

It's Not About You
Rabbi Mark Kaiserman
The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
Rosh Hashanah Morning – September 24, 2022

When I walked into her office, the mood turned immediately. I had stopped by my professor's study at HUC-JIR to share a quick hello. Although the classes for my Doctor of Ministry program were complete, I have to be on campus occasionally to work on the final project for my doctorate. It was the first day of the new semester, and I thought I'd pop in. Her door was open, and she was sitting in the desk chair staring off into an unseen distance.

She did not seem happy to see me. Her face soured with a reaction that was cold and detached. "Oh, hello," she murmured. I tried to make a little small talk about the summer and the new students. Her answers were sharp and perfunctory, even unfriendly. I backed to the door, my heart heavy. What had I done? How had I offended her? My mind raced to our last conversation, the last email. Was she holding some grudge from some past slight? Should I have walked past her office without saying anything – but would that have been rude? What had *I* done?

Just before I could depart, she broke the silence in the air with the first energy in her voice. "It's so frustrating. A couple of minutes ago, I learned the entire computer network is out, and they don't know if we can have our online classes this morning. On the first day! It's so maddening." I commiserated about the faulty technology and the challenges of a Zoom-based classroom. Having someone to share her difficulties, her whole mood lightened. I wished her luck and said my goodbyes with one thought in mind – It was not about me.

We are each the protagonist of our own lives. Every interaction and event is interpreted directly through our own experience. My neighbor is intentionally playing music tonight when he knows I am going to sleep early! That crying baby is upsetting my service experience! I have soccer all afternoon, how can the teacher assign me homework?

Living in the bubbles of COVID quarantine and social media, we cultivate and craft a world to our own liking. Others' actions and words are construed as about us when objectively they aren't. Announcing a new job on Facebook isn't a comment on your current employment. And when a co-worker shares about her daughter's wedding, it probably isn't referring to your child's marital status, whom she doesn't even know. Sometimes we're all living in Carly Simon's words, "You probably think this song is about you." Most of the time, it's not about you.

Because we are the central figure in our own life story, we insert ourselves in places where we never intended. Have you ever seen someone waving at you across a room? You smile, you wave back. Maybe you know them, but you aren't really sure who they are. They walk forward, ignore you completely, and greet the person behind you. It was not about you, but we sometimes make it about us. Our own story takes over and shuts out the actual protagonist.

When the government announced that some student loans were being forgiven, there was angry vitriol shared. People griped, "I worked hard to pay my student loans, so these students should have to pay it all in full." But the loan forgiveness wasn't about them. And your point of pride didn't stop people from turning down smallpox vaccines and social security and computers even though their grandparents didn't have any of those.

When a person tells you that they want to be known by a new name or a pronoun, it isn't about you. We change terms all the time. We stop using childhood nicknames, acquire titles through education, change last names through marriage, and then maybe through divorce. A name or pronoun change is a big deal for that person. Often is a life-changing moment on a difficult journey. Maybe we focus on them and not on ourselves.

The great Rabbi Hillel famously said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"

Some people live in the world of "If I am only for myself." They merge at the last possible second. They expect others to cater to them at the expense of everyone else. They twist reality to their own understanding, such as calling the cops on someone walking their dog or sitting on their building's stoop because they didn't fit *their* expectations of the neighborhood. They attack store clerks and waiters for minor infractions that they perceive as mortal wounds. They pass laws or vote to benefit their own political position without recognizing the human beings they will harm.

A midrash shares: Once, many passengers on a boat were shocked to see one man beginning to drill under his seat. "What are you doing?" they cried. "You'll drown us all." The man scoffed at them. "What business is it of yours? What I do here under my own seat does not concern you" (Leviticus Rabbah 4:6). All aboard, the people must have then shouted, "It's not about you!"

It is becoming more and more common to judge the world exclusively through one's own lens, as if they are wearing mirrored sunglasses with the mirror on the inside. Everything around them is only about them.

It's not always our story. Sometimes, often, it is another person's story, and we need to turn our attention to them.

As a child, our parents might have reminded us to put ourselves in another person's shoes and see things from their perspective. This can often be misunderstood as telling them *our* perspective. While there are times people honestly ask for our opinion, advice, and input. Often we supply it unasked. A friend recently told me, "Unsolicited advice is criticism, not help." Uninvited comments to change how we look, or work, or parent, or smile are pushing our agenda onto someone who didn't request it, and likely doesn't appreciate it.

When people share with us, they usually aren't looking for commentary but a listening ear. Last High Holy Days, I noted, "If your first response to someone's sharing is a statement that starts with 'I,' you might not be listening but speaking back at them." If someone tells us that their car broke down that morning, they aren't looking for us to share our list of previous car troubles. Worse, people often feel the need to respond, "You think that's bad? Once I..." Thus they have minimized the pain of the other person as if they shouldn't have their feelings.

Have you ever been told, "I feel sorry for you..." That kind of sympathy has turned a story about your life into an account of how the other person feels about your life. But the story was about you.

When sharing their struggle with infertility, telling the couple that everything will work out is based on the listener's need to make things all right, not the couple's struggles and pain. When learning a colleague's parent has died, telling them, "I know how you feel," turns their experience into your life journey. Having had a similar event in your life doesn't make it the same.

When people share – from a bad date to a fight with a family member to a struggle at work to financial troubles to a fun time they had yesterday – they want to be heard and appreciated. They want empathy.

The wonderful author Brené Brown wrote, "Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience....In the face of difficult conversation, when we see that someone's hurt or in pain, it's our instinct

as human beings to try to make things better. We want to fix; we want to give advice. But empathy isn't about fixing, it's the brave choice to be with someone in their darkness - not to race to turn on the light so we feel better." (Brené Brown, 2018)

Take a classic example. Someone shares that they are gay or lesbian or transgender or any part of the LGBTQ+ world. A common response is, "Yes, I already knew that." But it isn't about us and how clever we are. In that moment, that person wants connection and embrace. If a sentence starts with 'I,' it should be "I love you, I am here for you." This is their moment of need and vulnerability.

Suppose someone shares their mother's cancer diagnosis. A response could be, "At least you've had many wonderful years together." "At least..." is a silver lining response. It is taking their story and making it better for us, the listener. Our response will not make things better, but our connection can. Silence, a hug, a hand have a more positive impact than all the well-intentioned sympathy. We can respond with a true heart even when we don't have the words. "I don't know what to say right now, but I'm glad you told me. Tell me more what you are feeling."

Perhaps this morning's Torah portion is a reminder of empathy. Abraham heard God's command only through his own understanding. It wasn't until he recognized how Isaac would be impacted until he felt his son's pain that the opportunity for healing could be found.

We avoid empathy because then we, too, need to be vulnerable. It is easier to put up walls and create distance than to be present in the moment with someone else, even when we love them.

Putting ourselves in another's shoes is at the heart of the commandments of Judaism. Exodus 23 teaches us to "not oppress a stranger." Why? Sure it is nice and compassionate, but it is because we have been there. "Do not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). It is not a call to say, "You think you had it bad? Listen to my people's story!" It is a cry for connection on a soul level with another human being.

"When we allow ourselves to see things from the other person's point of view we create the opportunity for profound validation and healing. We do this when we listen non-judgmentally with our ears and eyes, our heart and soul." (Rabbi Joseph H. Krakoff)

People share to be heard and seen, to know that someone else in this dark, lonely world cares. Not to be told that someone else has the exact same experience or to one-up by sharing their story. Not to have silver linings put on their troubles. Not to hear about their pain filtered through someone else's eyes. People want to connect their souls. When we respond primarily from *our* needs, it is our mirror sunglasses on the inside. We are then sharing what we need to hear, not what they are searching for. Can we turn the moment and recognize that so much of the time, it's not about you? It's not about us. It's about them.

You are the protagonist of your life. Will you be a sympathizer, sharing about yourself? Or will you share empathy, focusing on them?

The actress Audrey Hepburn once said, "Nothing is more important than empathy for another human being's suffering. Nothing. Not career, not wealth, not intelligence, certainly not status. We have to feel for one another if we're going to survive with dignity."

In this new year, may we all use our many gifts not to tell others but to listen. Not to advise but to support. Not to share our experience but to embrace their journey. Not to make it about me but to make it about them. In our isolated world, we yearn for responses of empathy and openness. In the coming year, let's focus on each other.