

When I was eleven years old, my mother died. She had breast cancer, it was too late for surgery, and no other treatments existed then. She was sick for two years and I was always told she had “back problems.” I never learned she was going to die until, literally, the morning of the day she passed away.

It was a seminal experience. It shaped my adolescence and continues to shape my adulthood in ways I continue to discover.

Every once in a while, I meet someone else to whom this happened. Invariably, we look at each other for a long moment and then one of us says to the other, “you understand.” With nothing more than this simple piece of knowledge, with no further words said, I know that person and they know me.

A few weeks ago, a Temple member asked me to officiate at the funeral of her aunt. Before the service, I visited with the aunt’s daughter. In passing, she made a reference to herself in which she noted that she is 59 years old, and that her father had passed away many years ago. At the graveside, I saw her father’s marker. I read the information inscribed upon it.

After the service, I asked the daughter, “when is your birthday?” She told me. I told her that she and I had been born within weeks of each other, and that her father and my mother had passed away within weeks of each other. We paused. She commented, “We know a lot about each other, don’t we.” I said, “yes.”

There is a word for this. It is not sympathy. We did not feel sympathy for one another. The word is empathy. We could genuinely see the world through the other’s eyes. We could genuinely feel what the other felt.

Empathy pops up in the strangest places. In my mid-20s I had a girlfriend named Cindy. Cindy was a fine young woman with many sterling qualities. Alas, an appreciation of classical music was not among them, but she understood that classical music was part of the total package.

An evening at Carnegie Hall. The piece de resistance of the program was Beethoven’s first piano concerto. I sat between Cindy and a woman about our age, there by herself. The three of us chatted before the concert and it was clear that she, too, especially looked forward to the Beethoven.

The concerto began. At a particularly moving passage I began to swoon, and as we reached the apex, the ne plus ultra moment of ultimate poignancy...involuntarily, I sighed aloud. And at exactly the same moment, so did the woman next to me. After the concert Cindy asked me, “are you sure you never met her before?”

No. But that woman and I, we knew one another. Whatever it was about our internal wiring, our background, our psychology, our aesthetics, whatever.... A pristine musical moment

evoked from us precisely the same response. Because of that one moment, I knew, and that woman knew, that she and I understood a good deal about each other.

A few days ago, the New York Times carried a column by a deaf woman recalling a long ago lunch. "...she was one of those rare friends who started learning sign language solely to communicate with me. That day over lunch we forfeited spoken English and practiced conversing with our hands and our facial expressions. I felt a touch of exhilaration; she was relinquishing her conventional, hearing world and coming to meet me in my visual world.

After a few minutes, my usually bold, un-self-conscious friend stopped. She chuckled and shrugged a little, and said, "I feel like everyone here is *looking at us*."

I glanced around the small café. This was stuff I'd long ago stopped even noticing. "Yeah," I signed back, bluntly. "That often happens."

My friend smiled. They were looking at her, too. She understood. *This* is what it's like to occupy a deaf body.

Empathy: "the experience of understanding another person's condition from their perspective." You place yourself in their shoes and feel what they feel. It's not a difficult concept. Even a child can get it.

I explain it to Bar and Bat Mitzvah students this way.

Moses was a pretty patient guy. The Israelites whined and complained, even after he brought the Ten Plagues, even after he parted the Red Sea, even after he provided water in the desert, even after he caused manna to grow...whine, whine, whine. If Moses had run away after three days on the job, who'd have blamed him?

So why didn't he? Moses understood. He had empathy. He knew this because, while not a slave, he had been there. The trauma of 400 years in Egypt would not so quickly dissipate. He lived it. He felt what his people felt.

I ask a student, let's call her Jessica, to give me the name of a good friend. "Rachel," she says. "Okay," I say. Imagine that you run into Rachel on your way into school in the morning. You say, "Good morning Rachel." Rachel just sneers at you and walks off. I ask Jessica, what do you think of Rachel's behavior? Jessica responds, she's not being nice. I ask, why is she not being nice? Jessica says, she's just a jerk.

Then I ask, are there other reasons she might be acting that way?

Jessica looks at me. We think together. I suggest, maybe Rachel is upset because she forgot her homework or she forgot to study for a test. The light goes on. Jessica says, oh, maybe she had a fight with her mother that morning, or her dog was missing. That's why she was upset.

Now it's a different conversation. Jessica sees that there are many reasons why Rachel might have been acting the way she was, and that as a friend, Jessica should react not with anger, but with kindness. And Jessica understands this because...she understands. She could so easily be the one who forgot to do her homework or study for a test or fought with her mother or worried about a lost dog. Now she sees Rachel's world, through Rachel's eyes.

The Torah teaches empathy. Repeatedly, the Torah commands us to love the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We were there. We understand. We know how it feels because that is something we have felt.

It's easy to feel empathy with someone who's suffered a loss that we've suffered, or who is passionate about music we love, who shares a stigma from which we suffer. But...when that's not the case?

A couple of years ago, a Temple group visited Israel. We were all adults so while we went to the Wall and ascended Masada, we also went places tourists often don't go.

One morning, we visited Hebron. Hebron is a sacred, ancient city in the West Bank, twenty miles south of Jerusalem. It is rich with Christian, Muslim, and of course, Jewish history. We came to the center of the city to visit, Machpelah, the tomb where, our tradition teaches, the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried.

Hebron feels strange. Eerie. A few hundred ultra-Orthodox Jews live in a concentrated compound of nice buildings in the middle of the city, surrounded by over one hundred thousand Arabs whose buildings are not anywhere near as nice. The Jewish compound is surrounded by soldiers, and walls, and barbed wire.

Many blocks in the middle of the city are abandoned, desolate, and walking them is like being on another planet. This area once bustled with shops and cafes and life and now...silence. I know the history, I know about 1967, but...I began to think less about how the situation arose, and more about what it is like now. Hebron is a sad place. Those on the other side of the barbed wire look angry.

There was this one boy...staring at us. He was maybe nine or ten years old. There was some curiosity on his face. But there was a lot more of what I can only call repulsion. We were foreigners, and since we were walking with soldiers, we were probably Jews.

I looked at him and I thought, "he hates me. He really hates me." And at that moment I didn't think about who is right or who is wrong, or who is at fault and who is complicit. I was a nine year old boy, my whole life in that wretched place, seeing everything through his eyes. I thought to myself, "he hates me. And if I were him, I would probably hate me, too."

In several places we read that we are to love the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. But one such verse says it a little differently. Deuteronomy 23:8. You should not hate the Egyptian, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

We should not hate the Egyptian? After what he did to us? Maybe it's about reconciliation. But...we should not hate the Egyptian, because we were strangers in Egypt? That makes no sense.

Donald Trump has stormed through America like Sherman through Georgia. No one expected it, no one believed it would last, today there is hardly a journalist or columnist who does not have egg on his or her face.

A couple of months ago, close friends visited us at our Adirondacks cabin. One was Mary Beth, an accomplished individual who graduated from Georgetown Law School, an attorney for many years with a major Washington law firm and a writer of some renown. She wasn't the person I expected to help me "get" a large part of the Trump phenomenon.

I mentioned Mary Beth went to Georgetown Law School, which we've all heard of, but she first attended West Virginia Wesleyan College, which few if any of us have heard of. Why there? A very nice scholarship. Mary Beth was from a working class ethnic Polish family in Buffalo. Her father, a machinist, made blood sausage in a shed in the back yard. She was the first member of her family to attend college, let alone law school at Georgetown. Yes, she lives in the People's Republic of Montclair so she's a liberal like the rest of us, only her background is a bit different.

One afternoon on the porch, Mary Beth took off. It was a sight to behold, and I got it down.

My mom and probably all of my three siblings are going to vote for Trump in the fall, and I hate that they're going to do that. But in their anger I hear feelings that resonate with me nonetheless. These are people that have been lied to for decades by politicians of every ilk, and now the lies came home to roost and they are MAD.

I hear Democrats and Republicans touting the value of free trade, and I see the enormous dead expense of the Bethlehem Steel Plant hulking on the waterfront of my wretched hometown. The plant that for generations provided work and a truly good middle class existence for my high school friends' fathers, and their grandfathers, and their great-grandfathers. Not a sophisticated life, but a comfortable one, where your wife could stay home with the kids and you could have a big old American car and maybe a little boat, and a vacation every year at a campground by the lake.

But when politicians in Washington were making sure that pharma companies got their patents protected, and auto companies got their emission standards lowered, and corporate farmers got their sugar covered, who was making sure that the billions of Mexicans and Chinese and Filipinos were going to be making a living wage and working

in clean and safe factories so that all those jobs that American workers did wouldn't migrate out of the country for cheaper labor? No one, that's who.

And when those American workers got laid off and their factories closed and their towns and their schools, starved of tax dollars, shriveled up and died, who made sure those workers got the education and retraining they needed to be part of our new global economy? No one. And it's bad enough that your comfortable middle class life shriveled up and died on you. And now you see that your children aren't going to even have a shot at the kind of life you once had.

People like Mary Beth's family are angry at people like me. And I understand. I come from a place of privilege. My parents were educated and had the money to ensure I became educated, too. My children were raised in a home and in a community and in a milieu that ensures they will basically have to screw up not to achieve at least some success.

Do I have anything to apologize for? No. Do Mary Beth's family members bear some responsibility themselves? Absolutely. But these passionate words got inside me. They reminded me. I, too, was once a stranger in Egypt. If I were one of Mary Beth's relatives, I'd probably be angry at me, too.

Empathy with those with whom we share things is no great feat. Empathy with those with whom we violently disagree can change the world. When disagreement exists but the foundation beneath is one of understanding...hope is no longer a fantasy.

A psychiatrist friend told me recently that a key part of his training involved learning empathy, and learning to employ it in therapy. It is common sense. The patient will respond if the therapist employs the right techniques, but when patient knows the therapist genuinely cares about him or her, the therapeutic process achieves a far greater height.

I've discovered something similar in my own career. I can aspire to the loftiest ambitions of the rabbinate – oratory that spellbinds, scholarship that amazes, leadership that inspires. But none of that matters if I don't "get" you. Many members of this congregation are cherished friends with whom I disagree, sometimes seriously, about politics, about the world, even about religion. But when empathy is there, it doesn't matter. Somehow...it works.

Empathy can be learned. By anyone. If one wants to.

The world is a scary place right now. We are all scared. But what scares me more than anything is the lack of empathy that seems to surround us. The inability to see, even to glimpse, the world through another's eyes.

"You should not hate the Egyptian, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." We should love those with whom we agree; we should battle fiercely to love even more, those with whom we disagree.

To have empathy does not mean to adopt the other's sense of right and wrong. That little boy in Hebron did not cause me to rethink my position on the Middle East. While I heard the pain in the voices of Mary Beth's family I am not voting for Donald Trump. But they both intensify my resolve, always, to reach out, with love, respect and resolution, to find common ground on which to build.

When I was eleven years old, my mother died. Once in a while, I meet someone else to whom this happened. Invariably, we look at each other for a long moment and then one of us says to the other, "you understand."

To say to that individual, "you understand," is easy. But how lovely to live in world where there is not a single person to whom we not could say that. We may not agree. We may view the world differently. But if our ancestors could come to love the Egyptians, is there anyone whom we could not come to love. Shana tova.