

Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

Parashat Ki Teitzei

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Abstract: God wants us to understand that all it takes to make a difference in this world is for just one person to possess the necessary conviction, caring, and compassion. All it takes is just one person. Why not you?

I believe in the power of one. That is, I believe in the power of one individual to make a profound difference in this world. We know this to be true. The incredible examples set by individuals including Dr. Paul Farmer, Greg Mortensen, Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and so many others prove how true this is. Who else would you cite as an example of the power of one?

Now most of us want to do good. We have the best of intentions. What's the difference between most people and someone like Greg Mortensen, the hero of Three Cups of Tea, who has built 55 schools in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan to educate children, mostly girls?

The difference is we want to help, we think of helping. But Mortensen and people like him don't just think of helping. They just do it. They help.

Indifference is a natural human tendency. Our plates are full with our own personal problems and concerns. Moreover, the world's problems are vast and complicated, seemingly unsolvable. No wonder social scientists report that "compassion fatigue," the inability to care, pervades our society.

The Torah portion for this shabbat, *Ki tetzei*, pulls us back from the brink of compassion fatigue. It declares that the needs of our fellow human beings are so dire that we cannot permit ourselves the luxury of not caring. We read in Deuteronomy 22:3, "you shall not remain indifferent" - in Hebrew, *Lo tuchal lehitaleim*.

So who does this Torah portion speak up for? Let's read Deuteronomy 24:17-22. The Torah insists that the rights of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow must be protected. In addition, some of the harvest must be left for them, so that they can glean for food for themselves.

Why were the stranger, the orphan, and the widow singled out? They were the three groups most powerless and therefore most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in the ancient world. Who do you think are the most vulnerable in society today?

The Torah teaches that we must never give in to compassion fatigue. We must fight off our own sense of apathy. God wants us to understand that all it takes to make a difference in this world is for just one person to possess the necessary conviction, caring, and compassion. All it takes is just one person. Why not you?

To inspire us to take action, to be of help, not to remain indifferent, and to proclaim that it is time for all of us to prepare spiritually for the new year of 5769 we now hear the traditional blasts of the shofar.

A prayer for overcoming indifference

I watch the news, God. I observe it all from a comfortable distance. I see people suffering, and I don't lift a finger to help them.

I condemn injustice, but I do nothing to fight against it.

I am pained by the faces of starving children, but I am not moved enough to try to save them.

I step over homeless people in the street, I walk past outstretched hands, I avert my eyes, I close my heart.

Forgive me, God, for remaining aloof while others are in need of my assistance.

Wake me up, God; ignite my passion, fill me with outrage. Remind me that I am responsible for your world.

Don't allow me to stand idly by. Inspire me to act. Teach me to believe that I can repair some corner of this world.

When I despair, fill me with hope. When I doubt my strength, fill me with faith. When I am weary, renew my spirit. When I lose direction, show me the way back to meaning, back to compassion, back to you.

Rabbi Naomi Levy