

Vaera 5784

January 13, 2024

Bnei Mitzvah of Henry Gelber and Andy Tinio

Henry and Andy, wow. Those were two of the most creative divrei Torah in memory. Henry, you used both humor and solid textual analysis to ask what we've all been wondering at every seder since the beginning of time: what's so bad about frogs? The answers you explored led you to an important lesson about preparedness that applies to all of us with every threat, major or minor, we face in our day. Andy, you asked why Pharaoh didn't care enough to stop the destruction, connecting Pharaoh's inaction to our own inaction in response to fossil fuel disasters and gun violence, and you ended by calling us to empathy and action to save our world.

Truly impressive and important, both of you.

In some sense, you both were speaking about the human capacity for caring. Henry, in order to heed your call to prepare for the bad things that might happen in the future, we have to care about the people who would get hurt. Andy, you explicitly called upon leaders and the rest of us to care about bad things that are happening now even when they're not in front of our face and even when they go on for a long time, even when we feel powerless and even when they seem far away from us. You told us not to desensitize ourselves, not to get bored, not to be arrogant or removed, but to care.

So how do we care more and better? Is it possible to care for the whole world? If so, how?

I don't know the whole answer to that question, but I think I know two parts of the answer. One part is spiritual and one part is emotional.

In the first two verses of our parasha, Vaera, Gd says to Moses: Ani Adonai

אני אדוני "I am Adonai (spelled YHVH). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El

Shaddai, but my name Y-H-W-H was not revealed to them (6:3).” The word revealed/Nodati has at its root the word Daat, which means awareness.

Toldot Yaakov Yosef teaches that this verse means, “The secret of da‘at/awareness was not revealed until Moses.” And what is “the secret of awareness?” It is, according to Meor Eynayim, that “YHVH is the essence of all things...” In other words, everything and everyone is filled with Gd’s presence. “To have this awareness”, Meor Eynayim continues, “is to look within all things at the inwardness that gives them life.”

So Moses arrives in Egypt from the burning bush with a new awareness about Gd — the ability to see Gd’s presence in every being. But, according to Meor Eynayim and the Baal Shem Tov before him, “the secret meaning of the Egyptian exile was that true awareness (da‘at) was in exile” Moses had this awareness, but literally no one else did. The Torah tells us in our parasha that the Israelites couldn’t even hear Moses because they were kotser ruach, so crushed in spirit.

Think about it. The Israelites and the Egyptians were in the grip of a Pharaoh who hardened his own heart, a Pharaoh so corrupt and arrogant that he had no ability to empathize with his own people, not enough to act to reduce their suffering, and certainly not enough to care about the suffering of the Israelites. In turn, the Israelites were so traumatized, their ability to see Gd’s presence in themselves or others was in exile. It was utterly unavailable to them.

The secret of caring more, the secret of caring for the whole world, is the secret of awareness— of understanding, knowing, seeing, really seeing — that YHVH, Gd’s presence lives in every thing and everyone.

But it is so easy for that awareness to go into exile. When you feel crushed or oppressed it’s so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When you feel that no one sees you, that no one cares about your life or your suffering, when you feel that you are alone in the world, it’s so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When you have enemies who want you dead, it’s so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When 1,200 of your people

are brutally, unspeakably brutally, murdered and others celebrated it, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When 23,000 of your people are killed and the fighting is still going on and the world doesn't seem to care, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When more than 100 of your people have spent their 100th night in captivity in tunnels, and the world doesn't seem to care, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When 2 million of your people are starving and on the edge of famine, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When on social media or on your college campus or in your neighborhood or in your workplace, hatred against you, indifference to your suffering, grows on all sides and the people you thought were your friends say nothing, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When your government tells you that the path to your freedom is violence and you cannot be free until the other side is killed or removed, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile. When your government tells you the other side are animals that their little children are just terrorists in waiting, it's so easy for the awareness to go into exile.

And when the awareness of Gd's presence in all living things goes into exile, you may find yourself doing and saying and justifying terrible words and terrible actions. When the awareness is in exile, you might find yourself denying or justifying that two million people are starving when they're at the brink of famine. When that awareness goes into exile, it might seem reasonable to propose that the other side actually physically go into exile from their homeland. When that awareness is in exile, it might seem logical to refuse to consider a state for the other side ever, even if that would enable the return of your hostages after 100 days of captivity.

And you know that that awareness is far far in exile when you're the one taking the hostages, when you find yourself brutally and indiscriminately murdering and raping, when you create targets out of hospitals and relief shelters and use children as human shields. When you find yourself celebrating a massacre.

We are living in a moment when the awareness of Gd's presence in every living thing is indeed far away and in exile.

And the way to bring it back, the only way to bring it back, is to do what you both are urging us to do: to care. Moment by moment, day by day, wherever we live, with whatever power we have, to care about the problems of our world, to care enough to prevent the problems of our world, to care about the people those problems affect.

But won't it be too much, you might ask? Won't it be too much to care about the whole world? And here we come to the emotional part of the answer. Adam Grant wrote about this very question, the limits of caring, in the New York Times last week.

He wrote: "inaction isn't always caused by apathy. It can also be the product ...of what psychologists call [empathic distress](#): hurting for others while feeling unable to help."

Grant says that neuroscientists have discovered "that "compassion fatigue" is a misnomer. Caring itself is not costly. What drains people is not merely witnessing others' pain but feeling incapable of alleviating it. In times of sustained anguish, empathy is a recipe for more distress, and in some cases even [depression](#). What we need instead is compassion."

"Although they're often used interchangeably," Grant says "empathy and compassion [aren't the same](#). Empathy absorbs others' emotions as your own: "I'm hurting for you." Compassion focuses your action on [their emotions](#): "I see that you're hurting, and I'm here for you.""

It turns out that neuroscientists can see the difference in brain scans. When feeling empathy, our brains show that we ourselves are experiencing pain. And when people are in pain for someone else and can't help, they escape the pain by withdrawing. But when people focus not on sharing others' pain but on noting feelings and offering comfort, a different neural network lights up, one associated with affiliation and social connection, Grant says. Then, when you see others in pain, instead of getting overwhelmed and retreating, you feel motivated to reach out and help. And the caring doesn't hurt or exhaust you. Grant says that "a growing body of evidence suggests that compassion is healthier for you and kinder to others than empathy."

I'll admit that this is not easy or natural for me. Yesterday morning I spoke at a vigil at the UN marking the 100th day of captivity for the more than 100 Israeli hostages, and calling for their release. For 100 days they have been surviving in Hamas's tunnels, experiencing who knows what trauma, unsure whether they will live or die. One of the speakers at the rally was Hilla, a 13 year old girl who survived 50 days in captivity. For an hour after meeting her and hearing her speak, I found myself sick to my stomach, truly physically ill and unable to feel better. Her pain was in my body. I, like so many of us, have at times been immobilized, utterly overwhelmed by the horror and the suffering of this war. It feels like it's happening directly to us. But who does it serve to take the pain into our own bodies? How does it help?

Instead, I tried yesterday to remember that what happened to Hilla did not actually happen to me. Her pain is not my pain. I can care deeply, I can even care more effectively, and I can care longer term and more broadly, if I approach with compassion instead of empathy wherever and whenever I can. There is not an original word for empathy in Hebrew – empatia comes from other languages. But there is an original and very important Hebrew word for compassion. Rachamim, which comes from the word rechem, which means womb. It is a form of caring that recognizes our interconnectedness, our belonging to each other. It is also a name for Gd, HaRachaman. I think this shift from empathy to compassion might be an important part of the answer to how we can care more and better about the problems and people of our world.

This is the Shabbat of Martin Luther King Jr weekend. I feel fairly certain that Dr. King would want us to regain the awareness that Gd's presence lives in everything. That's what he dedicated his life to, after all. In his book *Why We Can't Wait*, he wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

We can do our part to bring this awareness out of exile. To know, to understand, to really see that Gd's presence lives in everything and

everyone, and from that awareness to care with compassion about the world, one person, one living being, at a time.

As you said Andy, “Getting people started is the hardest part. Once the ball gets rolling, once we’ve expanded our bubble to include the entire world, that’s when change starts to happen.”

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom.