**And What About Compassion?**

**The Place of Compassion in Jewish Culture.**

**Abstract**

In this article we explore the place of compassion in Jewish culture. Compassion is a cultural value with an emotional aspect. Values are associated with culture, and emotions are culture-dependent (Gonen, 2003). Compassion involves participation, consideration, and a demonstration of empathy for another human being’s suffering. Compassion entails justice and acts of kindness (Schantz, 2007). One needs, of course, to distinguish between pity and compassion. Pity does not involve sharing in another’s grief; it is nothing but a means of self-defense against the suffering of other human beings (Zweig 1986, p. 188); compassion, on the other hand, recognizes our fellow-man’s right to be just as happy as we are.

To understand the place of compassion in contemporary Israeli culture, one obviously needs to turn to its Jewish origins. Acts of kindness (*Gemach*) in Judaism include all the commandments between man and man. Judaism stresses the sanctity of the commandment of acts of kindness, of the idea of benevolence and compassion; however, there are fundamental constructs within Jewish tradition that are in contradictory discourse with concept of compassion, three of which are explored in this paper.

**Separateness versus empathy and unity**—can compassion, as a principal value, coexist with a sense of separateness, isolation, and even arrogance. In Jewish culture, which commands and teaches acts of lovingkindness, there is a deep sense of separateness and an embedded implication of ‘us and ‘them.’ In a culture that classifies nations, tribes, and individuals hierarchically, it is difficult to discover the unifying and common, to empathize with the ‘other,’ and certainly to have compassion for him or her, regardless of the commandment of acts of kindness. Jewish culture educates for compassion between the people of the Jewish nation, but universal compassion toward ‘others’ is controversial. Compassion and the commandment of acts of kindness are important values in Judaism, but primarily within the peer group, and therefore, their universal value is tainted.

**Judgement, and biblical reward and punishment**—at the basisof Jewish ethics is a discourse on reward and punishment between man and an external authority. The concept of Jewish judgement is innately conflicted with the notion of compassion. The very essence of compassion is a lack of judgement. In a culture in which judgement is a central value, in a place where the ‘other’ is judged, compassion toward one’s fellow man is lacking, just as severe self-judgement lacks self-compassion and self-acceptance. On the topic of the doctrine of reward and strict punishment, we will argue that in God the attribute of justice (*Middat HaDin*) is paralleled with the attribute of pity (*Middat HaRachamim*). The favorable attribute is pity, not compassion. The debate over whether the God of justice and *The Lord, a God compassionate and gracious* are separate or complementing entities is, of course, open to interpretation, but at the same time, reflects an innate cultural conflict.

**Intention, repentance, and personal responsibility**—compassion is associated with high levels of self-awareness, principally with authentic internal intent. The fulfilment of the commandments as obedience to a judge’s external order may distance man from conscious, reflective work and from searching for the deep internal intent behind the deed. In Christianity, the ‘intent’ receives a significant place. Not only is the external deed examined, but also the intent, that is, the thoughts and emotions (Schimmel, 1997). Judgement in Christianity is applied also to conviction, before the deed is done. In Buddhism there is a special emphasis on intent. Bad intent is scrutinized more than the deed itself. In Judaism, intent is important as well, but far more attention is given to the behavior’s external enactment, to visibility. In Judaism, on Yom Kippur, confession is not personal per se, but rather collective, performed aloud in the first-person plural, and does not entail shame (associated with Christian confession). When the confession is performed in the plural, the assuming of responsibility necessary for internal work motivated by intent is tainted.