

Radical Compassion  
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There was a study done a few years ago, where graduate students sat at crosswalks and intersections around the city to observe traffic patterns. They looked at who made a full or a rolling stop at a stop sign; who sped up at a yellow light and who slowed down; who gave the right of way and who ignored it; who was more likely to, in fact, speed through the intersection, distracted, or perhaps, so self focused they forgot they were in a public place.

What did the researchers discover? “[Y]ou see this huge boost in a driver’s likelihood to commit infractions in more expensive cars,” [UC-Berkeley Researcher, Paul Piff] said. “In our crosswalk study, none of the cars in the beater-car category drove through the crosswalk. They always stopped for pedestrians.”  
(<http://wheels.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/12/the-rich-drive-differently-a-study-suggests/>)

Now, this study is imperfect, and it is certainly plausible that people of means drove beater-cars and poorer people could have borrowed or leased a nicer vehicle. But a growing body of evidence including philanthropy, paying public taxes, donating to the food shelf, volunteering hours in public schools, and more, people who live at or below the poverty level give a far greater percentage of their overall income to others, and in this study, demonstrates they are nicer drivers.

It seems counter intuitive, especially given the dominant public narrative of the last half century, that people who are poor are unmotivated, bleeding the system, deserving of their status, and draining the public good from those of us tax payers and job creators who, “work hard and play by the rules.”

The fact is, compassion and empathy exist in abundance; people who are poor, it seems from all the evidence, are simply better at accessing them. Why is that?

Torah offers us some rich insights.

We read in Re'eh this week, as Deuteronomy draws to a close, about an array of activity God demands of the Israelites: How to sacrifice properly when they cross over into the land of Israel; how to avoid idol worship; how to treat slaves; how to observe the festivals of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot.

We also learn of the shmita year—God’s command to let the land lie fallow for a year. And that we must loan the needy in our midst the resources they need to survive, interest free—and in the seventh year, forgive these debts.

“Lo ta-ameitz et l’vavkha, to lo tikpotz et yad’cha. Do not harden your heart and shut your hand to the needy. (Deut. 15:7).

“Rather: Poteyach tiftach et yadcha lo”—open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.

Open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.

Ok. Fine.

But rabbi, c’mon—in year six or seven, who on earth would make a loan? That’s a terrible business proposition. Capitalism without profit is like ice cream without a cone.

(v9): Hi-Sha-meir: Beware, guard yourself, let you harbor the base thought, the 7<sup>th</sup> year, the year of shmita, of remission, is approaching, so that you are mean and give nothing to your needy—who will cry out to God against you and you will incur guilt.

(v10): Give readily and have no regrets when you do, for in return God will bless you in all your efforts and all the work of your hands.

(v11): Ki lo yechdal evyon mi-kerev ha-aretz al keyn Anochi mitzvacha la’more: Patoach tiftach et yad-cha l’achicha la-anicha u’l-evyoncha b’artzecha.” There will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land.

The text, virtually every week, also reminds us to remember where we have come from: Where were our people born? As slaves in the land of Egypt.

As we entered the Promised Land—we had made it to the land flowing with milk and honey—a sign post, a reminder: You were slaves. Don’t forget it.

We read it in Torah.

We pray it in V’ahavta and Mi Chamocha.

We begin the Passover seder each year in the first person: Not when *you* were slaves in Egypt. When *we* were slaves in Egypt.

What’s the great *chiddush*, the great learning, the powerful insight here?

Our ancestors understand that we could be rich or poor—and our status could change in an instant. Wealth and poverty are temporary and circumstantial, not permanent nor ascribed identities. Vanafochu we read in the Book of Esther, the

Purim story. Suddenly the world is upside down. Purim, the ultimate Jewish satire—Haman hung on the gallows he constructed for Mordechai, who gloats in Haman’s former place at the side of the King.

Vanafochu. The world—our lives—can change in an instant.

Vanafochu. Someone looks at their cell phones and rolls through that crosswalk and we end up in the hospital unable to work.

Vanafochu. A drought kills our crops; there is no harvest this season.

Vanafochu. You’ve spent a lifetime working in an industry that has found it cheaper and more efficient to send your job to India and you’re 60 years old.

Vanafochu. You’re in a theatre when gunshots go off and you didn’t duck fast enough.

Vanafochu. The doctor comes into the room and the diagnosis is cancer. It’s terminal.

Vanafochu. The world—our lives—can change in a split second.

The brilliance of Torah is that it demands we human beings we create a society whose heartbeat is compassion.

Keep your hands open, commands Torah.

Practice generosity and compassion.

Compassion that is not merely a feeling or an attitude. For the Jewish people, compassion is social policy—the essential way society is to be organized.

Why? Because it is so easy to be base, petty, and mean. There is a reason it is not simply a nice idea to keep our hearts and our hands open; it is a religious obligation, a mitzvah. Because it is hard. Really hard. It is much easier to protect ourselves and what we have; to create stories about people’s suffering that blame them in a way that we don’t have to look at our role in causing that suffering; to obfuscate our essential humanity. But when we do that, we forget: they’re our family. Some of whom, literally our family. Others, our human family.

Why is it that people with less give more, drive more carefully, act with more generosity?

Many years ago, I was on the subway in New York City. A homeless man came through the car, banging his cup. A woman standing next to me put a dollar in his cup. She turned to her friend, “we’re just one paycheck away.”

Empathy and compassion are powerful. It would be so easy for those who have less to hold tighter to what they have. But in fact, all the data shows the exact opposite: Those who have less give more, do so with greater frequency, and with more dignity to the recipients because they see in their faces their own. They remember where they came from.

Don't forget: We were slaves in Egypt.

While there weren't intersections with beat up cars in Torah, there were places in the desert that tested our definition of what it means to be fully human. We Jews must continue to choose compassion over pettiness, abundance over scarcity, and a recognition that the other guy in the crosswalk; he or she, they are us.

Open our hands and give without reservation.

Shabbat Shalom.