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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday October 23, 2026 ~ Parshat: Lech Lecha

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Before I Help You, Admit I Was Right

When did empathy become controversial?

First, let's make sure we share an understanding of what empathy means. Here are definitions from the Merriam Webster, and Cambridge English dictionaries:

1. the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of [another](#).
2. the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's [situation](#).

I would have thought that understanding and being sensitive to another's suffering was something most Americans could support. We might disagree about what to do about that suffering. But surely recognizing it was a good place to begin. Apparently, even that has become complicated.

An *Axios* article this week reported on a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute examining Americans' attitudes toward empathy. It found substantial differences among religious and political groups, with white evangelical Protestants standing apart in their preference for a statement warning about empathy when it conflicts with their understanding of divine truth.

Jewish respondents were among the groups most likely to affirm empathy's importance: 77% selected the statement describing it as foundational to a healthy society. As a rabbi, I was pleased. Our tradition repeatedly commands us to remember what vulnerability feels like and to allow that memory to shape how we treat others. But before we congratulate ourselves, we should ask what the survey actually tells us. Does it mean Jews are more compassionate than other people? That those who

answered differently are indifferent to suffering? I do not think we can draw those conclusions.

The questionnaire asked respondents to choose between affirming empathy's foundational value and warning that empathy can become dangerous when it draws society away from God's truth. Those statements are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A person could believe compassion is essential while also believing that appeals to compassion sometimes encourage poor judgment.

Additionally, in our ugly current political culture, even the word "empathy" can sound like an argument waiting to happen. That is why I began this Shabbat message with actual definitions of the word, stripped of any political context. Empathy has a real meaning. Yet in our current political climate, people may hear something very different when the word is used. Some hear an invitation to understand another person's pain. Others hear a demand to approve someone else's behavior. Still others hear pressure to support a policy whose consequences seem dangerous. We need to make some distinctions.

Understanding someone's anger does not excuse violence. Recognizing hardship does not settle every question of public policy. Compassion does not require us to abandon judgment, erase boundaries, adopt lower moral standards, or pretend that choices have no consequences. But neither should those truths become convenient excuses for indifference.

We can become so determined to explain why someone is wrong that we forget to ask whether that person needs help.

This week's Torah reading offers a remarkable example. Abraham and his nephew Lot have reached a difficult point in their relationship. Their herdsmen are quarreling. Their households have grown too large to remain together. Abraham proposes a separation and allows Lot to choose where he will settle. Lot chooses the well-watered plain of the Jordan. They go their separate ways. Sometimes, a relationship needs distance. Abraham recognizes that.

But the great Torah commentator Rashi adds a beautiful understanding of Abraham's words. Wherever Lot settles, Abraham will remain close enough to protect and help him. Rashi connects that assurance to what happens soon after that. War breaks out. Lot is taken captive. Abraham hears the news, mobilizes his household, and goes to rescue him. He brings back Lot and the other captives.

Abraham establishes a boundary without withdrawing his concern. He does not have to live beside Lot. He does not have to pretend their conflict never happened. But when Lot is in danger, Abraham responds.

The Torah records no lecture delivered before the rescue. No demand that Lot first acknowledge his mistakes. No insistence that he admit his uncle had been right.

Abraham goes.

How easily we reverse that order. First admit you were wrong. First apologize. First agree with me. Then perhaps we can discuss what I owe you. We hear that reasoning in political arguments. We encounter it in family estrangements. We may recognize it in ourselves.

“You chose differently. You believe differently. You brought this upon yourself. Why should I help?”

Abraham’s actions offer another answer: We have gone our separate ways. But your suffering still makes a claim upon me. That does not mean every estranged relationship can or should be restored. Some boundaries remain necessary. Helping someone does not always require reopening a door that needed to be closed. We must use judgment about what help is appropriate and how to offer it.

But we should examine the conditions we attach to our compassion. You do not have to agree with someone’s choices to recognize your responsibility when that person is in trouble.

That is the religious concern beneath this survey. We can argue about the meaning of empathy. We can endorse it enthusiastically on a questionnaire. Or not. The harder question arrives when someone needs us. Will we make room for that person’s pain, even when our disagreements remain?

Abraham does not send Lot a statement affirming the importance of compassion. He goes to bring him home. As always, actions speak louder than words.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner