

“Heart of Compassion”

D'rasha for Kol Nidre 5767

Alexandra G. Carter

Congregation Bet Mishpachah, Washington DC

On this *Kol Nidre*, I must confess: This *d'rasha* almost didn't get written. As recently as Tuesday night, I was in despair about what to say.

I've known for weeks that I wanted – I needed -- to talk about compassion. We live in a culture that seems splintered by bitterness, judgment and accusations -- in a world of threats, uncertainty and fear.

We need compassion, desperately, but compassion seemed like the last thing I could find anything useful to say about.

The Washington AIDS Partnership, one of my projects at work, had \$1 million in requests for HIV prevention and advocacy in the region, and less than half that amount available to give away.

There's too much work to do in fighting the pandemic, and too many necessary requests we had to say no to. The need, and the paucity of our resources, almost broke my heart.

As President, I was called to settle a squabble between two adults in the congregation, each of whom couldn't see beyond their own perspective, and each of whom thought the other was being a jerk. The negativity and the small-mindedness were enough to break my heart.

And late this week the Congress of the United States passed a law that makes it possible for the executive branch to seize evidence without warrants, to detain persons indefinitely without charges, and to deny judicial review of arrests.

Of course, this is okay, the reasoning goes, because the targets of the law are non-citizens, any of whom could be a terrorist. So every non-citizen in this country is now vulnerable to an extent that enrages me even as it breaks my heart.

So, what on earth could I find to say about compassion? I was far too weary, too frustrated, too sorrowful to feel anything much like compassion.

So I come this night seeking – seeking a lot. On the one hand, I seek to learn to forgive, and to ask for forgiveness. These are the traditional tasks we undertake together on this night, and into tomorrow.

But I also come seeking comfort, when it seems like everywhere I turn there is hate and division. I seek reassurance, that I can make my way through it.

I seek guidance. How can I connect to some place like compassion within myself, the compassion I need to offer, and seek, forgiveness?

I've seen the lack of compassion all around me. But my need to talk about compassion tonight is also driven by a spiritual practice of compassion I've been trying to develop.

It may sound peculiar to talk about a practice of compassion. In English, compassion comes from words meaning "to suffer together". It may seem that suffering is an odd basis for a spiritual practice – and not very Jewish.

But, thinking about it, perhaps not so odd. We all suffer – it is part of our human condition. And because we all suffer, we are all capable of understanding suffering.

It begins with connecting to the suffering of those closest to us, including, very importantly, ourselves. Developing a practice of compassion includes expanding the circle of those whose compassion we take seriously and feel strongly – from those closest to us, all the way out to people we don't know, people on the Beltway, other creatures, nature itself.

But a practice of compassion does not end with feeling. It's not saying, "I feel your pain," then going on with our lives. Compassion is not merely something we have; it's something we *do*. Compassion means being driven to do something about the suffering we see around, or inside us.

Viewed from one perspective, we Americans are a very compassionate people. We respond, swiftly and generously, to victims of natural disaster. As but two recent examples, the outpouring of giving around the Indonesian tsunami, or the Gulf coast hurricanes last year, were widespread and heartfelt.

And Americans have been raised with a can-do attitude, that we can just go in and fix any situation. Just point the way, and we're on the job.

This attitude has given this country some of its greatest moments. But – and this is a big but - - often the "job" is big, and complicated, and messy, and doesn't resolve itself quickly.

So we get what we sometimes call "compassion fatigue," because we think we're supposed to be able to fix it – and be done.

But perhaps what we term "compassion fatigue" is actually where true compassion begins. We may begin truly to feel the suffering of those we are trying to help.

But here is where difficulties arise. Feeling the suffering of others may be too intense, too uncomfortable, and we fear that the pain will break our hearts. And so we withdraw rather than continue to feel it.

And our withdrawal, our drive to avoid pain, results in numbing. We stop caring about, or even noticing, persistent, pervasive suffering -- poverty, war, hunger, disease. In Southeast DC. In Iraq. In Darfur.

In the Gulf, the terrible iniquities and violence of structural racism remain.

We deny, avoid, ignore the pain of others, so that we can deny, avoid, ignore the pain inside ourselves.

And these days, we Americans seem incapable of compassion for each other. We are daily treated to religious leaders building their power on the basis of excluding queer people – and women seeking abortions -- rather than on the teachings of love, compassion and service that their faith claims to embrace.

We are daily exposed to leaders whose primary method of “communicating” is setting up those who disagree as “other,” then demonizing them.

It’s amplified lately because it’s an election year, but it’s been out there, poisoning the very air, for a long while.

We are daily forced to listen to words that devalue difference, that push for control, that more and more seek certainty in exclusion and condemnation.

We seem determined to keep other out, to withhold our compassion. We are splintered by what papers we read, what television news we watch, what we listen to on the radio. Our circle of “us,” of those who matter, whose suffering we feel, grows smaller, tighter every day.

My heart breaks at the continued denial of our common humanity, of our seeming inability to understand others.

This perspective comes, I believe, from a position of fear. Certainty is reassuring. Knowing who’s “in,” and who’s “out,” who can be trusted and who can’t, can be comforting.

Fear has always been present in the world, but in the last five years – since the attacks of September 11th – it has ratcheted up in intensity.

The problem is, that because rigidity and exclusion come from a place of fear, any “community” built on them is inherently fragile.

It’s a way of life based on avoiding pain, on avoiding difference, rather than coming from a place of inner strength and integrity.

We can build that integrity from deep understanding of another source of the word compassion. Yes, in English, it’s about suffering together.

But in Hebrew, the word *rachum* is rooted in the word *rechem*, or womb. Commentary and liturgy tell us that God has the compassion of a mother for the children s/he has birthed.

We rely on this motherly/fatherly love on Yom Kippur. *Adonai, Adonai, Eil rachun v'chanun...* – Eternal One, Eternal One, God of compassion and mercy.... We attempt to model this compassion, this parental love, as we both seek and offer forgiveness.

But there is a more fundamental truth revealed by the roots of *rachum* as womb. This is the reality that each of us, in all our fragility, imperfection and brokenness, comes from the same Divine source. We all come from that same source of womb-like love and support.

This means we are closer than friends, closer than fellow congregants, closer than country-people. We are, in a fundamental and cosmic sense, family. We have obligations to each other.

When we forget this, when we shut down and withhold our compassion, we forgo something very important.

We give up the power, the joy, that comes from understanding our connections – to the disparate parts of ourselves, and to others. There is a great openness in being aware of connection. The more we care about, the more alive we are.

A Tibetan monk teaches that when you begin to touch your heart or let your heart be touched, you begin to discover that it's bottomless, that it doesn't have any resolution, that this heart is huge, vast, and limitless. You begin to discover how much warmth and gentleness is there, as well as how much space.

In traditional Jewish thought, the heart is the seat of wisdom. In our liturgy we plead for an open heart, or a clean heart. In the concluding lines of the Amida we say – *p'tach libi b'toratecha, u'mitzvotcha tirdof nafshi*—open my heart to your way/teaching, so that my soul may pursue your commandments.

Or, put another way, let me *feel* compassion so that I may *do* compassion.

So when I reflect on my heartbreak this past week, I realize that my despair was really compassion that was not fully developed. The fatigue and frustration came from too much compassion for others, and not enough for myself.

A lack of compassion for ourselves leads us to not take sufficient care of our own needs. And in that over-extended place, we cannot feel the expansiveness of a whole heart. As Jack Kornfield teaches, if your compassion doesn't include yourself, it is incomplete.

Full compassion can only develop after we spend some time inside, in our place of nurture, our own Source of wisdom – that womblike place within each of us.

We withhold compassion from ourselves too often. When we sit back and take too much. When we take on too much. When we ignore, belittle, or deny our needs. When we permit injustices to be done to ourselves.

So I am actually grateful for the pain I was feeling last week.

At the very least, it gave me this *d'rasha*.

It also showed me that my compassion practice is developing, at least in part – I am open to suffering in the world, and feel it.

And, it showed me that I need to develop the wisdom to have more compassion for myself – to hear, and feel, my own pain, and be moved strongly to do something about it.

That I need to care enough to hear my own broken heart in order to heal it, and in order to reach out to heal others.

Our internal source of connectedness, *rachem*, and our internal source of wisdom *libeinu*, our hearts, come together in compassion.

A wise, open heart, nurtured by knowledge of our fundamental connection, is a powerful base for doing compassion in the world.

As we move into the year ahead, let us remember the words of Rumi:

"We are the mirror as well as the face in it.
We are tasting the taste this minute of eternity.
We are pain and what cures pain, both.
We are the sweet cold water and the jar that pours."

Blessed is the Compassionate One who gives us compassion as a way of touching and being touched by the world around us.

May you have a *tzom kal*, an easy fast, and may the year ahead bring you, and those you love, many blessings.