

WE get this holiday all wrong. This is supposed to be a day of renewal. Yet, we enter this holy day preparing for the worst. The language of the machzor is full of dread. The words of *Une taneh tokef* speak of this as a day of dread. I cannot read these words. 23 years ago, as I looked out over my congregation at Glen Manor Home for the Jewish aged, I almost fell to my knees. I should not have been surprised. That was not my first High Holy day in a Rabbinic capacity, I had a year co-leading a service in Jerusalem and my first student pulpit was in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I had helped my Rabbi, Gene Levy for a few years, as well. I knew what was coming, but I had never been smacked in the face with the impact of those words. Glen Manor was the very last address for every person who came through the front door with a room reservation. I got to the words, "Who shall live and who shall die, and found myself praying that some of my residents would not be inscribed in the book of life. Making them live strapped to a wheel chair, lost to Alzheimer's or dementia, or in the excruciating pain of end stage cancer even one more day was cruel and inhumane. Or their families to have to endure the

endless end stages of life where no quality of life could be found for their loved one ... I am sorry, I cannot read those words.

At the same time, many of you have come expecting those words to be read. Cantor sang them in Hebrew, and I was thankful that most of you could enjoy the music, untainted by knowing what she was singing. Her voice took a painful misplaced theology and gave us a beautiful moment of meditation. Did you know that in the original Reform High Holy Day Prayer Books, they excised the prayer. For some reason in the creation of this book, editors chose to bring it back into our liturgy. For over 100 years of Reform Judaism, we never read this prayer ... and most never knew it even existed. These words were written for ALL time, but written in another time and we have evolved to a place where we can ask the questions at a higher and perhaps deeper level

I am not alone. I participated in a several week “on line” discussion about how to “DEAL” with this prayer during these holy days. It lacks empathy; it lacks compassion; it tears at the spirit of renewal for which this holy day stands; it bespeaks a theology of abdication. If our teshuvah is intentional and real

then it must make a difference, and there can be no predestined decree. The goal is our return to God.

We are now a large part of the way through the prayer book. How many times are we told what we need to do to perfect our teshuvah? Over and over again, the text instructs us to care for each other; to attend to the needs of the widow, the orphan and the stranger; and to ensure our neighbor's dignity. We know the ways of the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ultimately, our turning to God ... our teshuvah has to help us return to each other and change the world. If we are to return to each other, we have to be really concerned with each other's feelings and needs. We need to grow empathy, and foster reasonable expectations of each other. Where we find ourselves disappointed, we have to ask how much of it is about someone else letting us down, and how much of our "let down" results from our lack of understanding and perhaps unreasonable expectations we place on someone else.

Now, I know that disappointments are not always bad, often we can learn from them. The question is, "Do we or will we?"

What may seem like a setback may be a blessing in disguise—or a blessing in waiting; it may only be a matter of time before you recognize that your disappointment is the universe opening amazing windows through which you can breathe the air of personal growth and change. Thomas Edison never stopped trying. “I have not failed 10,000 times,” he said. “I have successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work.”

We can do a lot of preparation and trial work and up the odds of a project’s success, but people are not projects, and we do not walk within definable boundaries. Interpersonally, we carry so much baggage that often clouds our ability to think clearly. Therapists teach that if a divorced or widowed person marries another divorced or widowed person, four people climb into bed every night.

Our lives intersect with others all day, every day. Sometimes we know these folks well; frequently, though, the points of connection are brief and transient. Having realistic expectations about others begins with having the capacity for empathy. What do we really know about the people with whom we interact?

Who are these people? How might they tell their own stories? What thoughts preoccupy their minds? What joys and troubles are coursing through their feelings? Can we feel their pain? And, if so, how deeply can we all our connection(s) to their pain, before it is detrimental to our own well being?

I know that I have shared this story before, but, many years ago, my dear friend Rev. Hank Moody lost his daughter. She snuck out at night and ended up as a passenger in a car that hit a telephone pole. She never recovered from the coma. After several weeks on life support, I stood with Hank and Pat as they turned off the machines and watched as their baby passed away. Members of his church filled the waiting room. They were there to hold Hank and his family. As his parishioners came to him sobbing in grief, I watched him care for them, as a Pastor. I was amazed at his strength. His daughter just died, and he was caring for all these people in grief. As I later told Hank how amazed I was with his strength, he could only comment, "I pray you will never understand."

Several years later, I stood in the Emergency room. My wife Cindy had just died, and my son was in shock and wavering with an unclear prognosis. As I held the many people who came to support us but suffered their own grief in this loss, I finally understood Hank. Holding them was my default behavior. I was not strong. If anything, it kept me from falling apart.

Empathy is our tool for beginning to understand. It asks the question: If we could catch a glimpse of others' stories, would we treat them differently?

Ultimately, Torah calls upon us to hold our wants in needs in one hand, and our empathy for another's plight in the other, making sure that both hands receive equal dignity. A sage (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) once said, "We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer." It is easy to pass judgment on what we perceive should be someone's responses to any given situation, but not having walked through the messaging in their head, it is wrong to do so. It is easy to cast curses against another when you do not know them. In this world of technology when so

much conversation takes place in virtual reality, we have lost not only our filter for conversation, but also for appreciation of anyone else's situation.

We teach that opinion is the lowest form of human knowledge. Sharing one's opinion requires no accountability for knowledge or understanding. Empathy sets aside our egos and our ignorance, demanding only that we try to see the world through another's lens. Experiencing empathy allows one to transcend the judgments that separate us from each other, opening pathways for understanding. Even where we find ourselves still not agreeing, we still grow in our capacity to care for each other.

Expanding one's empathetic potential adds immense quality to our own lives. As we cultivate the ability to care for others, we become more aware of our inner strength and potential; better equipped to appreciate the quality of our own lives.

You know I believe that we are born to create miracles for each other. In one of the many places where science and faith walk hand in hand, over the last decade, neuroscientists have identified a 10-section "empathy circuit" in our brains. Hard

wired into our brain is the need to be involved with other folks. Damage to this “circuitry” impairs our ability to function in society. We are social animals who have evolved into dependence on each other. We function best when we have close emotional attachments with each other. Torah informs us to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” This innate attachment is why we cry at movies, why we open doors for each other, why we volunteer our time, and why we share tzedakah. Psychologists teach us that we begin to demonstrate this need for each other in infancy. Just out of the womb, we respond to a loving touch with a smile and coo.

Despite our natural tendencies towards empathy, if we don’t nurture and exercise our developing acumen, we lose our capacity to care. In learning from each other, we have the power to radically transform the world. It takes some intentional work. So, with the assistance and research of some amazing pastoral care educators and practitioners, here are five tools to enhance our “Empathic Capacity!”

I want to engage you, on this Holy Day, to share a toolkit to accomplish each “Habit.”

Habit 1: Cultivate curiosity about strangers

Highly empathic people are curious. We do not get stuck in the noise that distracts the world. We want to know more and specifically, more about people. We can’t help people if we do not understand people. Having meaningful conversations with people outside of our "comfortable" circle broadens our experience and helps us to better appreciate the blessings that manifest in our lives.

As I taught Pastoral Care at a Christian Seminary and began describing empathy to this class of budding Ministers, one stopped me and said, “Oh this is the Golden Rule! Do to others what you want done to yourself!” I quoted George Bernard Shaw, who pointed out, “Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you—they might have different tastes.” Empathy is about discovering those tastes.

Every day, we meet people who come from wonderfully diverse, but often challenging backgrounds. Each of us has a story that helps explain who we are and why / how we see the world as we do. Whether it is with the person delivering mail to your home or the receptionist at the Doctor, challenge yourself to have a conversation with one stranger every week. All it requires is courage, and the ability to listen. Seeing the world through someone else's eyes is often the greatest source of our spiritual education.

Habit 2: Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities

How many cringe when we hear that a Jewish person did something wrong that makes big news? How many of us supported Joe Lieberman but were secretly afraid that if he was VP or Pres and something went wrong ... what it would mean for all us Jews? How many understand the reality of what it means when someone protests Israeli governmental decisions by attacking Jews? Ok, now, how many have made blanket statements about all Muslims, all refugees, all minorities ...? We live in a world where we stereotype people and speak about

entire groups as if everyone is the same. Growing one's empathic capacity makes us challenge our prejudices and predispositions. The process makes us search for paths that bring people together in understanding and respect, even where we are not in agreement.

In 1980, at the age of 14, TJ Leyden took an oath of allegiance to the Neo-Nazi white supremacist world. He married a woman from his Klan, and they had a child. He rose through the ranks in the largest white supremacist transnational organization in America. After 15 years of spreading hate, bigotry, and racism, TJ had an epiphany watching his three-year-old child express racist ugliness that could have only been a learned behavior. He turned his back on the white power movement, and in going to work with the Wiesenthal Center, he exclaimed, "What was amazing was that for the first time in my life here was a group of individuals who honestly believed I could do good in the world. For the first time, I experienced real compassion. I came to realize that the only reason folks used to show me respect was

because they feared me. ... I [now] feel empathy and compassion.”

If you could stand in another’s shoes ... would you treat them differently?

Habit 3: Try experiencing someone else’s life

George Orwell wanted to understand the plight of those who lived beneath the social radar. He went to live on the streets of a very poor and rough East London, dressed as though he belonged there. He then wrote the book *Down and Out in Paris and London*, displaying incredible empathy for a world most knew nothing about and avoided like the plague. Homeless people are not “drunken scoundrels;” they are people who are lost, or who have lost everything. What if tomorrow, our income failed; what if we incurred bills from a catastrophic illness and could no longer afford our homes? Through no fault of our own, we would be in their shoes. Orwell became a better writer and more passionate advocate having lived the experience. With empathy, we become better humans.

Experiencing each other's walk in life can help us appreciate our own, as well. Facing the reality under which another lives is tough, sometimes shocking, but it helps us grow. This empathy is the stuff they cannot teach us while sitting at desks in a classroom.

Habit 4: Listen hard—and open up

I have a sign, “Teenagers, move out while you still know everything!” Remember being a teen? Didn't we think our parents were absolutely out of touch? We didn't need to listen to them ... or to anyone! Ok, we didn't know that we needed to ... as we get older, we learn how much we didn't know. Sometimes, it is embarrassing.

The most important phrase in our Jewish tradition comes from Pirke Avot, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what good am I? If not now, when? We have to be willing to be vulnerable and open to hearing each other, and to expressing our needs to and with each other.

But listening is never enough. Empathy requires a genuine exchange of self; it must be primal, for any hiding, shielding, or façade barriers that hide our authenticity can only serve to separate us further from each other. If we avoid opening ourselves up, if we avoid genuine sharing from our soul, there can be no growth or healing in a relationship.

Habit 5: Change happens organically

This is our last “habit’ to evaluate today, but may the lessons of this day be fruit that propels your thought processes tomorrow and the next day.... . Remember Edison taught us that we grow into empathy and into understanding ... often through trial and error ... but we never give up trying. “I have not failed 10,000 times,” he said. “I have successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work.” We will keep trying. We learn to think and feel differently. Sometimes it happens because of some calamity that shocks us into awareness, but more often, it does not happen all at once ... it happens step by step.

People without awareness of anything outside their own communities saw the hurricanes, saw the attacks, saw the lives

forever changed and poured from their homes and ran to give aid. The world changed. Yet, we still battle systemic racism, though the awareness of its evils become more real to more people. It was only 1969 that the US Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional to ban inter-racial marriage. Speaking of marriage, anti LGBTQ discrimination ... 20 years ago, who would have thought adults could marry whom they love, regardless of who approves ... but it took centuries. The world is changing, but much more slowly.

We spent the last century finding ourselves. The number of “self-help” authors and materials produced a multi-million dollar industry. Even while people became, we hope, in better touch with themselves we fell out of touch with each other. It’s time for change. Marc Chernoff once said that “The 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, a time when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others.”

Think of your hopes and dreams, how can we make them real without each other? Look to the people over whom you have

passed judgment. Rethink your assessment. How much did you really know about what was in their heads or their experience pool when you dismissed them? It's a new year. It is time to renew our vision. It is time to renew our lives....repeat after me...**It is time to renew our lives! Todah!**