

The Heart of Compassion

You might find this hard to believe but during part of my summer vacation, I spent 6 days sitting in silence in a room filled with 90 Jews. I know, you can't imagine me not talking for 6 days, let alone 90 other MOT. But it happened, you can ask my husband because he was there too. In fact, he invited me to join him on this Jewish Mindfulness Meditation Retreat. The last day of the retreat was our 21st wedding anniversary and this was the gift we decided to give ourselves. Now, watch it, because you don't want to be wondering why Aryeh would want to celebrate our wedding anniversary in silence do you? After all, you'll have a lot of explaining to do next time we come to the communal confessional prayers.

All kidding aside, it was an amazing experience. Most of you know that I am not a very quiet person. I love to talk. It was hard to sit without talking for so many hours, and I learned things about myself that I could not learn any other way. The quality of attention to my inner experience has added a new dimension to my spiritual life. Sitting still for 45 minutes at a time, over 6 days gave me the opportunity to reflect upon what is most important to me in my life, to clear away the business of my mind and focus on being aware of the present moment. Our everyday lives are filled with noise which makes it hard to be in touch with our inner lives.

This meditation retreat was at a Buddhist retreat center, but all of the teachers, which included 3 rabbis were Jewish. They shared teachings about a range of topics but the most powerful message I received from these teachers and from the depths of my own meditation was about living and acting with compassion. In sitting quietly for any period of time, our minds tend to look for areas of our lives or other people's lives that we think should be different. Our attention is drawn to judging ourselves and others. In fact, I know that sometimes I avoid quiet time because I don't want to know about all of the self-judgmental messages drifting in and out of my consciousness. We all have an inner committee that passes judgement on things we've done or not done and that committee can hold us hostage to suffering. Tara Brach, a psychologist in Washington DC, calls this tendency the "trance of unworthiness." We slip into the perception of being a defective, unworthy self and that may give rise to our most damaging behaviors. In reacting to how miserable we feel about ourselves in this state of mind we may wind up bingeing on food or alcohol to punish ourselves or acting out against the people we love. And the next day we take it out on ourselves for this destructive behaviors with thoughts and feelings of self-hatred, which just fuels another round of self negative behavior.

In meditation, we can learn to accept ourselves with compassion and break the "trance of unworthiness" that leads us to act in harmful ways. We can give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and come to understand that we are only human. Sitting quietly helps us identify what we are feeling in the moment, whether it be shame, remorse, physical pain, and meet this experience with compassionate attention. As we practice this our sense of our self grows beyond seeing our flaws and we can begin to trust that our true selves are filled with compassionate awareness. Cultivating compassion is a central element of Jewish practice.

During these High Holidays we turn our attention to the mistakes we have made. We take responsibility for these mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

One of my favorite stories from the Torah is related to forgiveness and compassion. And it is no accident that we chant a section of this story during the Torah service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

After spending forty days up on Mt Sinai, Moses comes back to the camp, only to find the people worshipping the Golden calf. In his rage, Moses throws down the ten commandments and they shatter on the ground. These are the Ten commandments that he spent forty days receiving directly from God on Sinai.

Let's take just a minute to talk about Moses and his relationship with God. It says in the Torah that Moses alone was able to speak with God face to face-panim el panim. But it also says that no person can ever see God and live. But after Moses shatters the ten commandments, this is exactly what he asks for, to be able to see God's presence. It's as if he needs the reassurance that in his anger he hasn't blown it completely. He wants to be sure that God is still with him. Maybe he even falls into the trance of unworthiness and is trying to figure out how to get back into right relationship with himself and with God. Maybe he is afraid of God's anger towards himself and the people.

God's answer to Moses is fascinating. I've thought about it a lot and I've come up with a number of different possible interpretations. And believe me, I'm not alone. Torah commentators have written volumes about God's response to Moses. Instead of showing Moses the Divine face, which in Hebrew is panim, God shows Moses God's insides, which in Hebrew is bifnim. You can hear the close relationship between panim-face (which by the way is in the plural form) and bifnim, insides.

God's response to Moses' request is fascinating.

This is what God says:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you

the Eternal name, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show," continuing, But you cannot see my face, for a human being may not see Me and live." God instructs Moses to come up the mountain and find a place nearby. Moses is then to place himself on a rock. God says, as My presence passes by, I will put you in a **cleft** of the rock and shield you with my hand until I have passed by, then I will take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." (Ex 33:19-23) God then instructs Moses to carve two stone tablets for the second set of 10 commandments to replace the first set Moses broke. Moses and the people are getting a second chance at receiving the 10 commandments. Moses does as God commands and he ascends the mountain early the next morning. The text describes God standing firmly **with** Moses as God proclaims these words, the same words we chant on HH as we stand with the Torah in our arms. If you know the melody, chant it with me:

"Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed ve-emet, notzer chesed la-alafim, nosei avon va-feshah, v'chata-ah v'nakei."

Adonai, Adonai, is compassionate and gracious, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon."

In looking at this story again I was struck by the parallel between Moses fracturing the tablets and God asking Moses to stand in the fracture of the rock on top of the mountain. How often we find this to be true in our own lives. We break something and wind up dwelling in the fracture itself. We live with our own broken-ness. And yet in this story, the broken part of the rock, the cleft, is a protective place and God's hand covers Moses there, shielding him from danger in order to receive God's compassion. And to take this even a step further, God stands with Moses in the fracture of the rock. I get this image of Moses being like a child in the womb and God's compassion flowing all around him. This is what it means to see God from the inside, *bifnim*. It is so powerful to imagine that after we make a mistake, instead of beating ourselves up, we can turn to God, standing with us, showing us love and compassion. Our own judgmental voices that can echo in our own minds can be transformed into kindness and understanding.

This reminded me of a story told in the Twelve Step community. I've taken a few liberties with the details.

A guy falls in a hole and is looking for a way out. Suddenly he sees a doctor walking by. Thinking to himself, I'm sure a doctor would want to give me a hand. So he calls out to the doctor, saying, I'm stuck down here in

the hole, could you please help me out? The doctor peers down the hole takes out his prescription pad and throws down a prescription, then continues on his way. Next the guy in the hole sees a rabbi walking nearby. He calls out to the rabbi, saying, hey I'm stuck down here in this hole, can you give me a hand? The rabbi looks down the hole, closes her eyes and recites a prayer. In a few more minutes, the guy notices a friend of his passing by. He yells up to the friend, saying, I've been stuck down here in this hole all day. Can you help me out? Before the guy can say a word, the friend jumps into the hole with him. The guy says to him, why did you do that? Now what are we going to do, we're both stuck down here. The friend answers, don't worry, I've been down here before, I know the way out."

This friend is the embodiment of compassion. He has experienced the same kind of suffering and he knows that he has to be able to get into the hole with the guy if is going to be able to really help him.

So, God stands with Moses in the cleft of the rock, and we can see God acting with compassion for Moses and by extension compassion with all of us.

In fact, when God calls out to Moses, the first of the 13 attributes is compassion. Maybe God gave this chant as a protective agent, instructing

Moses to use it as a kind of charm should God ever again get angry with the people as God did after the golden calf affair. In this chant we find that God's attributes of compassion triumphs over God's attributes of anger and serves as a shield, like the hand covering Moses' eyes as they stood together in the cleft of the rock.

During the Torah service on RH & YK we rehearse the thirteen attributes of God in hopes of reminding ourselves of the need to increase these divine qualities in the world.

Rabbi Anne Brenner explains that she sings this chant whenever she is angry with herself, feeling that she may have missed the mark or could have done better. She writes, "I appeal to the God-like part of myself to be compassionate and not give over to judgment, anger or despair.

I find that in confronting a mistake or disappointment, it is much more effective to invoke compassion than judgment. I am much more likely to change for the better in an atmosphere of loving and compassionate acceptance than in one where I am made to feel shame."

I don't have the time to discuss the wide range of Jewish definitions of God, and yet I do believe that we can relate to this teaching even if we don't experience God as a transcendent force outside of our own beings.

If we define God as an inner voice, we can also say that this story teaches

us to bear witness to our own pain and respond to ourselves with kindness, compassion and understanding. Having as much compassion for ourselves as we would for a loved one. My husband likes to share a teaching he heard about remembering to be compassionate with ourselves that goes like this. If we talked to other people the way our inner judgmental voices talk to ourselves, we wouldn't have any friends left in the world.

Tomorrow we'll will take the Torah scrolls out of the ark. We'll stand together and chant this blessing of compassion God spoke to Moses. In a more traditional synagogue, these words are not chanted when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat because we don't ask God for anything on Shabbat. But I want to propose that we chant these words as a reminder to ourselves not as a request. When we chant these words, feel them help wash away your most deepest held critical self judgements. Find a place for them to dwell in your heart so that you can draw upon them in the days ahead. In doing so,in our quiet moments. whether in our pain or our joy we will find a source of compassion and kindness that is unending.

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