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Tender Hearts, Clear Minds

Shanah tovah.

Earlier this summer, I spent a week serving on faculty at Camp Kalsman, as I do each year. This time, I was assigned to work with the high schoolers. One of the programs I led was called “The World We Build,” and I began with what seemed like a simple exercise.

Around the outdoor Beit Tefillah, I had posted signs naming different values: Justice. Compassion. Truth. Freedom. Kindness. Responsibility. Forgiveness. Equality. Safety. Loyalty. Privacy.

I asked the campers to stand beside the value they believed a healthy community needed most. The majority of the campers gravitated toward compassion.

Then I made it harder.

I asked them to explain why their value should take precedence over the others. Almost immediately, their certainty began to fade. A few campers moved from one sign to another. Others began qualifying their answers. Finally, one camper raised a hand and said:

“Rabbi, I guess…it depends.”

Exactly. It depends.

Those two words may be among the most Jewish words ever spoken. Judaism has never assumed that life’s most important questions have easy answers. It has never imagined that one value always outweighs every other value. Instead, our tradition assumes that good values often pull us in different directions.

Justice and compassion sometimes compete. Freedom and safety do not always point the same way. Kindness and accountability, love and discipline, loyalty and honesty all have to be held in balance.

Jewish wisdom lies in learning how to weigh them. That is one reason the Talmud is thousands of pages long.

One of the Talmud's most famous teachings declares, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*—"These and those are the words of the living God."[1] Imagine that. Two opposing opinions can each illuminate part of the truth. Judaism is less interested in eliminating tension than in teaching us how to inhabit it faithfully. That kind of thinking requires patience and a willingness to live without immediate resolution.

Our hardest moral questions cannot be answered in ten seconds. But our world does not always reward that patience. It often rewards something else: speed, confidence, and instant moral certainty.

We are living in an age of extraordinarily quick moral reflexes. Something happens somewhere in the world—a war begins, a court hands down a decision, a public figure says something offensive, a video goes viral—and almost immediately we are expected to have a response. Organizations release statements. Universities send emails. Companies change their logos. People post on social media. Silence itself can begin to feel like a statement.

Sometimes, before all the facts are known, we feel a quiet pressure to decide where we stand. To react. To speak. To demonstrate that we care.

And much of this comes from an admirable impulse. Many people genuinely want to alleviate suffering. Voices that were ignored for generations are finally being heard. People who once felt invisible are being seen. Our moral imagination has expanded. That expansion is worth celebrating, not dismissing.

Judaism recognizes the holiness of that impulse: the desire to see another person's pain and allow it to matter. Again and again, Torah directs our attention toward the vulnerable in our midst—the widow, the orphan, the stranger. We are told to love our neighbor, pursue justice, feed the hungry, and visit the sick. Compassion is not an optional extra in Judaism. It is at the heart of who we are.

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[1] Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b.

And yet, over the summer, I came across a provocative argument in a book called *Suicidal Empathy*.[2] Two questions have stayed with me: Can empathy, detached from reason, reciprocity, and concern for long-term consequences, sometimes lead us toward decisions that feel compassionate but ultimately fail to help? Can we become so committed to appearing caring that we stop asking whether our actions are just, effective, or sustainable?

What interested me even more was whether Judaism had already asked these questions. Had our tradition ever worried that the impulse to help, unguided by other values, could mislead us? As it turns out, our tradition has been wrestling with precisely that tension for thousands of years.

The Torah itself offers a striking example:

"You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your fellow fairly."[3]

The warning against favoring the rich makes perfect sense. Of course. We know how easily wealth and power can distort justice. But the other half of the warning is almost startling: "Do not favor the poor." Really? Isn't Judaism always telling us to care for the poor? Yes. Absolutely. But the courtroom is asking a different question.

Rashi imagines how a judge might rationalize doing exactly that: This person is poor, and the wealthy litigant is obligated to support him anyway. Why not rule in the poor person's favor and let him receive what he needs

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[2] Gad Saad is a Lebanese-born Canadian Jewish professor, evolutionary behavioral scientist, and public intellectual whose family fled antisemitism in Lebanon when he was a child. In *Suicidal Empathy: Dying to Be Kind* (2025), Saad argues that empathy, when severed from reason, evidence, reciprocity, and attention to consequences, can lead individuals and societies to embrace choices that feel compassionate in the moment but may ultimately cause harm. I find this central argument compelling and important, even as Saad's writing can at times be more combative—and less charitable toward those with whom he disagrees—than I would prefer. His argument nevertheless pushed me to think more carefully about the difference between compassion as an instinct and compassion as a moral practice shaped by judgment and discernment.

[3] Leviticus 19:15

without embarrassment? Or, in the other direction: This person is wealthy and powerful. How can I embarrass him publicly by ruling against him?[4]

Both instincts are understandable: concern for the poor person and deference to the powerful one. But the Torah says that neither may determine the verdict. You cannot perform one mitzvah by violating another. Justice cannot be achieved through injustice.

The Torah is not telling us to care less about the poor. It is telling us that compassion has a proper place—and that in the courtroom, it must not distort a fair judgment. Compassion cannot do all of our moral thinking for us. Justice requires discernment.

Maimonides develops a related idea in his famous discussion of the eight levels of tzedakah. He does more than tell us to give; he asks us to consider how we give. Intention, method, and human dignity matter. The highest form of tzedakah is helping someone become self-sufficient so that they no longer need charity.[5]

For Maimonides, what matters is not the intensity of the giver's feeling, but the dignity and long-term well-being of the person receiving. The issue is not simply, "How compassionate do I feel?" but, "What action will actually help another human being flourish?"

Judaism keeps moving us beyond instinct and toward wisdom. The Mussar tradition makes the same point through its treatment of our *middot*, our character traits. It asks us not merely to admire these qualities, but to cultivate them in proper measure. Otherwise, generosity can become enabling. Humility can become timidity. Patience can become passivity. Any virtue can become distorted when detached from the other qualities that ought to guide it. Even compassion. Especially compassion.

The point is not that we should care less deeply. It is that caring, by itself, is not always enough. Our concern for others must also take account of truth, consequences, and responsibility.

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[4] Rashi on Leviticus 19:15

[5] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Gifts to the Poor 10:7

The Kabbalistic map of the *sefirot* gives us a powerful image for this balance. The Kabbalists imagined God's presence flowing into the world through ten *sefirot*—ten divine qualities. You do not need to know all ten. The system gets complicated quickly, so I want to focus on only three.

On one side is *chesed,* often translated as lovingkindness: the expansive impulse to give, embrace, include, and love. On the other side is *gevurah*: strength, discipline, boundaries, restraint, and *din*—judgment.

For years, I assumed that the spiritual goal was to become more compassionate—to move even farther toward *chesed*. But that is not what the mystics taught. Neither side is higher. Neither side wins. A world governed only by *chesed* would have no boundaries, accountability, or justice. A world governed only by *gevurah* would have no warmth, forgiveness, or mercy.

So what sits between them? *Tiferet*. Beauty. Harmony. *Tiferet* is what happens when *chesed* and *gevurah* are held together—when love is tempered by restraint, and judgment is softened by tenderness.

The mystics often associated *Tiferet* with *rachamim*, compassion. But this is not the compassion I once imagined—the instinct to care more, give more, embrace more. *Rachamim* is compassion shaped by *gevurah*: a response that brings heart and mind together.

A heart that feels deeply. A mind that sees clearly.

Perhaps that is the spiritual goal: to become more mature in our compassion—to become the kind of person in whom care and judgment have learned to live together.

I love this image because Judaism has never asked us to choose between caring deeply and thinking clearly. *Tiferet* is not compromise or splitting the difference. Nor does it mean that every issue has two equally valid sides; Judaism knows that some things are wrong. *Tiferet* means recognizing which values are truly in tension and refusing to erase one simply because the other is easier to see.

Once I began seeing this pattern—our tradition's insistence that good intentions be tested rather than simply trusted—I started noticing places in

my own rabbinate where I had confused a morally admirable impulse with a fully considered response.

The first example takes me back to the summer of 2020. Like so many of you, I watched the video of George Floyd's death with horror. Across the country, questions about race, policing, and justice had moved to the center of public conversation, and every organization seemed to be asked the same question: "What are you doing?"

I remember someone in the broader Bellingham Jewish community asking me what Congregation Beth Israel was specifically doing to be anti-racist. I pointed to our social justice book club, where we had been reading and discussing books[6] about race and racism, and to our Board's work drafting an anti-racism statement. He pushed further. "And what else are you doing?"

If I am being honest, the question caught me off guard. My first reaction was: We're doing a lot! We're educating ourselves. What more ought we to be doing? That racism itself was wrong was never in question. If every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, then racism is antithetical to Jewish values. What I was less certain about was what that conviction required of us as a Jewish community.

I felt pressure to keep pace with other organizations—to prove that we understood the moment and were responding correctly. There was an expectation that congregations like ours should respond quickly and publicly. But I had not really stopped to ask what our tradition was asking of us.

Looking back, I do not wish I had reacted more quickly. I wish I had answered more Jewishly. I wish I had begun not with what others expected us to say, but with what our tradition required of us.

A second example is our congregation's participation in the Bellingham Pride Parade. I am proud that we march; in fact, I first suggested that we

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[6] Among the books we read and discussed were James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*; Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*; and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.*

do so during my first year here. That same year, when marriage equality was being debated in Washington, I asked our Board to place signs supporting it outside our old synagogue. The Board was not convinced. Some worried that we would alienate members. Others thought the synagogue should not get embroiled in politics.

I now realize that part of my motivation was to make sure the broader community knew what Congregation Beth Israel stood for. I wanted outsiders to know that we were like the other liberal houses of worship in town. And I did not spend enough time considering that other members of our own congregation might understand the issue differently—or that I had too quickly assumed what our communal position ought to be.

Today, I still want us to march. But I think about it differently. I want us to march because there may be a member of our own congregation who needs to know that their Jewish community sees them, loves them, and walks beside them.

The action is the same. But the reasoning has changed. One asks: “What will people think about us?” The other asks: “What do we owe the people entrusted to our care?” That is a profoundly different—and deeply Jewish—question.

One final example. Several years ago, our Board spent a surprising amount of time crafting a land acknowledgment statement. We debated every word, wanting it to be thoughtful, respectful, and accurate. After all that work, we hardly ever used it. That raised an uncomfortable question for me: Were we more interested in composing a statement than living out its implications?

Judaism has always been suspicious of words that are not followed by action. If acknowledging the history of this land deepens our gratitude, builds genuine relationships with our Indigenous neighbors, or calls us toward greater responsibility, then it serves a worthy purpose. But if our primary motivation is that respectable institutions are expected to have a land acknowledgment, then perhaps we have confused appearing thoughtful with doing the slower, harder work that genuine responsibility requires.

There is a modern phrase for what I have sometimes caught myself doing: virtue signaling. I have come to believe that there is something deeply un-Jewish about it—not because Judaism asks us to hide our values, but because displaying our goodness should never be the goal.

What matters is not whether other people can see how enlightened we are. What matters is whether we are actually doing what is right.

And in each of these moments, the deeper challenge was the same: not "What position should a Jew take?" but "How does Judaism teach us to approach a complicated moral issue?"

One of the great temptations of our age is to believe that every important question has an obvious answer. That every moral issue has only one value at stake. That if we simply care enough, the proper path will become clear.

Judaism says something more demanding and, I think, more hopeful. Life is complicated. Good values collide. Good people can disagree. And the work of a lifetime is learning to weigh those values with wisdom, humility, and integrity.

Sometimes a public statement is important. Sometimes speaking is necessary. Sometimes silence can cause real harm. But before Judaism asks whether we have spoken, it demands something first: that we think, learn, listen, and wrestle.

Have we allowed the accumulated wisdom of our tradition to challenge our first instincts before announcing our conclusions?

Judaism is less interested in helping us prove to the world that we are good people than in helping us become good people. Those are not the same thing. One is about appearance. The other is about character. One asks, "How will others see me?" The other asks, "Who am I becoming?" Those questions often lead us in the same direction. But not always.

So perhaps the questions we need to learn to ask are these: What is actually true? What action will genuinely help? What values are in tension? What might I be missing? What does my tradition ask of me? What obligations follow?

That is a deeply Jewish way of moving through the world. Judaism wants us to cultivate hearts capable of deep compassion. But it also insists that our care for others be shaped by humility, study, and a willingness to question our first instincts. Not to become people who feel less deeply. And not to become people who judge more harshly. But to become people whose compassion is deepened by understanding. Whose convictions are refined by study. Whose instincts are tempered by humility. Whose first response is neither outrage nor applause, but curiosity.

The shofar we hear today will not tell us what position to take on the issues that will dominate the headlines next week or next month. It will not tell us what to post on social media, what statement to issue, or what slogan to repeat. What it asks of us is something more demanding. It asks us to resist easy certainty. To think more deeply. To hold competing values long enough for a more considered response to emerge.

In other words, to become the kind of people who instinctively pause before saying, “I know exactly what this means,” and instead remember what those teenagers at Camp Kalsman discovered: sometimes the most honest Jewish response begins with, “It depends.”

The shofar calls us awake: awake to ourselves, awake to one another, awake to the extraordinary wisdom we have inherited—a tradition that has never promised easy answers, but has always offered us something better: a way to seek them.

May this be the year that our hearts remain tender and our minds remain clear. A year in which we resist the seduction of easy certainty and embrace the harder work of thinking Jewishly. A year of growing toward *Tiferet*—where *chesed* and *gevurah*, love and judgment, meet in *rachamim*: compassion that feels deeply and sees clearly.

Shanah tovah.