

Rabbi Alexis Berk

Yom Kippur 5776

### Empathy Exam

Apparently, there is a lot of discussion in the Facebook community about the possibility of a “dislike” option in response to a post. Yikes.

It turns out, though, this might not be what you think. Mark Zuckerberg responded to the inquiry from Sayid in Cairo, who requested the dislike button, saying: “... it took us awhile to get here. Because you know, we didn’t want to just build a Dislike button ... But over the years of people asking for this, what we’ve ... come to understand is [that]... People aren’t looking for an ability to downvote other people’s posts. What they really want is to be able to express empathy. Not every moment is a good moment, right? And if you are sharing something that is sad, whether it’s something in current events ....that touches you or if a family member passed away, then it might not feel comfortable to Like that post.

... people want to be able to express that they understand and that they relate to you.  
... It’s surprisingly complicated to make an interaction that you want to be that simple.”<sup>1</sup>

Right. When people are frustrated or pained, thumbs up doesn’t really seem to capture it. Our son Ari suggests a “relate” button could fix the whole thing. Facebook empathy. For all the warnings and caveats I’ve offered over the years on the subject of social media, I actually have to feel that empathy is something that social media has cultivated. Support. Connection. We seek it with that little thumbs up – how many people like this picture of my kids? Do you understand how cute my kids are? Do you see it, too?

### **Empathy is the deepest form of connection that human beings can provide.**

This, I’ve come to believe. It is the most satisfying, most loving, most universally craved human yearning. First, a definition. Empathy: “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another...without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://techcrunch.com/2015/09/15/the-sorry-button/#.d2zn4h:3Sr6>

an [explicit](#) manner.”<sup>2</sup> It’s the ability to understand another person without her having to tell you. It’s simple, and yet it’s not. And, ultimately, it’s the entire message of this season. It’s the oxygen that breathes life into repentance, forgiveness, reflection and contemplation. It is the key ingredient. Without it, none of the other holy pursuits of this season – or life – are even possible.

And, failure of empathy is where so many things go wrong – in personal relationships, communally, globally. When you think about it, there are so many instances of this.

I took an actual college course during my undergrad years at UC San Diego called “Sexual Deviance” – that was the name of the thing. There was not terribly empathic talk of homosexuality; for example, it was called “deviance.” Also, the course included a visit from a cross dressing boxer (not the dog, the athlete); we unabashedly gawked. When Bruce Jenner started to grow his hair, there was snickering. When his Adam’s apple got shaved, there was wincing. A few surgeries later: he’s gonna be a woman! The tabloids made him a freak, and made millions. Then, Caitlyn Jenner was celebrated at the ESPY Awards, and she forced us look at her. She required our empathy with her vulnerability. In her speech that night, she said to us: “I know the people in this room have respect for hard work, for training, for going through something difficult to achieve the outcome that you desire. I trained hard, I competed hard, and for that, people respected me. But this transition has been harder on me than anything I could imagine. And that’s the case for so many others besides me. For that reason alone, trans people deserve something vital. They deserve your respect. [Applause.] And from that respect comes a more compassionate community, **a more empathetic society and a better world for all of us....**

[Jenner continues] So for the people out there wondering what all this is about — whether it’s about courage or controversy or publicity — well, I’ll tell you what it’s all about. ...It’s about all of us accepting one another. We are all different. That’s not a bad

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

thing, that's a good thing and while it may not be easy to get past the things you do not understand, I want to prove that it is absolutely possible if we only do it together"<sup>3</sup>

What "doing it together" requires is empathy. Inspiring. But, turn it one more notch and watch this public figure pining for acceptance admit she is actually a "traditionalist" and opposed gay marriage, until she was called on the hypocrisy of it all. We are all empathy deprived and wanting others to understand us. But, when it comes to offering empathy....it's tough. But, the stakes are high and very real. When we endeavor to understand one another emotionally, we create love. But, when we don't endeavor to understand one another emotionally, we create pain. It seems clear cut, but it turns out to be so demanding.

There are things we don't understand. Examples are everywhere, where failures of empathy breed the worst in humanity. I overheard this conversation on the very first day that the mayor called for the removal of the monuments. You've probably heard conversations like it. This is *my* history. White person #1 was raging about it, out loud (quite loud): "This is *my* city. Why don't you just rewrite *all* of history? Where ya' gonna stop?" But, then, wait for it, the white conversation partner to this first white person then piped in about how we don't really understand slavery, anyway – people think it's all bad. But, he said with an air of authority (his mom was a historian, he reported), slavery was not all bad. He bolstered his assertion with this analogy: "You know how when you buy a car, you take real good care of it? You know how you don't want it to get all messed up? People did that with their slaves, so they had good lives. They really did." I witnessed this conversation, and I said nothing. Because my innards had frozen, and my thoughts as well. I guess it needn't be pointed out what a grand scale failure of human empathy for slavery this car analogy is.

In mid-August, Pastor Shawn Anglim of First Grace United Methodist Church organized a true interfaith effort of empathy on this front. Over 100 clergy, I and all of the New Orleans congregational rabbis signed on to this statement of empathy: "As clergy leaders in the city of New Orleans, we have watched and listened intently to the ongoing conversations about the monuments to the Confederate States of America

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/16/watch-caitlyn-jenners-powerful-speech-at-espys/>

that dot our City's landscape. We also carry some of the weight of responsibility for the presence of these monuments, for we know that pastors...before us were key figures in seeking funding in the efforts to erect these very monuments.

For some, the confederate monuments are symbols of our history that ought to be preserved. For many others, these symbols are living reminders of slavery, our segregationist past and the still bleeding wound that is systemic racism.

As the spiritual leaders of New Orleans, we know the power of symbols, which is why we stand in support of their removal."<sup>4</sup> I admire Pastor Anglim, even though we've never met face to face. He hooked me with his email signature – under his name he includes this 14<sup>th</sup> century statement of empathy from the Christian mystics: "**... Do not assume that your experience is the norm for everyone else.**" Live by that, and a lot can go well. A lot.

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's former chief rabbi, [recently] wrote: "I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbor because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now."<sup>5</sup>

Many of you asked me on Rosh Hashanah, empathy dripping from every pore, what can we do about the refugee crisis? We see it, we get it, and we're ready. Several in this room literally emailed to ask me about housing a Syrian family. While our government is still hearing the pleas of organizations like HIAS who are working tirelessly to build the infrastructure and influence the decision makers, we see the people.

And, empathy rips us apart. It's almost too much, as one writer captures: "It is the children that catch us. Their eyes round, their faces tired or hidden behind a parent's legs. They are asleep on their parents' shoulders, they walk beside them or are strapped to their bellies, legs dangling, as their mothers or fathers stride ever forward. ...They have been trapped the entirety of their young lives, and now we watch them, by the hundreds, as

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<sup>4</sup> <http://nolaclergy.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://forward.com/opinion/320780/refugees-plight-is-personal-for-me-and-all-jews/>

they seek refuge. ....”<sup>6</sup> This rippling, ripping empathy will be the force for change. It always is. I wish I could tell you there is now a way to host a family, or fix the problem. For now, we manifest our empathy by maintaining our advocacy and waiting until we can open our homes along with our hearts. Maybe that day will come soon.

Author and actress Leslie Jamison wrote a book called *The Empathy Exams*. It is an account of her experience as a medical actor, paid to act out symptoms for medical students to diagnose. In this role, she learned a great deal about empathy, and she teaches: “Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see....Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries...

[Jamison explains] Empathy comes from the Greek {*empathia*}—*em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling) – a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person’s pain as you’d enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*”<sup>7</sup>

In 1995, pastor and marriage counselor Dr. Gary Chapman wrote a now famous book called *The Five Love Languages*. One review summarizes it best: “the main idea behind this book is that just as people have unique personality preferences, we all have unique preferences for what we find satisfying and motivating when it comes to love. Your love language is the way that you most feel loved and cared for. The problem is most people love how they want to be loved, and that doesn’t tend to align with how their partner wants to be loved. So, you have to learn to speak your partner’s love language.”<sup>8</sup> The five love languages usually resonate immediately as yours, or not yours. They are: Words of Affirmation; Physical Touch; Quality Time; Acts of Service; Gifts. Do you know which love you love most? Which is the least resonant to you? Sure you do.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*, p. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/Love-Languages-Secret-that-Lasts/dp/080241270X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1442519051&sr=8-1&keywords=the+five+love+languages](http://www.amazon.com/Love-Languages-Secret-that-Lasts/dp/080241270X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1442519051&sr=8-1&keywords=the+five+love+languages)

In this pivotal exploration of love, Chapman basically states that indeed, “love your neighbor as yourself” isn’t the best approach; but we should rather pursue something closer to “love the stranger, because you are a stranger.” We do things for others that we want done for ourselves. But, that doesn’t always feel like love to another.

A man who often comes looking for work in our neighborhood knocked at our door a few days ago. He was thirsty from his day and asked for water. I gave him a glass of water, a real big one, just like I like it when I’m feeling dehydrated – room temperature. He handed it back; “Do you have any cold water?” I went back to get him a big, icy water bottle. This would feel like torture for me to drink; it was just what he needed. I felt like a fool, like I had given him substandard water. There was no time to explain my mistaken attempt at empathy.

A Chasidic tale, recounted by the Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassover:

“A conversation I overheard between two villagers taught me how we must truly love our neighbor.

One said, Tell me, friend, do you love me?

The other replied: I love you deeply.

The first rejoined: Do you know, my friend, what gives me pain?

How can I know that?, demanded the other.

The first then said: if you don’t know what gives me pain, how can you say that you truly love me?”<sup>9</sup>

We have to figure out what the other person feels, wants, dreams. We have to understand why the other person hurts, grieves, worries. It is basic and essential empathy. Since that first publication, Chapman has authored (as the publishing world has demanded) *The Five Love Languages*...for children, for parents, for teenagers, for singles, a men’s edition, and even *The Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*. The bottom line: every age and stage can stand to learn about love through empathy.

So, today is a day for radical repentance. And, for what do we repent, at the heart of it all? For failures of empathy, global, communal, and personal. Any wrongdoing is fundamentally rooted in this one miss. The failure to travel to another person’s place and find out, what grows where you are? What are the laws?

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<sup>9</sup> Chaim Stern, *Day by Day*, p. 276.

Many of you have appreciated the texture and tone of our new *machzor* – the translations redolent with relevance, and rich with redemption. *Al Chet*, the prayerful litany of wrongdoing we recite in unison, has a way of touching us – and a way of avoiding us. Some of those sins may not feel like ours, but we are asked to stretch toward a greater empathy in this way.

In just a bit, we will recite a new translation for the *Al Chet*, which includes a specific repentance for failures of empathy. It goes like this:

“We focused inward, narrowing our vision;  
we were preoccupied with ourselves.  
We turned our backs on the poor and defenseless;  
We were contemptuous of the weak.  
We tolerated violence against children,  
Neglect of the old, exploitation of the innocent;  
we told ourselves there was nothing we could do.  
We wasted the resources of the earth;  
we denied our own responsibility and put it out of our minds.  
We kept silent when we should have spoken out...”<sup>10</sup>

At our 2:00pm study session we will explore some further inspiration and explication of empathy directly from the Torah portion we will hear in the afternoon service. We can all add our voices to this search. I very much look forward to talking with you all more about this. It’s that important.

At Touro Synagogue this year, some transition in our congregational family has asked from each of us a large measure of empathy. We have been compelled, as a community, to imagine that our own vantage point is not the only one. We have been required, in various ways to accept the possibility that the experience of another is not the same as our own. That our opinions or perspectives are justifiable, understandable, and real, *and* there are other opinions and perspectives as well. And, we’ve had the chance to love one another through that, in spite of our differences and because of them. This kind of empathy can be grueling. So much so that many humans just opt out of it. But, not

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<sup>10</sup> Mishkan Hanefesh, Yom Kippur, p. 305.

you. I've seen so much empathy this year. Here is what I know: it has been difficult. And beautiful.

I assure you – I speak on empathy today not as an exemplar of anything at all, but as a fellow seeker, opting in. Ideas for these High Holy Day explorations only come when there is an irritant in my own soul, a grain of sand that rubs, until perhaps, there may become a pearl that can be worn as an amulet of our strivings.

**Empathy is the deepest form of connection that human beings can provide.** This, I've come to believe. It is the most satisfying, most loving, most universally craved human yearning. I pray with a full heart that we all strive greatly for an empathy that breeds love – in our relationships, our community, and our world. We are all strange strangers on some level. And, we have it in us to understand that – and find love for it.

May it be God's will, and our own.