

Parshat Miketz / The Habit of Compassion
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You may have noticed in the movies and on TV that there are a lot of remakes in the past few years, classic reboots. *Westworld*, for example, the hit series on HBO, was a reboot from a Yul Brynner movie from 1973; they remade the *Magnificent Seven* a few years ago into a Denzel Washington and Chris Pratt action flic; and many of us recently saw a *Star is Born* in its-not the second, not the third, but fourth incarnation (the original was in 1937, then a musical with Judy Garland in the 50's, the 70's with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson). I just want to say that this is all very Jewish, as we see that what was once old is new again – *chadesh yameinu k' kedem*, “renew us like the days of old.”

Of the blockbuster remakes is the *Planets of the Apes* franchise, which was brought back by Tim Burton in 2001, and which I happen to enjoy. During the original filming of the 1968 movie, starring Charlton Heston, there were people assigned to play humans and people assigned to play apes – now everything is CGI so costuming is different. But in the original they noticed something very interesting that happened during lunch on set, and this started to happen on the second or third day: all of the people who were playing apes would sit together and eat, while all of the people playing humans would sit together to eat - separately. Why is that?

Robert Sapolsky, a Stanford neurobiologist and primatologist brings this little anecdote in his book called *Behave*, which is about, among other things, how human beings so easily divide into categories of Us & Them. And he says that creating Us & Themness is not only natural – that is categorizing others into groups divided along lines of race, religion, gender, age, and ethnicity – but that it is also hardwired into our brains and biology; it's a part of our make up. And it can be easily created. Remember the Milgram experiment, when Stanley Milgram, the Yale professor, arbitrarily divided students up into guards and prisoners and how quickly and easily they betrayed their own conscience simply based upon the fact that the conditions of Us and Them were created.

If you do fMRI's, functional MRI's on people's brains and you show them images of people who are clearly other than they are – a different race, a different culture – then the lights start to flicker in the aggressive or warning or premonitory areas of the amygdala and other parts of the brain that let you know ‘this person is not like me.’

So Sapolsky, who happened to grow up as an Orthodox Jew – no longer an Orthodox Jew – what Sapolsky talks about in his book is one of the most taken for granted things that we all do all the time, which is judge people. And not just judge people by their look or style or manner, but also how we relate to our judgment and how we assume all sorts of things about someone's intentions based on that judgment – he or she is that way because she's old or he's black or Persian or because she a

woman, a young Jewish woman or whatever the categories, that is why or informs why she or he is doing what they are doing.

I bring this up because, well, first of all, this is such a huge part of human history and it is certainly a part the Joseph story and it is certainly part of the Hanukkah story. Who do you trust and who you do not trust? Who is on your side and who is on their side? Even inside families, this Us and Them mentality happens, as you may very well know.

When the brothers come to Joseph, he doesn't initially say, 'Oh my God it's my brothers they must mean well.' No, he has to test their intentions and figure out if they've changed before he is ready to move into forgiveness. And we all have this constant sense of people being unlike us being untrustworthy. This is what afflicts our nation terribly today. How often do you hear people on the left accuse people on the right or on the right accuse people on the left of not just disagreeing with them, but that they are hateful or stupid or pretentious and snobby or unpatriotic. It can't be just that they disagree with you, it's that we add on all of these other assumptions about their character, because it is so hard to imagine that someone unlike you means well. Because they don't come to the same conclusions that I do, they must be bad or less than in some way, it's not that they disagree, they must be abhorrent in some way.

And part of the way we cure or really manage this is by first understanding that this is a part of who we are – its even a part of our biology – and that we have to overcome it. And it is easy to overcome it if you make a move toward the habit of compassion. One way to do this, by the way – to make a move toward compassion – is to make an alliance with someone different in another area.

Think of it this way – think about how you'll feel if the star of your favorite sports team starts to play for another team. I'm actually going through this right now. As an Arizona boy who follows the Diamondbacks. My team, the Diamondbacks, literally just traded their best player – Paul Goldschmidt – to the St. Louis Cardinals. That bum! ☺ ... See how quickly you can switch the Us & the Them. You can love a person one year, but in another uniform, he's a bum.

So what we have to try to do is to awaken to the reality that human beings are multifaceted. No one is just a Republican or just a Democrat, or just black, or Asian, or Christian or Jewish. They are also grandparents, children to parents, sports fans, music lovers – all these other things, we are multiple identities. So, when we find that we mistrust someone, we have to realize that we are only mistrusting one part of them, and it's probably only the part we can see, but there are endless other parts with which we probably relate to and find common ground, and even share. Maybe we would be astonished to find out that they also love classical music, or mystery novels, or the Giants, or their grandchildren.

And we also have to remember that part of this impulse to judge, categorize and make assumptions is involuntary, its built into our brains through millions of years of evolution of loving and being devoted to your group and being scared of people who are not in your group, because the people in the other group may very well mean you harm.

Now don't forget, it is the gift of Judaism, as well as other religious traditions, that helped the world to overcome these tribal instincts. Many complain that religion is the reason for the tribalism, when in fact, it's religion that actually diminished it. One of the books by the wonderful religious historian, Karen Armstrong, called *The Great Transformation*, details the beginnings of the world's religious traditions, which generally covers the period from about the 8th to the 1st centuries BCE. This period was coined as the Axial Age by German philosopher Karl Jaspers.

During this period of what is just several hundred years of human history – a drop in the bucket, historically speaking – during this Axial Age, Confucius and Lao Tsu emerged in China; the Upanishads and the Buddha in India; Zarathustra in Persia; Homer, Plato and Thucydides in Greece; and the Hebrew Prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah in Israel. And what Karen Armstrong argues is that what each of these thinkers and dawning spiritual movements share is this retreat from tribalism, a retreat from Us & Themness, and instead a turn toward non-violence and compassion. The raising of the world's consciousness to compassion is what she argues is actually the world's first Enlightenment.

So what is compassion? Compassion is not easy to define. It has the word passion in it, which literally means "suffering" and "co" which means "with" or "together." So it has to do with our human ability to sympathetically share the suffering of others. To recognize the humanity, and therefore the pain and effort of others. Compassion in Hebrew is what – *Chesed*, which is love really, or kindness or mercy or grace. It's a kind of unconditional love. And *Chesed* is a binding concept. That is that we are bound in an *Ahavah Rabbah*, a deep love, and *Ahavat Olam*, an eternal love, as God is *Ohev Amo Yisrael*, the One who Loves the People of Israel and we should *v'Ahavta L're'acha Kamocha* – love your neighbor as yourself ... the rest is commentary, says Hillel.

Compassion is about breaking down the divisions and recognizing how we are similar, how we each want to be loved and held by others. We need others – *lo tov heyot adam levado*, it is not good for the human being to be alone, God declares. Each and every single one of us needs a helpmate, a friend, a lover, a teacher, a student, a partner in this world. We are bound by love, as that is the most real thing in the world while compassion is simply the evidence of the fact.

Love and compassion, by the way, are not Jewish. Each religious tradition has come to embrace them because love and compassion are God's and God is not a Jew, nor a Christian, nor Buddhist. Compassion is universal and its Jewish expression is universal. Indeed, recognizing what is universal in both the Us and the Them is what breaks down the polarized construct, so its not Us & Them but really just Us.

Erich Fromm, the great psychoanalyst and one of my personal intellectual heroes – he was Jewish – wrote a book in 1966 called *And You Shall Be As Gods*, which was his humanistic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. It's a genius work and he calls attention to universalistic credo found within the Rabbinic tradition in *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, where the rabbis ask: Why did God create the world with just one person? If the mitzvah is to be fruitful, multiply, and inhabit the land wouldn't it have been easier to start creation with 10 or 20 or 7 billion? Why just 1? To teach you, they say, that whoever destroys a life, it's as if they've destroyed a whole world and whoever saves a life, it is as if they've saved a whole world. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writing about that same teaching says that this is to teach you that each human life is of infinite value, including your own. There is no price tag you can put on a human life because you never know what a human being can accomplish, what impact a person can have on the world with a mere word, which can happen at any time. This is the dignity of infinite value and we are supposed to recognize it in ourselves and recognize it in others. Recognizing that dignity is compassion.

Why else? The rabbis ask in that same *mishnah*. Why else did God start with just one person? To teach you that no one should say that my father is greater than your father. In other words, we all come from one person. If you are black, brown, yellow, red, white from this part of the world or that, we are literally all brothers and sisters. My father is not greater than your father because we all have the same father. It says that in the Mishnah right here. Therefore, if you are a racist, you don't understand Judaism or take Judaism seriously, period. Racism or ethnocentrism is not Jewish. Now I know there are racist and ethnocentric Jews, some whom may even be quite ritually observant. Ritual observance, however, is no guarantee for being a good person. The Rabbis say one can be a *naval ber'shut haTorah*, a scoundrel who keeps the Torah.

No matter, however, how much or little melanin in one's skin or no matter how thick or narrow one's eyelids does not change the fact that we are all literally related. Yitz Greenberg calls this the dignity of infinite equality – we are all equal under God and recognizing that I am no better, but neither am I worse than any one else is an expression of compassion.

And finally why else? Why else did God create the human being with just 1 person? To teach you that each and every person is stamped with the seal of Adam, the first person and that no two of us are exactly the same. Sure identical twins maybe the same on the outside, but when we consider the inside, too, no one is the same. This

is the dignity of infinite uniqueness. Recognizing the uniqueness of yourself and then in every other person is an act of compassion.

Distrust may be natural and innate in our biology as humans, but thousands of years ago the Hebrew prophets taught us that *Chesed*, compassion and love is its solution and it's a spiritual solution.

And of all the people in the world who understands what it is to be distrusted and deemed the Other or the Them, it is the Jewish people. From Egypt to Spain, to North Africa, to Eastern Europe, to everywhere we've been, we know what that feels like to be objectified, to be seen as not fully human.

Now remember though, when Joseph sees that his brothers have actually fully changed, what does he do? He gets off his throne – which by the way is very important – because to see someone else as yourself, to have compassion and to offer them the dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness, you have to get off your throne. And he says, I am Joseph, your brother. So I hope that we can do the same. That we can look at people who are not like us and say, yes we are not the same, and yes we may disagree with each other about these 20 things, I live this way and you live that way, but, but I know that you are in the image of God in the same way I am in the image of God and so, I am Joseph, your brother.

Chag Same'ach & Shabbat Shalom