

Compassion Near and Far

Congregation Betenu Yom Kippur Sermon 5780

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This past summer I had the immense and heavy privilege of visiting with patients as a chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Boston. Two days a week I was learning about chaplaincy with my small cohort, and three days a week I knocked on hospital room doors, sitting with patients who were recovering from cardiac surgery, waiting for test results to come back about their cancer prognoses, or dealing with the new reality of what their lives would look like after the amputation of a leg.

At the same time, my family was dealing with our own news: my mom was diagnosed with what the doctors thought was a pre-cancerous mass. They hoped that a complicated but routine surgery would take care of the issue and that my mom would be back on her feet within a few months, cancer-free. When the doctors went in to operate, they saw that the cancer had been spreading, confirming a dreaded scenario we didn't want to believe was possible and guaranteeing a difficult and uncertain road ahead for her treatment.

I got this news towards the end of one of my education days at the hospital. Flustered and numb, I left early and got on the T to head home. I put on some quiet music and tried to process my own new reality and the shock of my mom's brand-new diagnosis. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a young woman, maybe 20 years old, on the phone, visibly but quietly upset, tears starting to stream gently down her face. As she hung up the phone, she continued crying, trying not to draw attention to herself. Onlookers who were engaged with their own conversations made

sad faces at each other— what do we do? Others, including me, tried to avert their glances, not wanting to stare and checking the map to see when their stop was coming up.

After a few minutes, tears were still coming down her face, and I was sitting across from her, as fewer and fewer travelers were on the T. I took off my headphones and moved over so I was sitting next to her.

“Is everything ok?” I asked her.

“They found a lump on my mom’s heart. They don’t know what it means.” she said. I sat with her in silence for a few minutes, asking a question here and there, making sure she would be able to get to her destination safely, fighting through a lump in my own throat, thinking about my mom. We parted ways and I told her I would be thinking of her. I was overwhelmed by the poignancy of our similar situations. A shared uncertain future. A shared fear of the known and unknown.

In this morning’s Torah reading, from Parashat Nitzavim in the book of Deuteronomy, we read the words “I command you this day to love the Eternal, to walk in the ways and to keep the commandments, laws, and teachings of your G-d, that you may live and increase.”¹

The Talmud² asks: “What does it mean to walk in G-d’s ways?” The answer?

“Just as G-d clothes the naked, as G-d did with Adam and Eve, so you, too, clothe the naked.

Just as the Holy One visits the sick, as G-d did with Abraham, so you, too, visit the sick.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:16, translation from *Gates of Repentance*

² Sotah 14a

Just as G-d consoles mourners, as G-d did with Isaac after his father Abraham's death, so you, too, console mourners.

Just as G-d buries the dead, as G-d did with Moses, so you, too, bury the dead."

To love G-d is to emulate G-d.

To emulate G-d is to show compassion towards our fellow beings.

To show compassion is to recognize the humanness in others, to be with them during difficult and uncertain times, to show up. In the words of Rabbi Shai Held: "When I manifest compassion in the world, I reach across to someone, knowing full well that by dint of our shared humanity, I and they are both utterly fragile and vulnerable."

It has not been an easy year in the history of our world. Of our country. Of our people. This year, we were witness to upheaval, to violence, and to degradation. We saw continued obstinance from our leaders in working towards tangible and long-term solutions to protect our environment so that our children and grandchildren can continue to live on this planet. We have seen our nation become increasingly divided, we have been drawn in by the toxicity of name-calling and personal attacks, by us vs. them politics, by debates waged in bad faith. This past year saw the horrific and unspeakable murder of eleven Jewish people, assembled for Saturday morning services at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, and of Lori Gilbert-Kaye at a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California. People very much like us, gathered together in a house of prayer to worship, to be in community, to reflect. We know that anti-Semitism and white supremacy are on full display in our country and even right here in New Hampshire.

At the same time, glimmers of hope: an outpouring of compassion and support from those in the nearby faith communities when ruthlessness and hate led to the murder of our

brothers and sisters, youth climate strikes organized around the world to tell our leaders that the climate crisis is real and it is pressing. By demonstrating compassion towards one another, by recognizing that all of us— *all* the inhabitants of our city, of our country, of our world— are utterly fragile and vulnerable, perhaps we can begin to heal some of the fractures that keep us apart.

A story is told of a young man who lived in the kingdom of the wisest king in the world. All of the king's subjects were sure that their king could answer any question and solve any problem. This drove the young man crazy with jealousy. Surely there must be some problem that was too difficult for this famous king! Suddenly, he had an idea. He went into the fields and captured a bird. He took the bird in his hands and carried it to the castle, to meet with the king. When he came before the king, he would say: "Your majesty, in my hands I hold a bird. Tell me, is the bird alive or dead?" If the king said that the bird was alive, he planned on closing his hands and crushing the bird. If the king said that the bird was dead, then the young man would open his hands and set the bird free. Either way, the king would be wrong. The young man arrived before the king and said, "Your majesty, in my hands I hold a bird. Tell me, is the bird alive or dead?" The entire court held its breath, waiting for the king's reply. Finally, the king spoke: "My son, in your hands you hold a very precious life. You alone must choose wisely what you will do with it."

We have the whole world in our hands, and G-d holds us in G-d's own hands. G-d gave us free will, and still our world is full of suffering. The question is: what will we choose to do with our free will this year? What are we doing for others who are dealing with their own pain and sorrow? What are we doing to ensure that there will be a future for our children and

grandchildren? What are we doing for those who inherited less fortunate situations than our own? What are we doing to reach across the proverbial aisle, to show compassion and understanding, to love and to heal this broken world? How are we showing up?

י-י א-ל רחום וחנון, ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת. נוצר חסד לאלפים, נושא עון ופשע ונקה.

The thirteen attributes of G-d that we recited just prior to the Torah service.

Just as G-d is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abundant in *chesed*- loving kindness, and in truth, so too may we be in the coming year.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:

Who shall live and who shall die,

Who shall see ripe old age and who shall not,

Who shall be secure and who shall be driven,

Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled?

None of us quite know what this year brings for us. As we plow ahead despite the uncertainty of our lives, may we find the courage to push ourselves to walk in G-d's ways more and more, to fill our hearts with compassion for those near and far, and to recognize that just as we are utterly fragile and vulnerable, so too is all of G-d's creation. *G'mar Chatima Tovah*— may we all be sealed for life, for health, and for peace.