding it to be too "toxic" to rely on, is that we will not have enough of it to allow us to seek forgiveness or to offer it to others. If we do not seek to understand the hearts of those whom we have wronged, how will we gather the motivation to repent, to ask them for forgiveness? We may simply justify our wrong action by saying that the people whom we have wronged are just not worthy of our compassion or care. And if we cut ourselves off from understanding the hearts of those who wrong us and with whom we disagree, how can we see them as anything but caricatures of evil? How can we take their apologies seriously, and how can any

[3] Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion by Allie Beth Stuckey (Sentinel 2024).
[4] See, for one example among many, Matthew 25:40.

forgiveness we may offer them be sincere? We need to broaden our empathy to have a chance at living in a world of faulty human beings and necessary second chances.

While we do need to widen the limits of our empathy, we also need to retain some caution about completely giving ourselves over to it. We have to think about what would happen in a world in which there were no limits, if our empathy for our fellow human beings, no matter their views, actions, sins, or faults, were complete. Here, too, the Torah provides a verse to challenge our thinking:

You shall not oppress a stranger,
for you understand the soul of the stranger,
having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.[5]

This instruction from the Book of Exodus is perhaps as far as we can get from Deuteronomy's insistence that too much empathy, even for those closest to us, might lead us astray from the path of God. Here, when the Israelites are so near in time to their horrible experiences in Egypt, where no one had a shred of empathy for them as strangers in a strange land, the Torah commands them to refrain from doing precisely what was done to them, and to sink deeply into their understanding of the soul of the stranger in order to motivate them to care. Rabbi Shai Held says of this verse,

> The Torah appeals to our memory to intensify our ethical obligations: having tasted the suffering and degradation to which vulnerability can lead, we are bidden not to oppress the stranger. The Torah's call is not based on a rational argument, but on an urgent demand for empathy: since you know what it feels like to be a stranger, you must never abuse or mistreat the stranger.[6]

The verse's call for empathy does not seem to be qualified in any way. It does not depend on the views, words, or actions of the other person. Regardless of who they are and what they do, we should not mistreat them because we understand their souls. No matter what, they are entitled to our compassion and care.

This position of holding nearly or completely unbounded empathy even for those who hold very different views from us is not a particularly popular one these days. But there are some people on the political left and right who have called for at least a little more empathy toward those whose views we may oppose, particularly in the aftermath of the murder of Charlie Kirk, which, as far as we know, was only the latest incident in a spate of political violence that has tragically claimed the lives of people across the political spectrum. Voices like the journalist Ezra Klein on the left and Utah Governor Spencer Cox on the right have called for more civility in political discourse, in Governor Cox's words, for us to "disagree better," fearing that we may otherwise be entering a period of violent expression of disagreement that could tear this country apart.

Other voices have, of course, pushed back at these calls. Some have, horribly, sought to justify violence against one side or another, including, shockingly, the voice of the President of the United States calling out one side as uniquely evil while ignoring the calls for violence among those in his

[5] Exodus 23:9.
[6] "Turning Memory into Empathy: The Torah's Ethical Charge" by Rabbi Shai Held (Mechon Hadar 2014). You can download the article at https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/turning-memory-empathy

administration and his supporters. Others, like Ta-Nehisi Coates, have warned that while violence is never justified, treating extreme, even racist and dehumanizing views with "civility" goes a long way toward making them mainstream and acceptable, even if in a previous era or even a few years ago they would have been considered beyond the pale. Our desire to lower the temperature of our national discourse, and to have empathy for those whose views run counter to ours, raises concerns that doing so could erase or at least muddy our moral boundaries, the ethical principles that make it possible to say what is right and what is wrong, and turn them into contested points of argument.

Like the idea of "toxic empathy," the idea of unbounded empathy also creates difficulty for the process of *t'shuvah*, of repair and return, of seeking and offering forgiveness that we are focused on tonight. If even the most extreme thoughts, words, and actions, the most dehumanizing stances we can imagine, are deserving of our compassion and care, then what does sin mean? How could there be any violation? We could then say that there was no need for us to ask for forgiveness from others or for others to seek it from us, because we are all basking in each other's unbounded empathy together. The ancient rabbis flag this problem when they imagine a world created by God prior to this one that was ruled wholly by *rachamim*, by complete mercy and love. They realize that such a world would immediately descend into chaos, with no defined moral compass and no way of human beings calling each other to account for our transgressions against each other and against our creator. As a result, God has to create a world in which *rachamim* is tempered by *din*, in which mercy and love are limited by moral and ethical standards that cut across the empathy we may feel for other human beings.[7]

In order for *t'shuvah* to work, in order for there to be a way that we can both hold ourselves and each other to account AND have the necessary empathy to understand the apologies we owe to others and to be able to offer genuine forgiveness to them, there needs to be a way to both broaden the boundaries of our empathy AND make sure it has reasonable limits. Again, Torah provides us with a verse that pushes us in that direction:

> The stranger who resides with you shall be to you like one of your own;
> you shall love [the stranger] as yourself,
> for you were strangers in the land of Egypt:
> I am Adonai your God.[8]

This verse appears in the Book of Leviticus, only a few verses after the more famous verse that teaches us to "love your neighbor as yourself."[9] That means that it can be read as an expansion of that teaching, revealing that it applies not only to those like us but also to those who are very different. Of course, it is also an expansion of the verse in Exodus mandating that we not "oppress" the stranger, a negative commandment to refrain from doing them wrong. Here we have a positive commandment to "love" them, which in Biblical terms is not necessarily an emotional term but one that governs how we act toward them. The famous exhortation in the *Sh'ma* that we must "love" God is usually interpreted to mean that we should fulfill our obligations toward the divine, that we must show loyalty through our actions, which is where we see the overlap with our modern ideas of "love," shown not just with what we say but with what we do. Similarly, we must act toward the "stranger" in ways that express our

[7] See Bereshit Rabbah 12 and Pesikta Rabbati 40.
[8] Leviticus 19:34.
[9] Leviticus 19:18.

obligations and loyalty to them, positive acts that go far beyond merely refraining from treating them badly.

But there is another change in this verse which gets to the heart of the tension we have been exploring between constraining our empathy too much and letting it loose unbounded, and it lies in the word that modifies both our love for our neighbor and our love for the stranger: *kamocha* – "as yourself." This word offers us the possibility of balance. Our compassion and care for one who is different from us must be balanced by our compassion and care for ourselves. This also means that the same mix of mercy and judgement with which we consider ourselves must be applied to both our "neighbor" and the "stranger." We do not fill ourselves with such self-regard and compassionate understanding that we do not call ourselves to account when we stray from the principles of justice and righteousness that should guide our lives. Neither do we judge ourselves so strictly that we condemn ourselves without compassionately understanding the pressures on us and the interior landscape that shapes our actions. We strive to balance *din* and *rachamim*, strict judgement and compassionate mercy, when we examine ourselves, and we should apply the same standard to others.

This means that the attitude we should adopt toward other people, even those with views very different from our own, is neither the highly restricted sphere of empathy that can make compassion impossible nor the unbounded empathy that would make judgement meaningless. Instead, we should offer them what I would call "balanced empathy." We should strive to understand them as human beings, trying to apprehend the forces that drive them and the logic of their arguments. But we should also be willing to exercise judgement as necessary if and when we find that their views violate our understandings of our moral principles and human decency.

The trick here is to manage to evaluate the words and actions of others without dehumanizing them, to be clear about our disagreements without devaluing them as human beings. We strive to make *t'shuvah* and forgiveness both possible and meaningful, for them and for us. It does us no good to unforgivingly condemn ourselves and to harshly judge our actions from the past year, because then there is no motivation for us to change or improve. Instead, we try to adopt what we hope is God's view of us, seeing us as a mixed product and applying to us both justice and compassion. Extending both of those to others as we do to ourselves is imitating God, but it is also only simple fairness.

Unlike restricting the sphere of empathy by calling it "toxic" or widening its sphere to a place of possible incoherence, "balanced empathy" has few advocates in our own time. People at all points on the ideological spectrum tend instead to advocate for empathy for those with whom they agree and harsh judgement against those with whom they disagree. This is part of what is driving the sharp splits and extreme polarization that everyone decries but few do anything to bridge. I am arguing tonight that there is a specifically Jewish and spiritual reason to push for "balanced empathy." If we want the idea of *t'shuvah* to mean anything, if we want to maintain our ideals and moral centers while treating ourselves and others with compassion, if we want to love both our neighbor and the stranger like we do ourselves, we need this balanced form of empathy to do it.

I am not saying that this is easy; it is in fact as hard to do as it sounds. And it does hold the potential to complicate rather than simplify our spiritual outlook, which of course is what makes it…very Jewish. Even more than being the People of the Book, we are the people who hold and value complexity. On Selichot I asked us to take a few minutes to do a meditation where we offered

compassion, lovingkindness, and forgiveness to those who may have wronged us during the past year. We started with those close to us, who are easier to identify with, easier to understand and empathize with. Then we turned to those who we don't know, which is harder and more challenging. But we still did it, thinking of them and offering them compassion, lovingkindness, and forgiveness. Finally, we turned to ourselves, offering our own battered hearts, full of the knowledge of all we have done wrong and how we have let ourselves down, the balm of our own caring and love, just as we hope God does for us. This was not the first time I have done this meditation, and each time, something has changed for me. After I do it, when I think of those who may have wronged me, who have views I don't agree with and take positions that I find distasteful and even destructive, I feel differently about them. I feel just a little compassion for them, even while I hold onto my disagreement. I see them as a little more human. And I pray that that can happen for all of us.

So let's take the first step together tonight by doing this meditation together, again or for the first time, just for a few minutes. If you're comfortable with it, closing your eyes can help. First, we'll think of those close to us who may have wronged us during the past year. Feeling our empathy for them even while we are clear on where they went wrong, let us imagine surrounding them with compassion, lovingkindness, and forgiveness. Let's take a few minutes for that… Next, we'll think of those we don't know personally but who may nonetheless have wronged us or caused us pain in the past year. Even while we hold on to our disagreement with their views, words, and actions, let us try to imagine surrounding them with compassion, lovingkindness, and forgiveness. We'll take a few minutes for that… Finally, we'll think of ourselves, knowing better than anyone our own flaws, all the ways we have not lived up to our own highest ideals during the past year. And while still holding ourselves to account, let us offer ourselves compassion, lovingkindness, and forgiveness. Let's take a few minutes for that…

"Shalom, Shalom— Shalom to those who are far off and Shalom to those who are near, says Adonai." Shalom is not about the triumph of one side and the obliteration of the other. It is, at its Hebrew root, about balance, a balance between the opposing forces that otherwise could destroy our world. May we, in our strivings, in our struggles, in our going astray and in our return, our *t'shuvah*, find our way to "balanced empathy" for ourselves, for those who are near, and for those who are far off. May the complex balance between compassion and judgement guide us to heal our divisions and reverse our polarization. And may we find our way to a coming together that will hold our common humanity, our common missteps, and our common potential to bring the divine values that form us more clearly into this deeply fractured world.

G'mar <u>h</u>atimah tovah.