

**Do Compassionate to Be Compassionate— The Lesson of the Mother Bird**

**Ki Teitze 5783**

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\*\*\*\*\*WARNING: This post discusses suicide\*\*\*\*\*

Last weekend, my family and I were in Chicago for a friend's bar mitzvah.

While we were there, on Sunday afternoon, an eighth-grade girl, who the kids we were with knew from school, committed suicide.

She jumped in front of a train—right there in Deerfield, where so many of our friends live and where Karen and I raised our children for eight years.

Lindsay remembered the girl from elementary school. Another friend knew her from Girl Scouts. She was their contemporary, a child. Just 13 years old.

As you can imagine, there was a lot of horrified and stunned chatter when we heard the news.

But one thing that struck me was that the kids and parents alike were, by and large, dumbstruck. Kind of like Aaron in the Torah, when his two sons are killed: "*Va-yidom Aharon*—Aaron was silent" (Lev. 10:3).

It felt like there was so much to talk about and yet so little to say.

What is there to say when a 13-year-old child takes her own life?

What is there to say when someone so young, for some reasons we might be able to imagine and others we cannot begin to know, feels like they can't go on anymore; feels so despondent that they choose to ride their bike to the train tracks they crossed probably hundreds of times in their peaceful and picturesque little suburb, and steps in front of an oncoming train?

We parents tried to talk to our kids about it. "You know that if you ever feel sad or depressed like that, you can always talk to us, right?" we said.

"Yes, we know," they said.

"How are you feeling about this?" we asked.

"We don't know what to feel," they said. "It's just weird."

What should we feel? What should we do?

The truth is: All of us—adults and kids alike—were at a loss.

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All week, I've been thinking about the girl's parents. What pain they must be experiencing, I cannot even imagine.

More than once I have pictured myself getting that news. Looking at my kids' pictures on my desk and in their bedrooms at home, the horrible thought runs through my mind.

It could be any of us getting that call.

I know some of you in our community have gotten that call—that your child has died.

Those of us who have not experienced it cannot know the anguish you have endured and continue to endure. Because the pain never leaves you. No matter how long it's been, it never goes away.

We cannot begin to understand what it takes to live with it, to live after losing a child.

The strength, the faith, the will, the courage.

You are heroic.

We cannot know your pain, but we can grieve alongside you and be present with you and offer our love and our caring and our friendship.

I hope we do that. In any case, I'm certain we can do it better than we are.

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As I've been thinking about this young girl's mother and father, something from this week's Torah portion came to my mind. It's a strange passage, but an important one:

If you come upon a bird's nest and want to take the eggs for yourself, says the Torah, you may do so—but only if you shoo away the mother bird first. (Deut. 22:6-7)

Such a random and arcane rule. You might wonder why we even bother reading it, let alone talk about it or study it.

But our tradition regards this commandment—number 545 of the 613—as one of the most important mitzvot there is.

Why?

Nachmanides, a leading sage of the Middle Ages, explains that every mitzvah in the Torah is there for a reason. And this one is here to teach us an important virtue: compassion.

Every living being, animal or human, feels a deep emotional attachment to their child—so deep that to see any harm come to their child will cause that parent severe and abiding pain.

Maybe in the time of the Torah, some people got eggs by taking them from a bird's nest. I don't know.

But in any case, the Torah understands that to take the eggs or the baby birds away from the nest while the mother bird is there to see it is incredibly cruel because it would cause her terrible anguish.

The requirement to shoo the mother away before taking the eggs is one of the ways God teaches us to empathize with other creatures and avoid causing them such pain.

If we become accustomed to showing such empathy and compassion to birds, then all the more so will we learn

to show empathy and compassion to our fellow human beings.

The mitzvot are not random, bizarre things we're supposed to do just because God or some old men from way back said so, even though they may appear that way.

The mitzvot are pathways to holiness, modes of instruction-through-practice. They're available to us as concrete actions we can do to become better, more virtuous human beings.

And when it comes to shooing away the mother bird, here's the Torah's theory: The best way to cultivate compassion in ourselves is simply to go ahead and do compassionate things for others: *g'milut chasadim*, in Hebrew.

As the Mussar scholar Alan Morinis explains, compassion is both a feeling and a way of acting. So even if we don't yet feel it—even when we don't know what to feel—going out there and just doing acts of compassion will help us become more compassionate people.

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As we approach the High Holy Days, I am confident that all of us can stand to become a little more compassionate.

Fortunately, Judaism gives us a lot of ways to do that by caring for others and helping them—and so does Temple Beth-El.

As I'm getting to know our community and the many different things we do here, I have had the great opportunity to learn about our *chesed* team.

The *chesed* team is a network of congregants who volunteer to help our members during times of need, times of sadness, and times of joy.

- They do things like deliver meals to fellow congregants when we're homebound, or sick, or when we've just lost a loved one.
- They help families with shiva arrangements when there's a funeral and call to check in on us when we're lonely.

We'd like our congregants to think of Temple Beth-El as an extended family who's there for each other.

We'd like to expand the ways our *chesed* team can offer support to our community. We'd like to strengthen the ways in which they already partner with the clergy to support and serve our congregants.

- We'd like to train a team of volunteers to do the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick.
- We'd like to grow our corps of volunteer shivah-minyan leaders, who can go to people's homes and lead a brief service and offer comfort to families who are in mourning.
- And I know we'd like to be a caring and supportive presence for people whose children are struggling, or are sick, or have died.

There's so much we can do to care for each other. But to do it, we need your help.

The work that our *chesed* team does is sacred work.

To get involved, all you need to do is reach out to Terri Levin or Randi Weiler or Debbie Bernstein, or to me or Cantor Adam. We can help you get plugged in in a way that feels right to you.

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When we are confronted with the suffering of others, we may find ourselves at a loss for words—feeling a mix of emotions but uncertain what to do with them.

But our response does not need to be like Aaron's. We do not need remain silent.

Alan Morinis writes, “[F]eelings...become worthy of the name compassion only when they are put into action. For our response to be truly compassionate, we must not just feel with another person but also try to act on their behalf.”

Doing acts of compassion for other people is the best way to become an even more compassionate and caring person.

Tonight, I'm thinking about the mother bird—and about the mother and father whose 13-year-old child felt she had no other option but to take her own life, and I'm thinking about the anguish they are surely experiencing right now, and I want to do something to help them.

I don't know what that is, but I know it's my responsibility to figure it out.