

Israelites and their suffering. When I am upset with my husband, it serves me well to pause and remember *our* covenant—the love and commitment that drew us together over 45 years ago. That relational covenant is the bedrock of our ongoing interactions. It rescues me from myself when I become impatient, judgmental, or angry. Remembering our early love and the covenant we created allows me to reach for my best self—at least some of the time.

With a higher consciousness, with *da'at*, we can come back to hearing and seeing in a new way. Just as God heard the Israelites cries and understood their deeper yearnings, so we can hear or see our partner's pain with empathy and compassion. We humans are social creatures; we need to “feel felt” by others, a term coined by psychiatrist Daniel Siegel. Darwin considered empathy the most important emotion, as it enables survival for social animals. We are wired to connect and to feel felt by others.

But if we did not experience empathy and attunement growing up; if, like Sarah and Daniel, we grew up in harsh environments where we did not feel felt, we might find it hard to master the skills of empathy. Empathy is natural, but it needs to be cultivated as well. In therapy, I often teach these empathy skills. I ask clients to do an exercise to set the stage for empathy. Try it now: First, sit with your fists clenched (you may clench your teeth for good measure). Get a read of how this feels in your body. Now, open your hands in an upturned, receptive position, resting them gently on your thighs. Let your jaw go slack, and take a few deep breaths. How does that feel? In this latter pose, which has been called an empathy posture, your entire body and mind are open and receptive, ready to receive what another may offer you; you are primed for compassion.

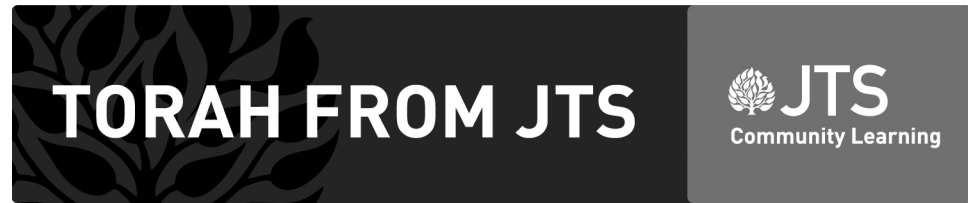
But how often do we take the time or have the presence to sit in this pose when our dear ones are hurting? Perhaps instead of making eye contact and offering gentle presence, we are distracted, texting, tweeting, emailing. Nothing is sadder than watching a couple out for dinner, each texting or emailing someone else on their smartphone. Or picture the mother, nursing her baby, looking at her smartphone instead of making eye contact with her baby. This is the world of distraction and fragmentation in which we live and in which we are raising our children.

Our Torah text suggests a different way, a path for connection: hearing, seeing, remembering, noticing. These processes can be challenging for us. Being mindful of how we perceive, remember, and think allows us to create the possibilities for relational transformation and redemption. May we have the courage to take a breath, connect with our higher self, and walk that path of connection and compassion.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold Hassenfeld [z"l].

learn.jtsa.edu

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit jtsa.edu/subscribe



Parashat Shemot 5775

פרשת שמות תשע"ה

Cultivating Compassion & Connection

Dr. Mona D. Fishbane, director, Couple Therapy Training Program, Chicago Center for Family Health, and JTS Rabbinic Training Institute faculty member

At the end of chapter two of Shemot, we find the Israelites groaning from their bondage in Egypt: their cry rose up to God. And, our text tells us, God heard their cry (*vayishma*), remembered the covenant (*vayizkor*), saw the children of Israel (*vayar*), and took notice or knew (*vayeda*). I want to explore with you the relational and ethical lessons we can learn from these verses in our own lives. In doing so, I am inspired by comments in the *Kedushat Levi*, the book written by the Hasidic Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. I am grateful to Jonathan Slater and his new book, *A Partner in Holiness*, for bringing the insights of the *Kedushat Levi* to my attention.

The *Kedushat Levi* suggests that God's “knowing” in this text involves a connection with the children of Israel, a connection that leads to compassion. The Berdichever associates *vayeda* with the relational intimacy of Adam knowing Eve. And through this connection, he says, God's anger turns into compassion. But the connection-compassion process is not God's alone; we humans play a role as well. Through prayer and thoughtful intention, we seek to connect with God, which evokes God's connection and compassion.

From this lofty scene, let's come down to earth and listen in on a fight in a kitchen in Anytown, USA. Sarah is screaming at her husband Daniel for not pulling his weight at home with the family. She says she can never count on him and all he thinks about is his work. Daniel offers an angry retort and storms out of the room, slamming the door behind him for good measure. This is not exactly a scene of connection or compassion.

How can our Torah text, and the *Kedushat Levi*'s observations on the delicate interplay between God and the Israelites around connection and compassion, help our hapless couple? I have some thoughts on the matter.

The key verbs in the Torah passage are heard, remembered, saw, knew. When it comes to human relationships, these verbs have multiple meanings. First, the verbs of perception: hearing and seeing. Hearing and seeing, it turns out, are selective. Imagine you're at a party with many conversations going on. While you are talking to one person, the rest of the talk is a blur to which you don't attend. But then someone in a nearby group of people mentions your name. Suddenly you hear what they're saying. It's relevant, and captures your attention.

Seeing is even more dramatic in its selective attention. Scientists have found that we see with our brain, not just with our eyes. We don't see what's "out there;" our brain fills in the gaps, and we often see what we expect to see. In a famous experiment called "Gorillas in our Midst," researchers asked subjects to watch a video in which people in white shirts and people in black shirts tossed a basketball. The task was to count the number of tosses made by the people in white shirts. During the video, a gorilla (actually, a woman dressed in a gorilla costume) walks across the scene. After the video, subjects are asked if they saw anything unusual. Did they see a gorilla? A third to half of the subjects did not see the gorilla. The experimenters call this "inattention blindness;" as they note, "without attention, visual features of our environment are not perceived at all."

We can see on automatic pilot, and often do. Or we can focus our attention, and see what may not be readily apparent. We can look beneath the surface and see more deeply. Daniel sees Sarah's anger; what he doesn't see is her pain, her exhaustion, her desire for him to connect more with her and the children. Granted, her form of delivery is not likely to evoke kindness and compassion. When Sarah screams at him, Daniel feels threatened. His fight-or-flight system is activated, and he responds with a little fight (a nasty retort) and a lot of flight (he disappears and sulks for hours). Sarah, for her part, only sees Daniel's selfishness, his unavailability. She doesn't see his stress from work or his anxiety as the primary provider for the family. Both Daniel and Sarah are reacting on automatic pilot. Neither is nurturing connection or compassion in this scene.

Our parashah offers examples of a different kind of seeing, a seeing of compassion and openness. Pharaoh's daughter sees baby Moshe in the Nile. She could easily have looked at him as yet another annoying Jewish baby thrown into the river, and good riddance. But instead, she sees a vulnerable baby, and takes compassion on him. And in the most dramatic scene of the parashah, Moshe sees the burning bush. Instead of running away in fear, Moshe deliberately turns to look at this marvel. It is his centeredness and his openness that allows him to see this amazing sight. Moshe's readiness to see prompts God's divine revelation to Moshe.

What if Daniel could look beneath the surface of Sarah's burning rage and be curious about her pain, ready to see her in her depth? What if he took compassion on her rather than recoiled from her? And what if Sarah could articulate her pain and needs in a way that evoked Daniel's empathy and compassion?

Sometimes the way we groan turns off the very people from whom we need compassion and care. Again, the Kedushat Levi offers us guidance on the interplay between the groaner and the recipient. He notes that the Israelites groaned out of their own pain. God, in hearing their cry, did them a double favor; he saved them from the Egyptians, and he heard their cries as if the Israelites were seeking to be closer to God. God looks beyond the surface,

hearing their yearning for connection underneath their groaning. The Israelites themselves, says the Berditchever, were constrained, in a narrow place, *bemeitzarim*, and so they could only cry out in raw pain. But God understood the deeper need for connection in their cry.

We, too, cry out in pain or rage or blame with our partner in an intimate relationship. Constrained in our own narrow places, we are unable to articulate our yearning for closeness, connection, and care. But the yearning is there, underneath the cries of pain and anger. Here is how Sue Johnson, a leading couple therapist, puts it in her book *Hold Me Tight*:

"Most [couple] fights are really *protests* over emotional disconnection. Underneath all the distress, partners are asking each other: *Can I count on you, depend on you? Are you there for me? Do I matter to you?* The anger, the criticism, the demands are really cries to their lovers, calls to stir their hearts, to draw their mates back in emotionally and reestablish a sense of safe connection."

In the biblical narrative, the people were unable to do anything other than groan and cry in pain. They were in *katnut*, a limited and self-referential state of mind. God had the higher consciousness, *gadlut*, and perceived the Israelites' yearning for connection underneath their anguished cries. Is it fair to ask Daniel to do this with Sarah? Should the onus be on him to perceive her deeper pain, vulnerability, and yearning to connect? Or should Sarah step up to the plate, calm herself down, and put forth her needs in a kinder and more mature manner? I think the answer is yes and yes. In a good marriage, we do need to self-regulate, put forward our concerns with what marriage researcher John Gottman calls a "soft startup," and reach out for our partner in a gentle manner instead of blaming or pushing away. At the same time, when our partner is upset and angry, an empathic hug can defuse the situation and help him or her calm down. Both partners bear responsibility for transforming a moment of pain into a moment of connection and care.

Let's come to the verb "remember" in our Torah text. Remembering is also complex. In our brains, we have two kinds of memory systems—implicit and explicit. Implicit memory, or emotional memory, often informs our current reactivity even if we don't consciously remember a past event that is triggering us now. Sarah's sense of being overburdened and abandoned by her husband triggers old memories from her childhood when she felt the same way. And Daniel's response to Sarah's angry criticism puts him back in his childhood, when his father would berate him for his mistakes. These implicit memories make it harder for this couple to come together in calm and compassion. Trauma and relational injuries can distort our perception of the present moment.

But explicit or conscious memory can elicit our higher values and goals. In our narrative, God remembers the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This remembering facilitates God's commitment to "know," to take notice of the