

Bridging Our Divides:
Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other, Part 2: Compassion
September 16, 2018
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Scriptures: 1 Kings 3:16-28; Matthew 25:31-46

According to the *Talmud*, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism, "We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are."¹

Does this observation strike you as odd? Most of us perceive ourselves to be objective interpreters of the world around us. We weigh the facts and make decisions based on the evidence. The house we buy, the employee we hire – and the political decisions we make – are all based on our objective assessment of what is good and right. Right?

If the Talmud is correct, our assessments are far from objective. The information we see and regard as true has already been filtered through a lens that has been colored in a certain way long before we ever set eyes on it.

According to reams of research, some of which is presented in Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*, the Talmud is, in fact, correct. We all look at the world through different colored glasses without realizing they are colored. When we look out at the world, we may think we're all seeing the same thing – and we very well may be – but we're each *interpreting* it differently. Our interpretation started being shaped even before we started looking. Is it any wonder why some people see a glass half empty when others see a glass half full?

If you know this is happening, you can adjust your vision to see more of what another person is seeing and – perhaps – conclude that they're not an idiot for believing what they do. But if you think that the world is actually colored in the exact hues that you perceive and everyone else is blind to the truth ... well, welcome to America 2018!

This difference of "coloration" is not something we see so much as something we *feel*. If you're feeling angry and resentful when you wake up in the morning, for

¹ Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachmani, as quoted in the Talmudic tractate *Berakhot* (55b.).

instance, you're likely to experience your whole day quite differently than if you wake up happy and excited. Your day isn't predetermined this way, but it is *predisposed*. Predisposed by your feelings, not your rational, logical assessment of how your day is going.

As Haidt puts it, our feelings, emotions, and intuitions are like internal elephants. Our reason and logic are like internal elephant riders. We like to think that the elephant rider is in charge of where we go. But as any actual elephant rider knows, if the elephant is dead set on turning left, you're both heading left whether that's the "reasonable" path to take or not.

The Talmud knows this. Jonathan Haidt knows this. And, for better or worse, advertising agencies know this as well. They know that if you can trigger someone's emotions right off the bat, you predispose them to lean in a certain direction. If you can manage the emotion, you can manage the direction the person is leaning. It's just a "lean," of course, not a "walk," but every walk begins with a lean. If you apply enough strong emotional triggers often enough, you might even get the internal elephant to go from leaning to walking and from walking to running. You can start a stampede!

One emotional trigger that is unusually effective at getting our internal elephants moving is Compassion – or its opposite – Harm. The word "Compassion" itself should signal its power. Compassion literally means, "to suffer with." (Latin roots: *com* = with; *pati* = suffer). When you experience someone else's suffering as your own, that's a pretty powerful motivator to take action!

The Hebrew word that is translated into English as Compassion makes this all the clearer. The Hebrew word is *rachamim*, which literally means "wombishness." In other words, when you feel connected to another person so deeply that it's like they reside within your belly, as flesh-of-your-flesh, bone-of-your-bone, such that the person's pain literally hits you in the gut, that's Compassion, as the Hebrews understand it.

Do you suppose that someone feeling deeply triggered by Compassion in this sense gives a hoot about weighing the evidence before deciding whether or not to help a person who's suffering? "Studies suggest that charging into the burning house before you to rescue your child only has a 10% chance of succeeding and a 90% chance of killing you ... Hey, come back! Didn't you hear what I just said?"

Of course, because this Compassion trigger is so powerful, there is constantly a temptation for people to use the trigger to manipulate people to serve a hidden agenda. Even King Solomon used the Compassion trigger to serve a hidden agenda. Did you notice?

Two prostitutes come before him with a single baby, each claiming to be its mother. Based on the evidence they produce to support their case, it is impossible to determine which is the rightful mother and which one is trying to steal the other's baby to replace their own that had just died. How will Solomon judge between them?

Well, Solomon knew that, "We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are." So he devised an illusion that would trigger each woman before him to react in a way that revealed who she really was.

Calling for a sword to be brought forward, Solomon ordered the child to be divided in half so that the child could be given to each woman equally. Given the choice between half a baby and no baby, the lying woman said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it."

Yet the rightful mother didn't see any choice at all. There could *only* be a living baby. Her compassion, her "wombishness," triggered her "inner elephant" so profoundly that it stormed the gates of heaven and hell to keep her child alive, whatever the cost. "Please, my lord," she cried, "give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!"

Did I mention that Compassion is a powerful trigger? It is one of the most powerful forces the world has ever known.

The strength of highly compassionate people is that they can accomplish some of the greatest, seemingly "impossible" acts of kindness and generosity the world has ever known. These are the "sheep" that Jesus distinguishes from the "goats." The sheep are those who bring food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, medicine to the sick, who welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner. In other words, sheep are the compassionate folks – the ones who give a hoot about the suffering of others. To these sheep, Jesus says, "Whatever you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me." (Matthew 25:40)

The weakness of these very compassionate “sheep” is that they can be played. Manipulated by those with ulterior motives. Any emotion, really, that can overcome reason and logic, and even a sense of justice such that a mother would literally place her child into the arms of a lying thief is an emotion that can be manipulated for nefarious purposes as well as righteous ones. So Jesus doesn’t just want his sheep to be compassionate. He warns them to beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing.

According to Jonathan Haidt’s research and that of many others, moral decision-making is not just based on Compassion. Compassion is just one of six moral values, or triggers, that are universally held throughout the world and across cultures. Coincidentally (or not!), each of these moral values corresponds to a sermon in this series! Last week’s sermon was on Fairness – one of these moral values. This week we’re looking at Compassion. The other values are Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity (the “God thing”). Everyone has a “taste” for these qualities.

Only, the surprising thing is that our “taste” for these moral qualities works a lot like our taste in food. Some people like salty foods over sweet ones. Some love the combination of salty and sweet, or sweet and sour, while others don’t. You don’t say that liking bananas is morally correct while preferring oranges is morally repugnant. You choose one over another simply because one tastes better to you. Taste isn’t objective. Your preference for oranges over bananas is influenced by your genetics, the culture in which you live, and other factors that have been established well before you have ever tasted either of these foods.

Curiously, our moral decisions are based more on subjective “taste” than objective reason. This isn’t to say that morals are strictly relative. The six moral values I just listed are universally held to be “good,” and their opposites are likewise considered “bad.” However, what *is* relative is the particular *weight* we assign to each moral quality when making moral decisions.

For example, according to Jonathan Haidt, an enormous swatch of the American population, which we’ll call for the moment Group A, assigns an extremely high value to Compassion and Fairness, and a particular subset of Liberty, which we’ll call Freeing the Oppressed. This same population assigns a relatively low value to the qualities of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity. So anything that smells like Compassion, Fairness, or Freeing the Oppressed, gets their saliva flowing. Their “inner elephants” lean in the direction of whatever policy or program seems to fulfill these three desires.

Since Group A is relatively indifferent to the qualities of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, they're also likely to find moral arguments that appeal only to these qualities and find the others about as appealing as white rice on a bed of mashed potatoes – at best. “Where’s the good stuff?” they’ll ask. It’s not that Group A doesn’t like rice or mashed potatoes. Group A just likes other foods much more.

Within Group A, there are also some who truly do like the “flavor” of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, but because of the way they perceive the world – rightly or wrongly – these qualities are negative, at least right now. If you are persuaded that the train you’re on is speeding down a track that has been wiped out by an avalanche several miles ahead and is headed over a cliff, then Loyalty to the track the train has been following for years, or trusting in the Authority of an engineer who doesn’t see the problem, or even putting faith in the Sanctity of a loving creator who will protect you from harm is vastly overrated. These “traditional values” are great under normal conditions, but not when the track is taking you over a cliff.

On the other hand, there is another enormous segment of the American population – we’ll call them Group B – that does not privilege one set of moral qualities over another. They assign pretty much equal value to each of the six moral “flavors.” The “foods” they get excited about, therefore, are those that appeal to all the moral taste buds at once, in relatively equal amounts – salty, but not too salty, sweet, but not too sweet, spicy, but not too spicy.

If these people are presented with a moral argument that champions the values of Compassion, Fairness, and Freedom from Oppression, but fails to engage the values of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, they are likely not only unimpressed, but even offended. It’s like making Thanksgiving Dinner but only serving turkey, stuffing, and steamed beans. “Where’s the gravy, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie?” they ask. “This is downright un-American!” they exclaim.

By now, you may realize that “Group A” corresponds to those who tend to self-identify as politically liberal. “Group B” tends to self-identify as politically conservative. Again, these are generalities to which there are many exceptions.

Given these moral “tastes”, and how they tend to predispose our “internal elephants” to move in one direction, you may be able to see why America is like a group of stampeding elephants right now.

Statistically, those who self-identify as “very liberal” hold the value of Compassion three to four times more highly than those who self-identify as “very conservative.” This intuition leads many liberals to *feel* like they alone care about those who are hurting.

Yet, according to Haidt, liberals have no monopoly on Compassion. Study after study confirms that, while exceptions do exist, “very conservative” people tend to be very caring people who deeply resent constantly being maligned as uncompassionate. Just because you hold other values alongside Compassion does not mean you are uncompassionate.

Further, “very conservative” people tend to view “liberals” as people with bleeding hearts, who are so blinded by Compassion that they can be manipulated into throwing out the baby with the bathwater even when it’s the baby they’re trying to save. An example might be an economic policy proposed by “liberals” to help the poor and level the playing field that “conservatives” honestly believe - rightly or wrongly - would actually hurt the poor and widen the playing field.

If you are a “liberal,” I’m sorry – the “conservatives” have a point here. Because “liberals” tend to value Compassion above all other moral qualities, your internal “elephants” can stampede more readily without meaningful input from your internal “elephant riders.”

However, what “very conservative” people often fail to see is that the values they hold more dearly than “liberals” are powerful triggers themselves. Threats to Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity – real or perceived – can throw off the elephant riders and run the elephants quite easily.

So what does all this tell us, you may ask. What it tells me is that political conservatives look very little like the caricatures painted of them: “haters” who care only for themselves and have no empathy for those who are hurting. Privileged people who don’t give a hoot about fairness and could care less about the poor.

And of course, political liberals don’t hold to their caricatures as well: people with bleeding hearts (manipulated by Compassion), who have no respect for the flag (Loyalty to country), or law-and-order (Authority), or God.

If we are to come together as a nation, we don’t need to agree on everything. But what we must do is listen to one another more carefully than ever. We need

to swap each other's rose- or blue-colored glasses long enough to be able to see the world through their eyes, not merely our own. We must try each other's foods until we realize that taste is a matter of preference, and even foods we don't prefer can be nutritious.

What this also tells me is that, like Solomon, we must reject any arguments that prefer dividing our nation and failing to unite our nation. Those who would incite a civil war – on the Right or the Left – are not the true mothers of our country, but liars, cheats, and thieves.

We don't need to surrender everything we love and hold dear and place them in the arms of the thieves and liars just to keep them alive. But, for those who call themselves Christians, we are called to surrender everything we hold dear and place them in the arms of Jesus.

As Christians, Jesus should be the recipient of our **Loyalty**. Jesus should be the source of our **Authority**. Jesus should be the model for everything we hold sacred. The way of life Jesus taught and lived should be our path to true **Freedom and Liberty**. Jesus' embrace of the outcast and lowest in society should set the bar for what it means to be **Equal and Fair**. And Jesus' self-sacrifice on the Cross should be our assurance of God's **Compassion** for all people – including our enemies. In this way, the colored glasses through which we view the world and respond to it will not show the world as it is, but as Christ wants it to be: A **Sacred** world, where we do on Earth as it is done in Heaven.