

PARSHAT KEDOSHIM FINAL 4/29/23 Linda Blachman

For my ancestors who sacrificed to give me a better life, and my daughter, son-in-law and granddaughters who continue it.

I didn't expect to fall in love again so close to the end. Don't get excited, family, it's not a man.

I fell in love with *Parshat Kedoshim* because it offers a vision of who we humans are at our core and can yet become, how to live a coherent life of goodness, peace, justice, kindness together. Theodore Roethke wrote, *In a dark time, the eye begins to see*. Reading the parsha, the most important principles in Torah leapt off the page like white fire.

First, *Be holy*, the opening, overarching commandment. A call spoken to the entire people. Be the good. See the good. Do good. What Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks calls "the democratization of holiness." We each carry a spark of Divinity and have innate worth, just for being.

Then, a dense moral framework of laws guides us towards holiness by which we can raise and redeem the sparks Kabbalists say are hidden in each thing, each moment. I go numb or get lost reading lists of laws but this time two more flares of light appeared.

We're told in Chapter 19:17-18, *Do not hate your neighbor in your heart... Love your neighbor as yourself*.

And, further, in verse 33: *Do not wrong a stranger who resides in your land... You shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt*.

The latter idea is so important that we're told to welcome, care for, and love the stranger at least 36 times in Torah, more than any other commandment.

These passages reveal that the luminous path towards holiness runs in and through relationship, compassion. Relatedness is the primary element for building the *mishkan* – a place for the sacred to dwell. In Buber's words, *All real living is meeting*. The holy is found in the in-between. Between humans, humans and the world, humans and the mystery. Everything is connected.

A beautiful vision to strive for, but dogged questions arise. How to live in peaceful, compassionate relationship with those we see as different? Invoking Buber, how to see the Other as "Thou" bearing a Divine holy spark instead of "It," a potential enemy to fear, fight, or flee, or an object to be used?

The questions have haunted history since the Israelites wandered the wilderness en route to an elusive Promised Land. Today, in Israel, this country, the world, getting there feels more remote. Human fallibility, fear, greed, hatred hit me. And doubts. We can legislate or morally enforce peace, justice, kindness to an extent, but success rests on the human heart, on relationships. God gave us a VERY tall order.

I fell in love with the *parsha*'s vision, but now the real marriage began. Marriage needs to hold the hard truth of things as well as the higher call of love. If the sickness of our times is disconnection, chaos, fear-induced hatred, then the medicine we need is connection, wholeness, compassion, commonality,

I turned to the verses about relations with our neighbors and the “stranger” for clues pointing to our common humanity, the good and hard of it, and found both. Torah is realistic about this project of becoming human.

Both start with a reminder: ***Do not harm your neighbor; Do not wrong the stranger.*** Jews don't believe in original sin but we each come with a *yetzer hara* – the evil inclination, the proclivity to harm.

Yet we're also told: ***Love the neighbor, love the stranger.*** We each have a pure soul and a *yetzer tov*, an inclination towards goodness, kindness, mercy. Stated positively or negatively, it seems God is saying *You can do this! You are made for it! You can love even a stranger, utterly different than you.*

How is this possible? . . . ***for you were strangers in Egypt.*** The clause tells us that suffering is universal and can connect us to each other, familiar or foreign. All humans struggle, have hardship, heartache. It's in our nature to become ill, grow old, die, know loss. With that comes pain, grief, vulnerability. We're fallible and flawed. We're all in the same lifeboat.

Norman Fischer said: *There's a gateway to deep compassion when we realize that we and all fellow human beings are fellow sufferers.* Compassion is the heart's response to suffering. We have the capacity and it's tested in how we treat the most vulnerable among us. “Egypt” repeatedly reminds us of our own vulnerability. Remembering history, inhabiting our pain, can soften us, open our eyes to see the Other as human and our hearts to respond with care, altruism. Not remembering narrows us, cuts off a part of our heart and humanity.

Thousands of years ago, *Love the stranger* told us “You can do this!” The news keeps blasting harsh truths of history, but there's underreported good news. *Very good news.* Rigorous science (our new God) is telling us the same thing.

Since 2001, Dacher Keltner and social scientists at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center have studied what it takes to foster a compassionate society. A robust body of neuroscience research now shows that the capacity for sympathy, kindness is in our genes and neuro-physiology. Our nervous system is hardwired for survival and threat, but the human heart's desire to alleviate suffering is also hardwired.

Having the capacity, though, does not ensure the peaceable kingdom. There are deep obstacles in our powerful need to be safe and survive, in our culture and conditioning. Most pertinent in the US: extreme individualism and survival of the fittest over care and community; denying the truth of our common humanity regarding mortality and *any* kind of vulnerability. We devalue, shame and isolate others who remind us that we share the same fate. A culture of fear keeps it that way.

Even as Jews, we internalize the values, habits and fears of the larger culture. So where to look? The verses offer a suggestion: the most intimate love object: ourselves.

You shall love the neighbor, You shall love the stranger as yourself. Which I read *As you do or should love yourself.*

If all real living is meeting, we can't leave out meeting ourselves. **Hillel famously said:** *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?* "For myself" comes first.

Across time and cultures, how we love ourselves is understood as related to how we love others. To quote the revered Thich Naht Hanh: *Your ability to love another person depends on your ability to love yourself.*

The call *as yourself* pierces the individual and collective heart with questions: How *do* we treat ourselves, especially when we feel bad about ourselves? Do we meet ourselves with kindness as a beloved Thou, a friend in pain, or as a commodity to be pushed, controlled, sold; or an enemy to fight, a stranger we don't want to know?

Self-compassion is so central to creating a peaceful and compassionate society that science has taken it on. The 10-year old science of self-compassion, pioneered by research scientist Dr. Kristin Neff, has completed more than 3000 studies. She defines self-compassion as relating to ourselves with kindness and understanding especially when we suffer, embracing ourselves as we are, flaws and all.

This research demonstrates that when we relate to ourselves with greater acceptance and care in response to suffering, we actually become more forgiving, accepting, empathetic to others – not more selfish or narcissistic. So long as our self-compassion is rooted in "common humanity" – seeing life's joys and struggles and our own imperfect selves as part of shared human condition – we become more accepting and tolerant of people who are not like us.

It makes sense but it's not easy to inhabit our pain and keep our hearts open to suffering when there are so many forces against it – inherited trauma, upbringing, defenses and habits, fear reactions from current trauma. Our culture conditions us to avoid suffering, yet we can learn to meet it differently.

Recent advances in neuroscience show that we can change our brains and nervous systems throughout life, even trauma responses. The path to self-compassion and inner wholeness starts with building an internal *mishkan*, a safe place to soften our heart towards ourselves, remember our holy longings and inherent goodness, and accept all of ourselves with kindness and self-forgiveness.

Thich Naht Hanh said: *Peace in the world starts with peace in oneself.* Just as fear and anger are contagious, so is calm, a peaceful heart, kindness.

The capacity to love the stranger advances by meeting the truth of our own vulnerability and pain and tending it with love, self-forgiveness. Self-compassion is a practice and there are many opportunities out there for learning.

R. Nachman's practice helps too. Recognize and reinforce the good in ourselves that's already here. When feeling sad or bad, search within for an aspect of goodness, a white dot within the black – a quality, a kindness, etc. – then a few more until they form musical notes. Enough notes form a melody affirming your fundamental goodness. Seeing your own goodness helps you see it in others and the world, even when dark.

There's much to be hopeful about even in these times. Alongside an evolutionary crisis, we may well be living through a transformative revolution in human consciousness, supported by advances in science. Despite technology and social media that distance and dehumanize us, some scientists and spiritual leaders think we may be poised to go from survival of the fittest to what's being called survival of the kindest or survival of the nurtured. Wouldn't that be swell!

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Entering my 80s, I, too, could use a reboot. I hope for greater ease, inner peace, more delight, love, aliveness in each precious moment.

This will be my last *drash* for reasons of self-compassion. Deep thanks to the Life Story Circles team for generously co-sponsoring the Kiddush, Lee Bearson for encouragement and editing, and several trees that sacrificed their lives for my endless drafts.

Praying and singing together recalls sitting on my daddy's lap, first row, in a Chassidic shul, surrounded by black-coated men raising the sparks in ecstatic song. I was a good, spiritual child, and when that gate closed to me because of my sex, I felt cut off from the Source, unworthy. I in turn cut off Judaism and parts of myself. It's been a long, winding road back.

I've fallen in love with all of it again – Torah, being Jewish, being in this blessed community for 33 years. And Kol Rom. Singing together in our *mishkan* returns me to the pure soul I was in childhood. I feel we're all one heart and am grateful.

Shabbat Shalom.

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