

## Rosh Hashana Morning

Saturday, 9/19/2010

Rabbi Jim Simon

### THE ENDURING VALUE OF EMPATHY

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world and on this day, we are to be grateful for this wonderful gift we have received from God.

Perhaps we should offer our own gift to God and the world, something that is uniquely Jewish and the something the world desperately needs. After all, this is what it Means to be "A Light unto the nations"— not that we have been given special power or status but rather, to offer to the world something that God has taught us is crucial to our own well-being as well as the well-being of others.

What can we give to ourselves and to a world where we continue to witness a disintegration of civility and courtesy, escalating violence in all forms, an onslaught of meanness in behavior and spirit, rampant selfishness, greed and narcissism? One of the things we can offer is empathy.

Dr. Daniel Goleman, the author of EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE-WHY IT CAN MATTER MORE than IQ, writes as follows- "Altruism, the desire to meet the needs of others, is an essential component of EMOTIONAL IQ. And the root of altruism can be found where we find empathy".

It is especially important we distinguish between empathy and sympathy. They are not synonyms. Sympathy is when we feel FOR someone, but we do not share what he or she is feeling. Empathy comes from the Latin Word *empathia*- it means to feel into, not to feel for, but to penetrate the other, to know how they feel and read their emotions. The narcissist cannot or will not sense the needs, the despair or the pain of others.

They are so filled up with themselves there is no more room inside of them or desire to care for anyone's pain or needs, but their own. How can we find our own sources for empathy? First, the Torah is filled with countless examples of a God who is clearly more empathic than sympathetic. Early in the Torah, God clearly hears Not just the cry of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah-he hears their pain too-and realizes that the evil is so great he must take drastic action. We see it as well with God who hears the crying of the Israelites in slavery. If you wish to be more empathic, God's actions can provide a good role model for you.

Second, and this may or may not be surprising to many of you, but Dr. Goleman argues that women in general (there are always exceptions) are probably more attuned to empathy than men, though we are not sure why.

Since compassion is part of empathy, perhaps it is no coincidence that in Hebrew the word for womb is *rechem*, which is connected to the word *rachamim*, the Hebrew word for compassion. We may wish to observe women to learn about empathy.

When we offer empathy to others we act in a god-like way and we show God how grateful we are to have been created in the image of God. That is a wonderful gift.