

Walk a Mile in My Shoes
SERMON KOL NIDRE 5778 – 2017
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Well here we are on Yom Kippur eve, Kol Nidre, the most solemn day in the whole Jewish calendar. So, I want to begin this evening by invoking the King. No, not the King of Kings, but rather the King of Rock and Roll. And I'm going to ask you to help me out, by clapping along with me, and singing too if you know the words:

*If I could be you, if you could be me for just one hour
If we could find a way to get inside each other's mind
If you could see you through my eyes instead of your ego
I believe you'd be, I believe you'd be surprised to see that you've been blind*

*Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
Yeah, before you abuse, criticize, and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes*

*Now if we spend the day throwing stones at one another
'Cause I don't think 'cause I don't think or wear my hair same way you do
O well I may be common people but I'm your brother
And when you strike out to try hurt me, it's a hurtin' you*

*Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
Yeah, before you abuse, criticize, and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes*

*Now there are people on reservations and out in the ghetto
And, brother, there, but for the grace of God go you and I
If I only had the wings of a little angel
Don't you know I'd fly - to the top of a mountain and then I'd cry, cry, cry?*

*Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
Yeah, before you abuse, criticize, and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes*

Sing it with me!

*Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
Yeah, before you abuse, criticize, and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes*

I've been humming that Elvis Presley song a lot lately, because after all, this day is all about shoes. What kind of shoes are you wearing today? Running shoes? Crocs? Dress shoes with a rubber sole? Probably not blue suede shoes. We don't wear leather-soled shoes on Yom Kippur because leather is understood by our sages as a sign of luxury and comfort. Our sages did not want us to get too comfortable in our own shoes. They wanted us to step outside our comfort zone, to get inside someone else's skin, their heart, their mind, to experience life through their eyes, to learn what it's like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. To experience empathy. Because only through the experience of empathy can we both change ourselves and change the world around us.

Let me share with you a story about such a change. In 2012, Csanad Szegedi was poised to lead Jobbik, an ultra-nationalist neo-Nazi, racist, anti-Semitic political party in Hungary that garnered 20% of the vote in 2014. Jobbik consistently accuses the Jews of being at the center of a cabal of western economic interests seeking world domination.

The opposition research from Szegedi's rivals revealed the surprising news that Szegedi's maternal grandmother and grandfather were Auschwitz survivors. It was true. When his mother was fourteen, her father told her the secret but insisted that she never reveal it to anyone. And she didn't, not even to Szegedi, who was shocked by the news.

When Szegedi first admitted the truth about his Jewish ancestry, one party leader urged him to shoot himself. Another urged him to make a public apology. It was this comment that made him say, "Wait a minute, I am supposed to apologize for the fact that my family was killed at Auschwitz?" When he stepped out of his comfort zone and gave a speech in support of Israel, skinheads and neo-Nazis showed up at his home chanting "Death to the Jews." He was forced to experience what Hungarian Jews had experienced at the hands of his Jobbik party, at his hands as a Jobbik leader. This changed him forever. In response, he devoted himself to defending human rights. He says, "I am aware of my responsibility and I know I will have to make it right in the future."

Having learned the truth about himself, he resigned from the party, went to visit a local rabbi, studied Torah and underwent circumcision. Dovid, as he is now known, became a religious Jew, keeping kosher and observing Shabbat, studying Torah and Talmud and davening regularly. And this fall he made aliyah to Israel.

Walk a mile in my shoes.

Szegedi had radical empathy forced upon him by circumstance. But empathy can be a force in our more mundane everyday lives as well.

Let me give you a simple example. It happened once that a young girl's friend lost her favorite doll which she'd brought over to play with. She was heartbroken. She sat on the steps and began to cry. When the first little girl's mother came outside to check on the girls, she found

them both sitting on the step sobbing. She asked what was wrong, and her daughter told her through her tears that her little friend, Suzie had lost her favorite doll. The mother looked puzzled for a bit, then asked her daughter, “did you lose your doll too?” “No”, the daughter sobbed. “Then what’s wrong with you?” asked the mother, “Nothing” she sobbed. “I’m just helping Suzie cry.”

Helping Suzie cry. You see, that’s what real empathy is. Empathy is feeling what another person is feeling. It is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings, their experiences, their perspectives, the way they see the world, and using that understanding to guide your own actions.

Walk a mile in my shoes.

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is when I feel *for* you. Empathy is when I feel *with* you. Sympathy is when say “I know you are hurting.” Empathy is when I endeavor to feel and understand your hurt from your perspective. When I hurt with you.

Imagine that someone has fallen in a deep dark hole in their lives. And they shout out “I’m stuck, it’s dark, and I’m overwhelmed.” Sympathy is when you look over the edge of that hole and you look over the edge of that hole, and you wave down there and you say, “Wow. That looks really bad.” Empathy is when you climb down *into* the hole. You stand with them, and you say: Hey, I know what it’s like down here. I’ve been down here. You’re not alone.”

Moses climbed down in that hole. The midrash tells us that Moses among the slaves in the field and put his shoulder to the grindstone. He felt others' pain as his own, and helped alleviate their burden.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great 19th century founder of the Mussar movement, also climbed down into that hole. The Jewish community of Kovno operated a homeless shelter which fell into disrepair. Despite various appeals, the community failed to fix the facility. So what did Rabbi Israel Salant do? He went to sleep in the broken-down shelter. And he vowed to continue doing so until proper repairs were made.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, taught that a tzaddik – a righteous person – must go down into Gehenna – to Hell – himself to be able to raise up souls. Not to sin with them. Not to castigate them. But to be with them empathetically and experience their pain. If you cannot experience someone’s pain, if you cannot identify with them, you cannot help lift them up.

Walk a mile in my shoes.

The amazing thing is that we are hard-wired for empathy. Scientists have discovered that some 20% of the neurons in our brain are what they call “mirror neurons.” These “mirror neurons” fire when we see someone else doing or feeling something, and they allow us to participate with them in a kind of virtual reality. You’ve all experienced it: When you see a scary scene in a

movie, and you jump just as the actor who is scared jumps. When you are with someone who is experiencing pain and you wince. When you see a face that looks sad and it makes you feel sad. That's our "mirror neurons." It's as if the barriers between us dissolve, as if our minds and our bodies become one.

That's what eastern religions teach, and that's what Judaism teaches as well. Kabbalah – Jewish mysticism – tells us that all the distinctions between us are illusory, that in truth we are all part of one unity. You and I, the chairs on which you sit, the trees and grass outside these windows and the air we breathe are all a part of the flow of God's energy and spirit. That's the meaning of the Shema. Not just that there is one God, but that God is the singularity of the universe, that everything is contained and unified within God's spirit, forever connected. To understand this is to understand the true meaning of empathy. It is the God-given ability to dissolve the barriers between us and become one with each other.

Empathy enables us to feel connected to and supported by others. It is a cornerstone of our emotional intelligence, contributing to both our humility and our self-esteem. It opens our minds to new landscapes and challenges us to grow in new directions. It should come as no surprise then that empathy contributes to our emotional wellbeing and our happiness.

Philosopher Mary Gordon points out that at the Nuremberg trials, one of the judges pointed to the war crimes of the Holocaust as a "failure of empathy." She goes on to say that "Empathy is integral to solving conflict in the family, schoolyard, boardroom and war room. The ability to take the perspective of another person, to identify commonalities through our shared feelings, is the best peace pill we have."

Walk a mile in my shoes.

And yet it seems that lately we have lost touch with this unique gift that God has given us. Instead of breaking down barriers we seem to build them up, drawing ever more distinctions between "us" and "them." We live in a world marked by a hostile disregard for the 'other' whether that 'other' is someone of a different race, religion, gender, orientation, or political persuasion, or a different segment of society. We especially seem to demonize those who hold different opinions from our own.

Indeed, we suffer from an empathy deficit. Studies show that empathy levels in this country have dropped by nearly 50% in the last three decades. The most dramatic drop has been in the last ten years. Why is that?

First, we must acknowledge that feeling empathy is hard for us because it requires us to feel vulnerable and out of control. Feeling someone else's pain may open up wounds of our own that we have managed to suppress and feeling emotions we may not want to feel. Looking at things from another person's perspective may challenge our own beliefs and assumptions.

We also suffer from an increasing focus on ourselves. The 90's was the "me" generation. The millennial decade has been the "I" generation. For decades, our psychologists have told us that if we want to solve our problems and to feel contentment in life we should look *inside* ourselves to resolve our issues, instead of telling us to look *outside* at the world and those around us. You don't believe me? Just go to the bookstore and see how large the "Self-Help" section is. Then do me a favor. Go find the section labeled "Helping Others." Of course, you won't find it.

Some of this decline in empathy is also from compassion fatigue. We are flooded daily with news of catastrophes so overwhelming and so frequent as to make us numb: Harvey, Irma, Jose and Maria, the tsunami in Asia, the earthquake in Mexico, refugees from Syria, the genocide of the Rohingya, terror attacks in Israel... it's just more than we can absorb.

Some of this decline in empathy may be technology itself making us less empathetic. Not just being on our computers, tablets and phones all the time, but technology's very presence in our lives. Did you know that studies show that if there is a phone just sitting, turned off, on the table between two people, those people listen less to each other? Isn't that fascinating?

Our resistance to empathy also comes from being in a state of denial. Perhaps we feel shame or guilt that by contrast, we live such privileged lives. Perhaps we turn away because we don't want to admit that we might be somehow responsible. So we tell ourselves that our actions won't really change anything.

And if we are honest, some of our resistance to empathy comes as well from our own prejudices that make it difficult for us to appreciate the humanity and uniqueness of other people's personal stories.

Walk a mile in my shoes.

So how do we regain our ability to empathize?

It starts with the most basic tool: listening. Really listening. What is commonly called "active" or "empathetic" listening. That means that when you speak, I am fully focused on being present with you rather than caught in my own reaction or preparing my response. This is an exercise that I make every couple practice in the months before their wedding. I see some of you in the sanctuary tonight. You can vouch for this! Listen to your partner and then repeat back to them exactly what you believe you heard, without commentary or response. Check in with them: did I hear you correctly? Only once they confirm you heard them fully and correctly do you respond.

Couples are surprised how often they don't hear each other correctly. And couples find this exercise terribly awkward at first, But those who persist find it becomes natural, a part of their everyday life and relationship. And do you know what? Studies show that active listening increases the chances of a marriage's success. And it's not just for our personal relationships.

One recent study showed that when corporate management and unions used empathetic, active listening, the time it took to negotiate a contract was reduced by 50%. In his famous treatise I and Thou, Martin Buber taught that we can become fully human only when we have “genuine conversations” that try look at the world through the other person’s eyes and to comprehend their thoughts and feelings. In that book he described what that process was like for him. He wrote: “I imagine to myself what another man is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking. . . .” He went on to write that the “inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man’s relation to himself, but in the relation between one and the other, between men.” It’s only in that dialogue – in the listening – that we can discover each other.

A second tool in regaining empathy is to humanize those hidden individuals in our lives, those that we benefit from but we take for granted. Commentator Karen Armstrong suggests we try this exercise:

“When you get up in the morning, remember those who planted, picked and spun the cotton of your sheets and who collected, treated and exported the beans you grind for your morning coffee. You enjoy their product,” she says, “so you have a responsibility for them, especially if they were working in poor conditions. As you set off to work, reflect on the thousands of workers and engineers who maintain the roads, cars, railways, planes, trains and underground transport on which you rely. Continue this exercise throughout the day.”

A third tool to help us regain empathy is what one social philosopher calls “the character game.” When you see someone who you might treat as other, someone who is different than you, try instead to imagine them in a more human guise. When you see someone on the street who you think looks dangerous, looks different, makes you uncomfortable, or just seems worth your time and concern, try to imagine him playing hide and seek with his child or singing to her elderly mother to cheer her up. In this way you can give people a human face, break through our stereotyped views of them, and open us to new opportunities for connection and conversation.

Finally, we have to be willing to set down our worldview for a moment and put on someone else’s glasses. We must allow ourselves to see the world through *their* eyes, to experience what *they* experience, to feel what *they* feel, to know *their* truth, and to understand that their truth – whether we agree with it or not, whether we like it or not – exists in the world beside our truth, and that we have to support them in it.

If we want to regain our sense of connection to each other, if we want to heal as individuals and as a society, this is where it all begins: We must learn to walk a mile in each other’s shoes. To learn to humanize the other. To have genuine conversations in which we seek to see the world from their perspective. To understand and accept without judgement what someone else is feeling and be able to be with them in their pain. To let down our guard and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to be changed by those around us. To break down the illusory barriers that we

think divide us and see how much we share in common and how good it feels to be in one unity.

This is the meaning of the words that we sing so often that come from our sacred texts:

Hinei ma-tov u-mah na'im shevet achim gam yachad.

“Behold, how good it is when we – brothers and sisters, the children of the One God – can dwell together in unity.

So this Yom Kippur, we know what we need to do. Sing it with me one last time:

Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
Yeah, before you abuse, criticize and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes

May we all learn to walk a mile in each other's shoes every day. Amen.