



י"ד מרחשון תשע"ח

Touring the Talmud: Sanhedrin 104-110 (Shabbat Vayera)
Mirror Neurons and the Road to Olam HaBa

*“We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do,
and more in the light of what they suffer.”*
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

Throughout this week's pages there is a holy attribute that is held as the binding tenor throughout. It is the ability to practice, receive and create empathy. In order to be whole and develop the fullness of one's soul and connection to God, the Hakhamim teach us that we must cultivate our ability to feel the plight of others and give help.

Here are some examples from the text:

We learn of the great effects of giving food and sustenance to others even when our other behaviours are less than virtuous (104a). Rabban Gamliel cries together nightly with his mourning neighbour over the death of her son to the point that his eye lashes fall out (104b). We learn from Ribbi Yohanan that it is appropriate for one to make his suffering public so that others can have an opportunity for compassion (ibid.). We are taught that the deterioration of Jerusalem was in its lack of empathy and that it sank lower than Sodom in its callousness and indifference. We are never to curse others — even the wicked (105b). Love and hatred fundamentally change our habitual behaviours (ibid.). When we love someone, we care about their welfare and even our rebuke of them is for their growth (106a). One must always rebuke with the weaker left hand, but bring close with the stronger right hand (107b). We read of the nation of Moab who did not greet us in the desert with bread and water but instead left us to starve, and of Sodom, a city built on stinginess and a refusal to give charity (109a-b).

Empathic acts or the lack thereof are pivotal in the eyes of the Talmud in determining one's access to the World to Come. One can be filled with intellect, sophistication, erudition and aplomb — and even be proficient in religious ritual. But none of those attributes determine our capacity to be in tune with our hearts, feelings and emotions, and if we are not in tune with our own, we cannot be in tune with anyone else's.

We can excel in matters of the mind while failing in matters of the heart. The Talmud sees the failings of the heart as the most serious.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer
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The Loving One (God) desires the heart. (106b)

This point is expressed in the Talmud's discussions of personalities such as Bil'am, Rehoboam, Do'eg, and Ahitofel this week (106b). All of these were among the intellectual elite but also had hearts that were polluted with callousness and malice (107a).

Our hearts are developed not by intellectually understanding others but by our ability to see kinship in others — or to see ourselves in them. The root of kindness is 'kin' which expresses the familiar or native which is why the word kind is also used to denote things which are alike as in 'two of a kind'. When we deem others to be alien, we feel threatened and fear connecting with them therefore lacking the drive to help or support them.

The sign of the heart's maturity is its ability to sense the pain and pleasure that another individual experiences. Empathy drives connection because to have it we must connect with something in ourselves recognises the feelings we are sensing in someone else. Being inquisitive, validating, compassionate and non-judgmental develops our empathic abilities.

Our primary human drive is not for aggression, violence and self-interest, it is to belong. All humans are born with 'mirror neurons'. These are neural mechanisms in the brain that promote sociability, affection and companionship by mimicking feelings that we observe in others. We go from being infants who cry when we hear another infant crying to recognising ourselves in the mirror at around two years of age. We further develop observing the anger, frustration, sense of rejection or joy in others and experience it in our selves to some degree. We are soft-wired to feel each other's plight.

Our ability for empathy matures through communication and the gradual discovery of another person's feelings and experiences.

But we can also diminish our capacity for empathy. We can dull its power within us and quiet its impulse, although this may not always be voluntary. There are many difficult or abusive conditions that one can experience in early life that inhibit the work of our mirror neurons as a defence from pain. We can also voluntarily numb such feelings with chemicals or psychological and emotional distractions. Yet, the fallout from numbing and dulling the mechanisms that drive connection and compassion even when they bring us pain, leads us to isolation and callousness. At best we lose our ability to form intimate, close relationships, and at worst we become abusive and malicious because we grow indifferent to the feelings of others.

Empathy grows with the development of the self. The more self-aware I am, the more I have the ability to sense in others what I sense in myself. As we gain a deeper understanding that life is fragile and that we are vulnerable. We know that we live a singular life and that we will die. As we become more aware of our mortality the question of 'What life do I wish to build for myself?' becomes more



prominent in our minds. As we grow older we become more aware that every moment is precious because it is utterly unique. In our empathic awareness we also know that this is true for everyone else.

One loses a place in the World to Come through acts of callousness and cynicism because in doing so he shows no care for life's preciousness and sanctity. He does not 'fear' death because he does not appreciate the precious value that death puts upon his life. It is in the heart's ability to respond to suffering and need that we find our greatest humanity and brilliance. It is in the hardening of the heart and an inability to feel, care and respond that we destroy ourselves.

Therefore, enmeshed in the weave of the Talmud's discussions on ultimate reward and punishment and the World to Come are discussions of kindness, compassion and empathy, because empathy is deeply connected to mortality.

The question, of course, is who is kin to us, and to whom will we practice empathic kindness? It is here in our readings that the Talmud clearly indicates that the World to Come is open to all of humanity, Jews and gentiles (105a). What connects us to the World to Come — the realm in which we share our full being with God — is our fully cultivated and mature capacity to feel what others feel and to be aware of the unity of all of existence and its connection to God — the One Source of Being. We are to live in actions that are driven by that awareness.

With every passing generation time and space shrink and we find ourselves more and more connected. We are able to communicate with each other instantly across the globe and information passes between us in abundance and at lightning speeds. We do not realise it, but as this happens our brains change, and our neural networks develop and extend the definition of those with whom we identify as kin. It is not incidental that with the development of the 'global community' we find greater struggles than ever before for rights and freedoms. We find that our old prejudices which were powerful when we were more isolated, are now restricting us from expanding into our global connections. Our minds are connecting more than ever before. Will our hearts do the same?

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Joseph Dweck



Touring the Talmud: Sanhedrin 104-110 Outline/Summary

Daf 104

- Providing sustenance to others protects even the wicked from calamity.
- The Gemara questions why certain seemingly wicked kings were not enumerated among those who have no share in the World to Come.
- King Hizkiya's mistakes are examined.
- The Gemara examines the decline of the kings of Judea and the destruction of the Temple. Verses from Eikha (Lamentations) are studied.
- The Men of the Great Assembly enumerated who would be excluded from the World to Come. keeps the Men of the Great Assembly from enumerating certain people
- God Himself (in the form of a Divine Voice) asserts to the Men of the Great Assembly that the determinations of who enters the World to come is His alone.

Daf 105

- The Gemara examines the abilities and actions of Bil'am ben Be'or.
 - Cursing anyone, even the wicked, is inappropriate.
 - Love and hatred affect one's habitual behaviour.
 - One should always engage in Torah and mitzvot even with ulterior motives for eventually good things come of it. (This is learned from the offerings brought by Bil'am on behalf of Moab in order to curse Israel that the Hakhamim see as ultimately having merit and produce Ruth the Moabite who converted and became the grandmother of King David.)
 - A human being is jealous of everyone except his child and student.
 - The Hakhamim expound on the verse from Proverbs 27:6 — The chastisements of a loved one are faithful, but the kisses of the enemy are unremitting.

Daf 106

- Continued study of the Bil'am narrative.
 - Any nation standing in God's way when He comes to redeem Israel will be crushed.
 - Bil'am's death.
 - Study of the actions and attributes of Do'eg the Edomite and Ahitofel (as ones who lose the World to Come).
 - They were erudite and wise but callous and selfish.
- God desires the heart over and above the intellect.
 - God reveals His secrets to those who fear Him. (Psalms 25:14)

Daf 107

- One should never put oneself in a morally challenging circumstance. This is learned from King David who asked God to test his faithfulness. He is tested and fails with Bathsheba.



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- The Gemara examines the details of this story.
 - The doors of the Holy Temple built by King Solomon only opened in merit of King David.
 - The Gemara examines the deeds and attributes of Gehazi (the attendant of Elisha the prophet) as one who has no portion in the World to Come.
 - We learn from Elisha's strong rebuke of Gehazi that we must always bring people close with greater effort than that with which we rebuke them. Especially our children.
 - Discussion of Jesus and why he left the teachings of the Hakhamim.
 - We must be careful in dealing with our physical drives and not cut them off completely out of fear of sin, but work on properly calibrating them and channeling them for good.
 - Elisha asked God to be healed from terminal illness, Abraham asked God for old age and Jacob asked God for weakness so that they might use the awareness of these vulnerabilities in their efforts towards compassion and kindness.

MISHNA - The generation that died in the Flood has no place in the World to Come. The generation of the 'Dispersion' (The Tower of Babel) has no place in the World to Come. The people of Sodom have no place in the World to Come.

Daf 108

The spies who brought an ill report back from their visit to Canaan have no place in the World to Come. Ribbi Akiba says generation that died in the wilderness (after leaving Egypt) has no place in the World to Come. Ribbi Eliezer says that they do as they entered into covenant with God. The assembly of Korah has no place in the World to Come.

GEMARA - Each of the points in the Mishna are examined and detailed. The specific sins and iniquities of each are discussed.

- The circumstances of the flood and the Ark are discussed.

Daf 109

- Stories of Nahum Ish Gam Zu.
- Extensive study of the city of Sodom and their behaviours.
- Study of the Spies who spread an evil report of their visit to Canaan.
- Study of Korah and his assembly of rebellion against Moshe and Aharon.

Daf 110

- More on Korah
- Appropriate conduct between a student and his Rabbi are drawn from Korah's interactions with Moshe.
- Study of the generation that died in the desert after leaving Egypt.

MISHNA - Ribbi Akiba says that the ten lost tribes will not return to the Land of Israel even during the messianic era. Rabbi Eliezer disagrees.



GEMARA - The Hakhamim notes that Ribbi Akiba's words are inconsistent with his usual compassionate approach.

- From what stage does a minor who dies come into the World to Come?
- There is dispute between the sages. Is it from birth or from the time the child begins to speak?
- Ribbi Me'ir says from the time he learns to say 'Amen'.