others as well as ourselves because this orients us toward the resources we have, not what we lack. An attitude of optimism and joy ensues, and it is to foster that outlook that we practice gratitude throughout our day. The intention is that the seeds we plant in practice will sprout, and then we will find ourselves experiencing flashes of gratitude as we go about the ordinary activities of our life.

> It is good to give thanks to the Lord
> And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High
> To proclaim Your goodness in the morning
> And Your faithfulness at night.
>
> —Psalms/*Tehillim* 92

10

Compassion

RACHAMIM

Kindness, empathy, and care arise from standing so close, feeling what the other feels.

> 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."[1] 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.
>
> —*Orchot Tzaddikim*

THE MORAL PRECEPTS of Judaism demand that we be compassionate to every soul. Singled out repeatedly as especially needing our compassion are the poor, widows, orphans, and others in need. The Torah repeatedly hammers away at our obligation to help those who are vulnerable and needy. The tradition is so insistent that we be living vessels of compassion that the Talmud asserts that "anyone who is not compassionate with people is certainly not a descendant of our forefather Abraham."[2]

The Hebrew term for compassion—*rachamim*—shares its linguistic root with the word *rechem*, which means "womb." That compassion is somehow connected to motherhood has led many commentators to link this soul-trait to the emotional bond of mother to child. Compassion is seen to be the embodiment of the strong ties of love, kinship, and tenderness a mother feels for the baby she carries within her.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,[3] for example, notes the connection between the words *rachamim* and *rechem*[4] and draws the conclusion that we

should have compassion in our hearts just as a mother has a loving, emotional bond to the child of her womb. He writes:

> Compassion is the feeling of empathy which the pain of one being of itself awakens in another; and the higher and more human the beings are, the more keenly attuned are they to re-echo the note of suffering which, like a voice from heaven, penetrates the heart.[5]

Is Compassion a Feeling?

Rabbi Hirsch's words are beautifully expressed, but we can still ask, is he right? Is compassion a "feeling of empathy," as Rabbi Hirsch says? Before we can fulfill the many commandments we are given to be compassionate, and before we do what we can to cause that soul-trait to take firm root in our hearts, we have to grasp what is really meant by compassion in the uniquely Jewish view. That requires that we add into the mix a number of other references where the term *rachamim*—compassion—figures prominently. It is, in fact, a very common term in the Torah,[6] and the way it is used adds more dimensions to the simple focus that rests on the mother-child relationship.

In a psalm we read: "As a father has compassion on his children, so God has compassion for those who are in awe of Him."[7] This single line of scripture gives us two additional points to note about compassion. Not only is compassion a quality that is somehow related to a mother and the child of her womb, here it is set out in the image of a father-child relationship. In addition, compassion is portrayed as a divine quality, exhibited by God, "who crowns you with loving-kindness and tender compassion."[8] One very frequently used name of God is *Ha'Rachaman*—the Compassionate One—and the two notions of a father's compassion and God's compassion are brought together in the daily prayer that contains the line *Ha'El Ha'Av Ha'Rachaman*—"God, the Compassionate Father."[9]

That God is seen to be compassionate is fundamental to a Jewish view of the divine. The high point of the closing prayers on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, is the recitation of the thirteen divine *middot ha'rachamim* (attributes of compassion)[10] of God. This is also the central refrain of the forgiveness prayers that are repeated periodically throughout the year. When do these thirteen attributes of compassion that we invoke on Yom Kippur and in these special prayers make their appearance in the Torah? They show up in the immediate aftermath to the sin of the Israelites building a Golden Calf to worship, when Moses successfully pleads with God not to wipe out his people who have sinned, but instead to be compassionate and forgiving. So it is appropriate that we, too, call on the compassion of God as we confess our own weaknesses and transgressions.

We can see that this notion of compassion is related to the mother's womb and to the father-child relationship as well, and is also a quality that God manifests for all of us. This gives us our first important conclusion about compassion, which is that it is *an attribute of relationship* and that it can exist in relationships of many kinds.

We'll need to look more closely at how compassion shows up in relationship, but before we do that, we need to investigate whether compassion is indeed an emotion, as Rabbi Hirsch and others describe it to us. Is compassion simply the kind of empathetic feeling a parent has for a beloved child, and which we hope and pray God has for us, who are like children of the divine? When we look at one further way in which the term *rachamim* is frequently put to use in the Jewish tradition, we will have to call into question the idea that compassion is an emotion.

Tradition teaches that God's original intention was to create the world solely with the attribute of judgment.[11] We can still see the results of this intention, because the fundamental laws of nature are themselves immutable. If you put your hand in fire, it will be burned, no matter what you might say or think. A world created according to the quality of judgment requires that everything be a specific way, with no deviation whatsoever.

But we are told that God realized that the world (and especially people) could not survive if the world were set up so that strict justice was exacted instantly for every error or wrongdoing. A world run only according to the principle of stern justice would leave no room for free will, learning, change, or growth, because every single time you did something wrong, mechanical rules would mete out results instantly and without variation. To forestall such insufferable rigidity, God included the attribute of compassion as an essential feature of creation, right alongside judgment.[12]

A midrash explains the necessary interplay of judgment and compassion in creation by telling of a king who had some fragile glass cups. He said to himself, "If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and break, and if I pour cold water into them, they will contract and shatter." So what did

he do? He mixed hot water with cold water and poured the mixture into the cups, and they did not break.

So it was when it came time to create the world. 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."[13]

A Building Block of Creation

Compassion is so fundamental to the world that the Talmud says it is one of the ten elements through which the world was created.[14] The mystical tradition in Judaism has picked up on this depiction, and so it comes down to us that *rachamim* is one of the ten primary emanations that underlie all of ongoing existence in the universe. Compassion is the meeting and balancing point for the channels that bring down loving-kindness, on the one hand, and strict judgment on the other. Compassion blends these energies and so achieves and promotes balance between the necessarily hard and rigid and the equally necessary soft and caring.

So we see that far from being just an emotion, compassion now appears as a fundamental feature of the way in which reality has been constructed or, if you prefer, of the way in which God runs the world.

A poignant example from the Talmud makes this case by asserting that even the exile to Babylonia, which was an enormously catastrophic event in Jewish history that is still mourned to this day, also had within its harshness a measure of divine compassion. "Rabbi Chiya taught that the Holy One, Blessed be He, knew that Israel could not withstand the cruel decrees of Rome, and therefore He exiled them to Babylonia."[15] This sort of compassion is not just an emotion, a feeling of empathy, but an action that takes care of the other.

That compassion is something other than an emotion is confirmed in the Mussar text *Orchot Tzaddikim,* where some examples are given of the firm guidance that is the responsibility of parents, whose compassion for their child might well involve rules, consequences, and even punishment,

in order to bring the child to the right way of thinking and acting: "Though it may seem cruel to do so, such cruelty is compassion."[16]

All these teachings from tradition lead us to the conclusion that compassion is not what it may have seemed at first—the emotion a mother feels for the child she carries in her womb. If not that, then how are we to understand compassion?

Close Identity

One feature that we can identify that unites all the ways the term *compassion* is put to use in Jewish thought is the notion of closeness. The soul-trait of compassion emerges from an experience of being very, very close to another, or from a feeling of closeness, or equally from an effort to draw closer to the other.

Put another way, compassion is an inner quality that grows within us out of the perception that we are not really separate from the other. We have a commonsense appreciation that we are all separate beings, but the truth is that we are very much connected at several levels. Could there be a better image for this intimate connection than the physical proximity of fetus to mother, where two beings so totally overcome duality by situating one of them within the other? That is a beautiful and revealing image, but such closeness is not a feature of only the mother-child relationship. And so tradition also includes images of the father-child relationship, and of the relationship of God to each of us. The key and common point here is closeness in relationship, which can potentially exist in any relationship.

Compassion then appears to depend upon the internal connectedness that arises from a sense of shared identity, as the you and the me are mingled in a oneness that transcends our perceptions of separate identities. When that close connection registers with a resonating impact within me, I am able to feel your pain (and your happiness) as if they were my own. We express this in common language when we say that we are "touched" by someone else's story or experience. To be touched is to have a physical connection, to join.

If you get a thorn in your toe, you don't say, "I have nothing to do with that toe down there," because you recognize the connection. Or if you are chewing and accidentally bite your tongue, you don't run to get a hammer

and start smashing your teeth. When we experience being so close to one another that the membranes that separate us are permeated, then I will live in the recognition that you and I are as connected as I am to my own foot or mouth. This condition of intimacy precipitates compassion.

We find examples of closeness setting off compassion in the Torah, such as when God responds to the people who have returned from waywardness and drawn close once again. In 2 Chronicles 30:9 we read: "The Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him." The same process appears in Nechemiah 9:27: "When they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven You heard them, and in Your great compassion You gave them deliverers." Drawing close sets the stage for compassion.

Identity with the other as the basis for compassion is precisely what the Torah invokes when it hands down the commandment to be loving to the stranger in your midst. The rationale for doing so is our shared identity as strangers: "You shall love the stranger, because you have been strangers in the land of Egypt."[17]

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, a great Mussar teacher and kabbalist of the sixteenth century, demonstrates the link of compassion to closeness by drawing the picture of the negative case. He asks how compassion can be fostered and answers that compassion can be nurtured through Torah study. But he immediately warns that "great caution must be exercised to avoid becoming aloof through one's learning, which could cause great harm."[18] Aloofness—with its sense of being remote and distant—is inimical to compassion. So it is that a recent study of executioners in the United States documents that in order to do their job of killing people on behalf of the state, these people set an emotional gulf between themselves and the prisoner: "And the closer they are to the killing," the article reports, "the higher their level of disengagement goes."[19]

We are led to the conclusion that compassion is not primarily a feeling. It is something more fundamental than that. Compassion may indeed involve feeling. It also may breed action. But these qualities do not take the definition far enough. The soul-trait of compassion may be more accurately defined as the inner experience of touching another being so closely that you no longer perceive the other one as separate from you. The two are made one, as the baby in the mother's womb. In that state of inner identification, feelings will be shared as fully as if they were your own. You will leap to care for the other as naturally as you care for yourself. Because the other is no longer other.

Compassionate Feeling and Action

Though it is not its defining characteristic, compassion does have an important emotional component. My oneness with you means that whatever you are feeling is also stirred within me as my own emotional experience. Your sadness is my sadness. Your pain is my pain. Your confusion is my confusion. Your joy is my joy. Compassion may not be an emotion, but it cannot exist without full emotional contact with the other.

When you make real contact with someone who is suffering, and you feel their needs and their pain or their trying situation, this sets up the conditions for compassion to arise in you.

What is it that turns empathetic connection into compassion? The answer resides in the Jewish insistence that inner qualities only reach a state of *sh'lemut*, "wholeness," when they are brought out into the world of action. Having a good heart is not the final goal that Mussar sets for us, as Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe clarifies: to really elevate our soul-traits we must put them into action.[20]

A number of crucial soul-traits require action or else they are incomplete, possibly even illusory. *Chesed,* loving-kindness, is not some sort of loving feeling you have toward another person in your heart, but for *chesed* to be real you must take action to sustain that other person. Similarly, *rachamim*—compassion—does not come into being just by feeling empathy. The depth and richness of the emotional connection must be translated into action that expresses concretely how truly moved you are to take care of the other. It is the action you take that turns a relationship or a shared emotion into compassion.

So it is that Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda challenges us in *Duties of the Heart:*

> Express compassion when you encounter the impoverished, the poor, and the diseased; with people who are outside the mainstream of society, who do not know how to improve their lot, who do not know how to conduct themselves, who are imprisoned by enemies, who have lost great fortunes, who regret having transgressed, and who weep for the consequences of their sins.

All the situations Ibn Pakuda identifies where compassion is called for represent what tradition calls "stern judgment." Our compassion is what we can offer to offset these outpourings from the side of judgment. Notice, though, that Ibn Pakuda doesn't say "feel" compassion, but rather "express" compassion.[21] The emphasis is on the actions we take. The two steps prior to action that have had our attention—joining ourselves to the other person and sharing in their feelings—become worthy of the name compassion only when they are put into action. For our response to be truly compassionate, we must not just feel with another person but also try to act on their behalf.

Defining Compassion

Compassion is a deep emotional feeling arising out of identification with the other that seeks a concrete expression. Compassion flows between equals or from the more powerful to the less powerful, as we see in the Torah, where it never expresses human feeling for God. It does, however, apply to a human king caring for subjects[22] and to God caring for humanity.[23] These defining features help us understand what touches and moves people to act as they do when they manifest compassion.

It was 1942 and the Nazis were rounding up Jews in France. The pastors of the town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in southern France gathered together their parishioners and asked them to shelter Jews, even though they would be putting their own lives at risk. They hid Jews in homes, on farms, and in public buildings. Whenever Nazi patrols showed up, the Jews were sent into the countryside. One of the villagers recalled: "As soon as the soldiers left, we would go into the forest and sing a song. When they heard that song, the Jews knew it was safe to come home." The villagers provided Jews with forged ID and ration cards and helped them get over the border to Switzerland.

It is estimated that three thousand to five thousand Jews were saved. One reason given for this display of compassion is that these French villagers were Protestants descended from persecuted Huguenots. Their history of persecution as a religious minority connected them to the persecuted Jews. Out of this feeling of shared identity came action: "Things had to be done and we happened to be there to do them" is how one villager put it.[24]

Compassion comes into being only by being put to use. It is like a skill or a tool that gains its full value only when used. And like a skill or the use of a tool, it can be cultivated. When the Rambam discusses the commandment we are given to emulate God by "walking in His ways,"[25] he says, "Just as He is called gracious, so you should be gracious. Just as He is called compassionate, so you should be compassionate." We are enjoined to be compassionate, taking God as our model. Because we more easily perceive our separation than our oneness with others, we slip into judgment more easily than we rise to compassion. We need to be told to walk in God's footsteps by acting to cultivate compassion in our hearts.

Imitating the divine trait of compassion is not just a lovely ideal. We are assured that it is within our grasp to do so, however, because "He will bestow upon you [the attribute of] compassion and show mercy to you."[26] The capacity for compassion is innate within us. But to bring that quality from potential to actuality, we need to take steps to confront the obstacles to compassion.

Self and the Other

The primary barrier to being compassionate is the sense that you and I are separate from each other. We have our separate family, a personal name, our own property, and, more fundamentally, the sensibility of being an autonomous entity. Our personal life so easily becomes a preoccupation—seeking only what the "I" wants and needs—that we come to live within a walled fortress called self. When we live in this separateness—you in your fortress, me in mine—how could we possibly identify with one another?

Compassion can come into existence only when you lower the barriers that ordinarily wall off and isolate your own sense of self. Opening up to connecting so closely with another that you actually feel that other person's pain will be possible only when the high walls of ego are reduced.[27] Only then will it be possible for compassion to well up and flow into passionate action on behalf of the other.

A habitual ego-bound perspective gives rise to the well-ingrained tendency to look at others 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. We will also see more deeply to perceive the untainted soul that is the kernel of that being—the image of the divine that is reflected in ourselves as well. This perception leads us to suspend our own sense of judgment of the other. Through close identification we become more generous, forgiving, excusing, overlooking, patient, and forbearing, just as you would expect someone to be to you, if only they would feel what you are feeling.

This was the practice of Rabbi Noson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka. His compassion emerged from his perception of the holy dimension of the person who stood before him:

> He loved people with an extraordinary and excessive love, a love without restraints; he had a limitless affection for humanity—for any human, regardless of who or what he was. He was also extremely sensitive to any humiliation of any person and he fully participated in other people's suffering. The source for these qualities is that he saw in people the image of God, a part of God from Above. Every human was, for him, like Adam—a creation of God's own hands—before his sin and fall . . . whose holiness is part of the nature of every human even after the Sin, even after the sins of all later generations and all the terrible descents and falls.[28]

The interplay of judgment and compassion is presented to us as a notion of how the cosmos is put together. This is not just an abstract concept but also a dynamic process that is alive and effective in our own lives as well. Compassion has us believe that a person is inherently holy and has the capacity to change, so the deeds we might find ourselves judging do not really reflect who a person is at the core, nor could be. As a result, compassion has us see a person more favorably than his or her deeds currently warrant. Said a different way, judgment assesses a person based on the reality of who he or she is now, while compassion recognizes as well a person's soul-nature. This is how compassion offsets the force of judgment.

Varieties of Compassion

Yet all of that identification and shared feeling will become compassionate only when put into practice. 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.

The classic example of compassion in the form of compassion is the redemption of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. It has been argued that the Jews in Egypt did not deserve to be redeemed from slavery. There are traditions that say that while in Egypt, the people of Israel assimilated, did not keep what they knew of tradition (which was incomplete, in any case, because the Torah had not yet been received), and, worst of all, became idolaters. The prophet Ezekiel reveals, "I also said to them, 'Cast away, every one of you, the detestable things that you are drawn to, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt—I the Lord am your God.' But they defied Me and refused to listen to Me."[29]

Why, then, did God redeem the Israelites and free them from the oppression of slavery? That was solely because of God's compassion. "And HaShem said: 'I have surely seen the oppression of My people, who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows.'"[30] The way the prophet Isaiah puts it fits well with our view that compassion is based on the experience of nonseparateness: "In all their affliction He was afflicted."[31] It was based on this identification that HaShem acted compassionately and "brought forth Your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror."[32]

Compassion in the guise of judgment appears in the story of the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. This seems such a harsh punishment for the very human error of not following instructions. They aren't even given a second chance. But this apparently stern judgment can also be seen to be an act of compassion on God's part. In the first instance, God could have eliminated the errant couple from the world in a stroke, but did not do so. Second, the world of Eden was perfect and it demanded perfection. Then as now, this is more than humans can handle. By exiling us from Eden, God put us in a world where human imperfection is tolerated and so made it possible for us to survive.

That biblical story brings to mind another example that can be understood in the same way. I mentioned briefly in the last chapter the story

about my teacher, Rebbetzin Shoshana Perr, whose family was living in Poland at the start of World War II. They escaped to Lithuania, but in 1941 the Russians who controlled Lithuania began rounding up "clerics and clerical students" for deportation, among them Rabbi Nekritz (Mrs. Perr's father and so Rabbi Perr's future father-in-law). His wife wouldn't hear of being left behind, and so the entire family, with babies, was shipped out to endure the rigors of life in Siberia. This apparently stern judgment concealed divine compassion, however, because their exile removed the Nekritz family from the path of the Nazis only weeks before they invaded Lithuania, where they killed all the remaining Jews. Exile at the hands of the Russians ensured that the Nekritz family all survived. A later agreement between Stalin and the Polish government-in-exile freed all Polish refugees, and the Nekritzes eventually made their way to the United States.

Modeling our own pursuit of wholeness on the traits of God requires that we, too, need to be capable of acting in both ways—with compassion in the form of compassion and compassion in the form of judgment. We aspire to having the spiritual dexterity to shift from one type of compassionate action to the other, as the situation requires and according to how our sensitivity guides us.

We get a hint that our wise ancestors wanted us to grasp the multiple layers embedded in compassion because the Hebrew term they bequeathed us—*rachamim*—is unique among the soul-traits: its name has no singular form and is always stated in the plural. Or possibly they wanted us to understand that despite our apparent duality, compassion is one and so are we.

> 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.
>
> —*Tomer Devorah*

11

Order

SEDER

Order creates inner alignment, peaceful and prepared.

> Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind.
>
> —Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm

THE SOUL-TRAIT of order[1] is all about the middle way. Too little order gives birth to chaos, while at the other end of the range, too much order ties us up in obsessive rigidity. The best in life lies between these extremes, and we are well-advised to seek that moderate course.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler[2] provides three reasons why we should make an effort to bring order into our lives. First, knowing that things are well arranged creates a feeling of inner satisfaction and confidence that everything is under control. Another reason is even more practical—order helps you find things when you need them and saves you the time you would lose looking for them. And a third reason is that many things will function only if they are arranged correctly, like a machine that requires every one of its parts to be in good working order, often in a specific sequence, to run properly.

That such practical guidance emanates from a Mussar teacher of Rabbi Dessler's stature reveals something about our spiritual life as the Mussar masters see it. The path to spiritual growth they illuminate is hidden right in front of us, right there *within* the ways of this world. The order you create on your desk, in your car, and with your clothes, your financial papers, your tools, your kitchen utensils, and so on is not just good management, it is actually bona fide spiritual work. Nothing less.