

Compassion as a Jewish Value

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Text 1:

The existence of the entire world depends on this virtue [our capacity to imitate God's compassion, etc.] ... Hence, whoever follows in this path will bear the Divine image on his person; while whoever refrains from exercising this virtue and questions himself, 'why should I do good to others?' removes himself completely from God, the Blessed One. (The Chafetz Chaim, Loving Kindness, chapter 2)

Text 2:

Compassion is an extremely noble trait. It is one of the thirteen traits attributed to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written: "Compassionate and gracious." [Ex. 34:6] All that one can do in cultivating this trait, he should exert himself to do. Just as one would want compassion in his time of need, so should one have compassion on others who are in need. – Orchof Tzaddikim (quoted in Alan Moranis, Everyday Holiness, p. 75)

Text 3:

Though angry, may You remember compassion.
(Habakkuk 3:2 Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, published by JPS)

Text 4:

A habitual ego-bound perspective gives rise to the well-ingrained tendency to look at other with eyes of judgment. What appears before us when we look at another in this way are that person's accumulated deeds and habits as they stand right now, which we judge from our own vantage point. When we lower or transcend the boundaries of self, however, and draw closer so that we can feel within us the truth of that other person's experience, and so see with eyes of compassion, we still ought to see that person as they are now, but something else will also be added to that picture. (Alan Moranis, Everyday Holiness, p. 84-5)

Text 5:

A midrash tells us that God reflected, "If I create the world with only the attribute of compassion no one will be concerned for the consequences of their actions, and people will feel impunity to act badly. But if I create the world with strict judgment alone, how could the world endure? It would shatter from the harshness of justice. So I will create it with both justice and compassion, and it will endure." (Alan Moranis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 78, quoting Bereishit Rabbah 12:15)

Text 6:

According to the Mussar masters, compassion can come in two forms. There is "compassion in the form of compassion," when our feeling along with the other leads us to act kindly, softly, and gently. The second type of compassion comes as "compassion in the form of judgment." In this case, our shared feelings with the other call for action that is firm, hard, or possibly even harsh. (Alan Moranis, *Everyday Holiness* p. 84-5)

Text 7:

"accept our prayer with compassion and favor."
(Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, Mincha, Avinu Malkenu, The Metsudah Machzor. Metsudah Publications, New York – Eng)

Text 8:

Whosoever has compassion on the poor, the Holy One, blessed be He, has compassion on him. (Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 247:3, Rabbi Moses Isserles)

Text 9:

When they both went outside, Cain turned and said to Abel, "I see that the world was created in compassion, but it is not conducted based on the fruits of good servants [of God], and that there is favor...Abel answered Cain and said, "The world was created in compassion, and it is conducted based on the fruits of good servants [of God], and there is no favor exercised in [God's] judgement. (Targum Jonathan on Genesis 4:8, Sefaria Community Translation)

Text 10:

Perhaps it was through Pharaoh's daughter, who, in her compassion for the child Moses, said to her father that he should not act in that way. (Ramban on Exodus 1:10:1, *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban [Nachmanides]*. Translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. New York, Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976)

Text 11:

For good reason the Torah relates that two of its great heroes, Abraham and Moses, took sword in hand to defend their brethren: "And when Abraham heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he led forth his retainers" (Genesis 14:14). "And when Moses saw the Egyptian smite a Jew ... he struck down the Egyptian" (Exodus 2:11–12). This behavior does not contradict the principle of loving-kindness and compassion. (Kol Dodi Dofek, Six Knocks 10, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, translated by David Z. Gordon, 2006)

Text 12:

Rather, all these advantages are to us – to lead us in paths of compassion even during [the process of] slaughtering....sign upon thy hand, and for frontlets between thine eyes; for by strength of hand the Eternal brought us forth out of Egypt [Exodus 13:16]. – are not ordained to honor G-d, blessed be He, but to have compassion...But the reason for the prohibition [against taking the dam with its nest, or against killing the dam with its young in one day] is to teach us the trait of compassion and that we should not be cruel, for...Thus these commandments with respect to cattle and fowl are not [a result of] compassion upon them, but they are decrees upon us to guide us and to teach us traits of good character. (Ramban on Deuteronomy 22:6:1, Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides). Translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. New York, Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976)

Text 13:

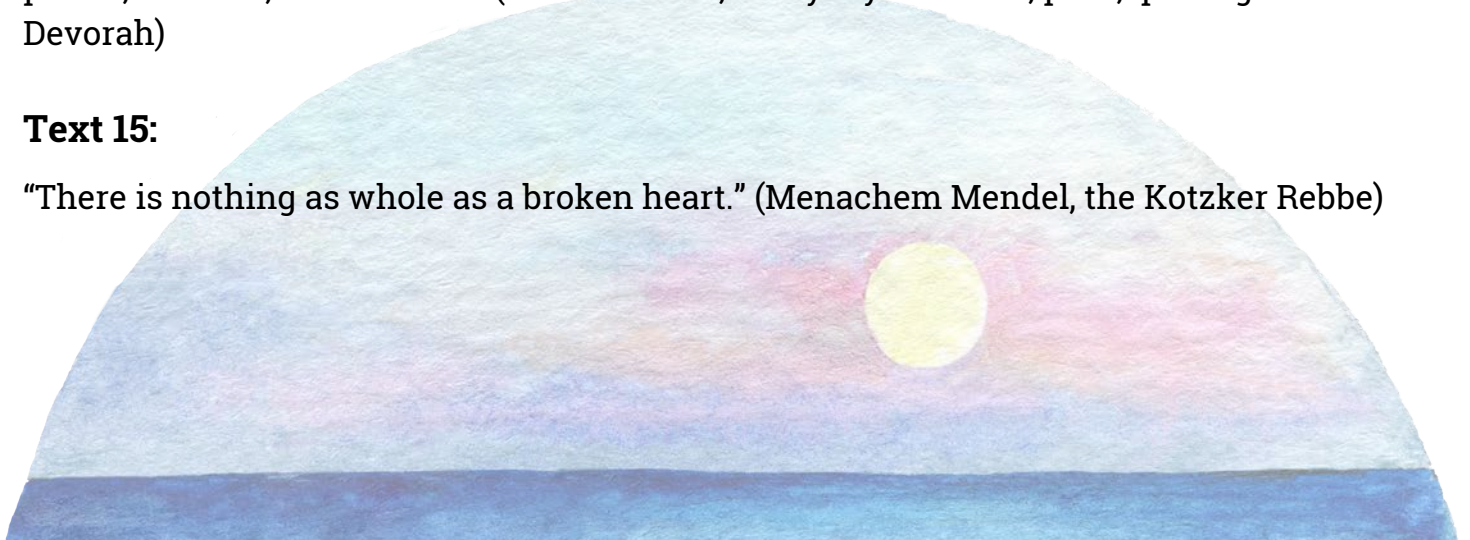
Compassion ... promotes balance between the necessarily hard and rigid and the equally necessary soft and caring. (Alan Moranis, Everyday Holiness, p. 78)

Text 14:

One's compassion should extend to all creatures, and one should neither despise nor destroy them, for the wisdom above extends to all of creation -- inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans. (Alan Moranis, Everyday Holiness, p. 86, quoting Tomer Devorah)

Text 15:

"There is nothing as whole as a broken heart." (Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe)



Additional Reading:

[From "Compassion is a Jewish Value" Torah commentary on Va'eira by Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson on the AJU website <https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/compassion-jewish-value>]

Pity poor Moses who had to stand up, not merely against this particular Pharaoh, but against the kind of heartless, self-serving power that this Pharaoh (and all Pharaohs of every age) embodies. Moses could rely on no armies to enforce his edicts, no chariots to defend his people. Instead, in seeking the liberation of the slaves, all Moses could utilize were his stirring words, and the power of an idea so pure that it has reshaped the world: "Let my people go!" Over and over, Moses repeated this incantation of freedom to the Egyptian king, confronting the Pharaoh with a witness to power that is based on the dignity of each human being and the holiness of the all living things.

Compassion was not very persuasive in Pharaoh's court, just as it is pretty unpersuasive in the court of public opinion. Yet compassion is at the very core of Moses' mission: To fashion a sacred and just community in the service of God.

When words failed, Moses turned to a more conventional sort of persuasion, unleashing the plagues that afflicted Pharaoh and his courtiers and eventually resulted in the liberation of the Israelite slaves. Yet even within that display of a clearly intimidating and coercive power, God continues to display a caring and a concern for humanity and for creation.

God tells Moses to appear before Pharaoh, and to relate that "I will rain down a very heavy hail, such as has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Therefore, order your livestock and everything you have in the open brought under shelter; every man and beast that is found outside, not having been brought indoors, shall perish when the hail comes down upon them!"

Even in God's rage that Pharaoh still refuses to free the Jews, even at the very height of this divine display of power against the evil king, God still seeks to protect the innocent and to care for the animals. As the Rabbis of the ancient midrash Sh'mot Rabbah comment, "See the extent of God's compassion; even in a moment of anger, God has compassion on the wicked and on animals."

True, there are occasions when compassion alone will not suffice. There are times when refusing to combat evil is to accede to it. Such a conflict motivated God to strike against Pharaoh and his legions. Yet even in such a conflict, part of the victory emerges from being able to retain what is distinctive, and moral, and better. To completely abandon compassion would be to become just a bigger Pharaoh. Rather than a victory, such an alteration would have been a loss.