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When NASA first started sending up astronauts, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens would not work in zero gravity. To combat the problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and something like \$1 billion to develop a pen that writes in zero gravity, upside down, and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to 300 C. The Russians used a pencil. Simplicity...

You know, we often think that Judaism is a very complex and complicated religion. We are, after all the People of the Book and our religion is one with a great many laws and customs. But in a sense this week's Torah portion reminds us, teaches us that Judaism is not the complicated at its core. Leviticus 19:18 is very straightforward: "Ve-Ahavta L'Rayecha Kamocha" - Love your neighbor as yourself - Ani Ha-Shem - for I am Gd. What is it that Gd wants of us? Simple: Love your fellow, your neighbor and the people you meet, as you do yourself. This, Rabbi Akiba says, is "Klal Gadol Ba-Torah" - a Great Principle of Torah. In other words: What is your mandate, Jewish People? To be compassionate! It's that simple. But it is also that complex.

Our natural assumption is that people would want to be compassionate, caring and kind, right? In theory, yes, but in practice it's a lot tougher. And there are lots of reasons why people are less compassionate in real life than they would want to be in theory. I want to talk briefly with you this morning about this challenge and what we can do to address it. One of the reasons we can sometimes be less compassionate than we want to be is because we are more interested in being right than we are in being sensitive. Compassion requires putting ourselves out and seeing things from the other person's perspective. And, if we look at ourselves from their perspective we might find out that we are wrong. Being right is comfortable. Being wrong isn't. So compassion isn't just about helping someone feel better, it's also taking the chance that you will feel worse about yourself.

I think that's why the sage Hillel twisted this simple wisdom around a bit. Remember, the Torah says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Well, Hillel, when asked by a man to teach him the whole Torah in a nutshell (or as the text says, while standing on one foot), said, "What ever is hateful to you do not do to your friend." In other words, see what causes you pain and then vow not to do that to others. Here it's not so much about understanding the other person, or seeing life

through their eyes. Rather, it's more about understanding yourself, and when you do, when you know what you like and don't like, it's pretty safe that the other person will feel the same way. I totally understand why Hillel would take it this way. Seeing them through yours keeps you in charge. Trying to see yourself through their eyes makes you vulnerable, and that's why we are sometimes not as compassionate as we'd like to be.

Hillel's teaching does, however, take on one of the major obstacles to compassion and that is we think that compassion is beyond our reach. When we hear stories of compassion they are usually feel good stories about people doing amazing things for others. They are feel good stories about people we could never be. Most news today is bad news, and it is only acts of extraordinary compassion that get any media attention at all. And when we see them we think, "Well, great for them. How wonderful..." But I don't think people sit down and say, now how can I do that? It's too big, too ambitious and too daunting.

Still another reason why we are not as compassionate as the simple "Love your neighbor as yourself" pushes us to be is because people often associate being compassionate with getting depressed. People who need compassion are hurting or in pain. Extending sensitivity and compassion means feeling their pain. And even those of us who are professional care givers can get compassion fatigue. If "Loving your neighbor as yourself" means primarily feeling their pain then that's not something we want to live with all the time. And yet, I truly believe that this simple principle is one that Gd wants us to live by minute by minute, day by day, every day. That's why it is the "Great Principle of the Torah."

So let me give you another way of looking at and living compassion: I believe that the Torah's injunction here to "Love your neighbor as yourself can" foster a compassion that is motivated not simply out of caring, or kindness or empathy, but rather out of curiosity. Curiosity is "entry level" compassion. Just because you are curious what it is like to be another person, to walk in their shoes, does not mean that you need to feel worse about yourself. You don't need to feel like your taking on something bigger than you can handle. Compassion born of curiosity makes compassion interesting and even fun. Love your neighbor as yourself, seen in this way, is an invitation to learn, to explore, to think, to wonder. And I think it's an easy way to broach the subject with our kids. "I wonder what it's like to be her or him?" That is the starting point of compassion. That's the first step in "Loving your neighbor as yourself." It's the first step in overcoming excessive self-

obsession, the first step in becoming more fully alive and in touch with the world around you. Curiosity can then lead to empathy, empathy to kindness, and kindness to care.

So I want you to think of people who are need of your compassion. But instead of thinking about what you can do for them, how you can help them, I want you to just think about a question you might ask them, something that would reveal a bit more of what's going on on the inside. Your curiosity may be all that it takes to bridge the gap between them and you. To make it even simpler I suggest you start with the four most compelling words in any relationship building. These are the four words of compassion that come from curiosity. And here are these four most powerful words: Tell Me Your Story. In the quiet time of prayer we are about to share think of someone who can benefit from the healing touch of your curiosity, someone who needs you to simply say to them: Tell Me Your Story...