

The Virtue of Empathy: Thoughts for Behar-Behukottai, May 16, 2015

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By

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I recently attended a daily minyan but could hardly concentrate on my prayers. What was the problem? One of the worshipers chanted all his prayers in a loud tone of voice, generally a paragraph or two behind the hazzan. The more I tried to focus on my own prayers, the more the loud voice of this person distracted me. Instead of experiencing the prayers with a feeling of spiritual elevation, I found myself feeling annoyed, even angry. Assuming that the loud worshiper was sincerely and piously trying to concentrate on his prayers, why didn't he think about how his voice would impact on the others in the room? He apparently was so concerned with his own recitation, that he simply ignored the feelings of everyone else in the room. As long as he was tending to his own needs, he was not thinking about the possible needs of others. We all come across people like this in various contexts—people who look out only for themselves, but care little or not at all about how their behavior affects others. They act rudely or crudely; they domineer; they grab. They lack basic good manners and a sense of empathy for the feelings of others. This week's Torah portion discusses the laws of the sabbatical year, when farmers must let their land lay fallow. This "rest" for the land is a demonstration that the land belongs to the Almighty, not to us, and that we depend on the Almighty for our sustenance. In relating the laws of the agricultural sabbatical, the Torah states: "And if you will say, what shall we eat the seventh year? behold, we may not sow, nor gather in our increase?; then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year and it shall bring forth produce for the three years [sixth, seventh and eighth years]" (Vayikra 25:20-21). The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Judeo-Spanish Torah commentary, wonders why the Torah presented this information in terms of a question and answer i.e. q. what will we eat if we can't engage in farm work? a. don't worry, God will provide extra on the sixth year. It could simply have stated: keep the laws of the sabbatical and God will provide abundant harvests on the sixth year, so that you will have enough food to carry you through the next few years. Why did the Torah record the question--what will we eat on the seventh year? The Me'am Lo'ez suggests that the question--what will we eat?--is a reflection of our anxiety and concern. A moral lesson of the sabbatical year is that we are supposed to worry about our

sustenance. Even if we normally have enough to eat, at least once in seven years we become deeply nervous that we might not have enough food. We are driven to ask: if we can't plant our crops, how are we going to feed ourselves and our families? That very question forces us into the existential understanding of what poverty is. Although we might ask the question only once in a sabbatical cycle, poor people have to ask this question every day of their lives. Each day, they wonder how they will provide food for themselves and their families. By making us ask the question and feeling the dread of impending hunger, the Torah teaches us to empathize with the constant plight of the poor. By feeling this dread ourselves, we will be better able to understand the predicament of those who lack their daily food, and we will be more compassionate in providing for them. Yes, the laws of the sabbatical year teach the quality of empathy for the plight of the poor. But these laws are a reflection of the Torah's general concern for the cultivation of empathy. We are to conduct ourselves in such a way that reflects good manners, respectfulness, sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others. It is natural to focus on our own needs and wants. But the Torah wants to lift us beyond that level of existence. It prods us to be sincerely concerned with the needs and wants of others.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)