

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [285]

What Shall I Do to This Elder? (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 87b)



Background to Our Story

Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion (Understanding the differences)

(With appreciation to Gail Budiansky for leading me into that direction)

Sympathy: feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune.

Empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Compassion: literally "to suffer together." Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.

Empathy vs. Sympathy: What's the Difference?

What's the difference between empathy and sympathy? Basically, emotion. **Empathy** means **experiencing** someone else's feelings. It comes from the German *Einfühlung*, or 'feeling into.' It requires an emotional component of really feeling what the other person is feeling. Sympathy, on the other hand, means **understanding** someone else's suffering. It's more cognitive in nature and keeps a certain distance.

This hilarious RSA Animate, narrated by a clip from Brené Brown's TED talk on empathy, highlights the difference perfectly

<https://www.6seconds.org/2021/01/20/empathy-vs-sympathy-what-the-difference/>

Empathy vs. Compassion: What's the Difference?

Compassion is not the same as **empathy**, though the concepts are related. While **empathy** refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person, **compassion** is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help.

Hosea

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hosea>

In the Hebrew Bible, Hosea (Hebrew: הוֹשֵׁעַ, 'Salvation'), son of Beeri, was an 8th-century BCE prophet in Israel and the nominal primary author of the Book of Hosea. He is the first of the Twelve Minor Prophets, whose collective writings were aggregated and organized into a single book in the Jewish Tanakh by the Second Temple period, forming the last book of the Nevi'im; but which writings are distinguished as individual books in Christianity. Hosea is often seen as a "prophet of doom", but underneath his message of destruction is a promise of restoration. The Talmud claims that he was the greatest prophet of his generation. The period of Hosea's ministry extended to some sixty years, and he was the only prophet of Israel of his time who left any written prophecy.

Hosea Chapter 1

1 The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

² When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom; for the land will stray from following the Lord." ³ So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

⁴ Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel." ⁵ In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel."

⁶ Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them." ⁷ Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the LORD their God, will save them."

⁸ After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi (which means "not my people"), for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

? What is it odd about the first chapter of the Book of Hosea?

Hosea Chapter 2

¹ "Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.' ² The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel. ³ Say of your brothers, 'My people,' and of your sisters, 'My loved one.'

...

²⁵ I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'"

"I Hope that when you grow up, you'll have a kid just like you!" (See: **Always Wear Clean Underwear!** by Marc Gellman)

? Have you heard of parents telling their children the above expression? In which circumstances?

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 87b

"דבר ה' אשר היה אל הושע וגו' בימי עזיהו יותם אחז יחזקיה מלך יהודה". בפרק אחד נתנבאו ארבעה נביאים, וגדול שבכולן הושע, שנאמר: "תחלת דבר ה' בהושע". וכי בהושע דבר תחלה? והלא ממשוה עד הושע כמה נביאים! אמר רבי יוחנן: תחלה לארבעה נביאים שנבאו באותו הפרק, ואלו הן: הושע, ישעיה, עמוס, ומיכה.

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא להושע: בניה תטאו. והיה לו לומר: בניה הם, בני חנוניה הם, בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב, גלגל רחמי עליהן. לא דיו שלא אמר כך, אלא אמר לפניו: רבונן של עולם, כל העולם שלך הוא – העבירם באומה אחרת.

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מה אעשה לזקן זה? אומר לו: לך וקח אשה זונה והוליד לה בנים זנונים, ואחר כך אומר לו שלחה מעל פניה. אם הוא יכול לשלוח – אף אני אשלח את ישראל. שנאמר: "ויאמר ה' אל הושע לך קח לה אשת זנונים וילדי זנונים", וכתוב: "ויגלה ויקח את גמר בת דבלים".

"גמר", אמר רב: שהכל גומרים בה. "בת ומהר ותלד לו בן ויאמר ה' אליו קרא שמו יזרעאל כי עוד מעט ופקדתי את דמי יזרעאל על בית יהוא והשבתי ממלכות בית ישראל ומהר עוד ותלד בת ויאמר לו קרא שמה לא רחמה כי לא אוסיף עוד ארחם את בית ישראל כי נשא אשא להם ומהר ותלד בן ויאמר ה' אליו קרא שמו לא עמי כי אתם לא עמי ואנכי לא אהיה לכם".

לאחר שנולדו לו שני בנים ובת אחת אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא להושע: לא היה לך ללמוד ממשוה רבך, שכיון שדברתי עמו – פירש מן האשה, אף אתה גדול עצמה ממנה.

אמר לו: רבונן של עולם, יש לי בנים ממנה ואין אני יכול להוציאה ולא לגרשה!

אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא: ומה אתה, שאשתך זונה ובניה בני זנונים, ואין אתה יודע אם שלך הן אם של אחרים הן – כך. ישראל, שהן בני, בני בחוני, בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב, אחד מארבעה קנינין שקניתי בעולמי. תורה קנין אחד, דכתיב: "ה' קנני ראשית דרכו". שמים וארץ קנין אחד, דכתיב: "קנה שמים וארץ". בית המקדש קנין אחד, דכתיב: "הר זה קנתה מינו". ישראל קנין אחד, דכתיב: "עם זו קניתי". ואתה אמרת העבירם באומה אחרת!

כיון שיזע שחטא עמד לבקש רחמים על עצמו. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: עד שאתה מבקש רחמים על עצמה – בקש רחמים על ישראל, שגזרתי עליהם שלש גזירות בעבורך.

עמד ובקש רחמים ובטל גזירה, והתחיל לברכו, שנאמר: "והיה מספר בני ישראל כחול הים וגו' והיה במקום אשר יאמר להם לא עמי אתם יאמר להם בני אל חי ונקבצו בני יהודה ובני ישראל יחדו וגו' וזרעתיקה לי בארץ ורחמתי את לא רחמה ואמרתי ללא עמי אתה"

"The word of the Lord that came unto Hosea, the son of Beerī, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judea, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel" (Hosea 1:1).

The Sages explained: Four prophets prophesied in one era and the greatest of them was Hosea, as it is stated: "When the Lord spoke at first with Hosea" (Hosea 1:2), indicating that Hosea was the first of these prophets. If not, the question arises: And was it with Hosea that the Lord spoke first of all the prophets? Weren't there several prophets who lived and prophesied during the period from Moses until Hosea? Rather, Rabbi Yoḥanan said: He was the first among four prophets who prophesied during that period, and these are they: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: Your sons, the Jewish people, have sinned. Hosea should have said to God in response: But they are Your sons; they are the sons of Your beloved ones, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Extend Your mercy over them. Not only did he fail to say that, but instead he said before Him: Master of the Universe, the entire world is Yours; since Israel has sinned, exchange them for another nation.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: What shall I do to this Elder who does not know how to defend Israel? I will say to him: Go and take a prostitute and bear for yourself children of prostitution. And after that I will say to him: Send her away from before you. If he is able to send her away, I will also send away the Jewish people. As it is stated: "The Lord said to Hosea: Go, take for yourself a wife of prostitution and children of prostitution" (Hosea 1:2). And then it is written: "So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim" (Hosea 1:3), and the Sages interpreted her name homiletically. "Gomer"; Rav said she was so called because everyone would finish [*gomerim*] having relations with her and satisfy their desires with her. "The daughter of Diblaim"; the name Diblaim can be taken as the dual form of the word *dibba*, ill repute. It suggests that she was a woman

of ill repute, daughter of a woman of ill repute. And Shmuel said: The name Diblaim is the plural of the word *deveila*, cake of pressed figs, indicating that she was as sweet as a cake of pressed figs, and therefore everyone used her services. Rabbi Yoĥanan, based on a similar derivation, said the name signifies that everyone would tread [*dashin*] upon her, a euphemism for sexual relations, like a cake of pressed figs. Alternatively, with regard to the name Gomer, Rav Yehuda said: The name can be understood as deriving from the root *gamar*, to finish. It alludes to the fact that the gentiles sought to finish the money of the Jewish people in her days. Rabbi Yoĥanan said: They did not just seek to do so, but were successful. They plundered and finished it, as it is stated: "For the king of Aram destroyed them and made them like the dust in threshing" (II Kings 13:17).

The passage in Hosea continues: "And she conceived, and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him: Call his name Jezreel; for soon I will visit the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will obliterate the kingdom of the house of Israel...And she conceived again, and bore a daughter. And He said to him: Call her name Lo-ruhamah, for I will no more have compassion upon the house of Israel that I should bear them...And she conceived, and bore a son. And He said: Call his name Lo-ammi; for you are not My people, and I will not be yours" (Hosea 13:9).

After two sons and one daughter had been born to him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: Shouldn't you have learned from the example of your master Moses, who, once I spoke with him, separated from his wife? You too, separate yourself from your wife. He [Hosea] said to him: Master of the Universe, I have sons from her and I am unable to dismiss her or to divorce her.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, rebuked him and said to him: Just as you, whose wife is a prostitute and your children from her are children of prostitution, and you do not even know if they are yours or if they are children of other men,

despite this, you are still attached to them and will not forsake them, SO too, I am still attached to the Jewish people, who are My sons, the sons of My faithful who withstood ordeals, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are so special that they are one of the four acquisitions that I acquired in My world. The Gemara proceeds to enumerate all four: Torah is one acquisition, as it is written: "The Lord acquired me as the beginning of His way" (Proverbs 8:22). Heaven and earth are one acquisition [*kinyan*], as it is written: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator [*koneh*] of heaven and earth" (Genesis 14:19). The Holy Temple is one acquisition, as it is written: "And He brought them to His sacred border, to this mountain, which His right hand had acquired" (Psalms 78:54). The Jewish people are one acquisition, as it is written: "The nation that You have acquired" (Exodus 15:16). And you, Hosea, said that I should replace them with another nation?

Once Hosea realized that he had sinned, he got up to request that God have compassion upon him for having spoken ill of the Jewish people. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: Before you request compassion upon yourself, first request compassion upon the Jewish people, since I have already decreed upon them three harsh decrees on your account, in response to your condemnation of them. There is an allusion to these three decrees in the names of the children born of the prostitute. Jezreel is an allusion to a decree for Jehu's actions in the Jezreel Valley (see II Kings 9:10). Lo-ruhamah, one that had not received compassion, suggests that God will no longer have compassion for the Jewish people. Lo-ammi, not My people, indicates that the Jewish people will no longer be considered God's people.

Hosea stood and requested compassion upon the Jewish people and nullified the decree. God responded and began to bless them, as it is stated: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered. And it will be that instead of that which was said to them: You are not My people, it shall be said to them: You are the children of the living God. And the children of Judea and the children of Israel shall be gathered together" (Hosea 2:1). And I will sow her to Me in the land; and I

will have compassion upon her that had not received compassion; and I will say to them that were not My people: You are My people” (Hosea 2:25).



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? According to the Talmudic story, why does God instruct Hosea to take a prostitute and bear for himself children of prostitution?

Bonus ? How does Hosea learn empathy and compassion?

For a Conversation ? Do you believe it is possible to learn empathy and compassion “being in the shoes” of the sufferer?

Bonus ? At the beginning of our story, Hosea is referred to as the greatest among his contemporaries. What is so great about Hosea?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Learning empathy and compassion: not always an easy task.



Our Talmudic story is based on a very strange biblical narrative, in which God instructs the Prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute and to bear children from her. While in the biblical story, the Prophet’s actions are meant to convey God’s message to the Israelites in a graphic way, in the Talmudic story, Hosea’s marriage to Gomer is part of God’s plan to teach Hosea empathy and compassion.

God reminds Hosea -and all of us- that not only is there no fast track to learn empathy and compassion, but many times, like in our story, learning comes through a personal experience of loss and pain.

At the end of our story, Hosea is transformed into a more sensitive and compassionate person; attuned to his own feelings and the feelings of others. In this transformation lies his greatness.