

How to Expand? Stand in *Their Shoes*¹

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*If I am not for myself, who will be?
And when I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?*
—Hillel¹

On a plane, you constantly fight for limited resources and against encroaching elbows, crying babies, overstuffed overhead bins, or coffee spilling on your open laptop (especially if you fly coach). Life on a plane is a microcosm of life on the planet. It's easy to see only your own point of view, feel that you must fend for yourself, and guard your space in a world reduced to you-or-me thinking.

In fact, aircraft are great laboratories for empathy. Put yourself in the shoes of a flight attendant (my wife was one for many years). "Often, we arrive with our beverage carts, obviously ready to take their drink order," said Robert Ward, a flight attendant based in San Francisco, but customers "wait until we have asked once or twice before removing their headphones and saying, 'What?'" Alan Boswell, a US Airways flight attendant, has experienced the same cold shoulder. On a typical flight, "I got to row four before I heard a single 'please' or 'thank you.'"

That's peanuts compared to Mary Sutphen's story. On a New York-Amsterdam flight, a passenger cursed her for refusing to serve him another whiskey, then kicked her in the knee, and finally decided to get her attention by urinating on her jump seat. On arrival he was met by the local authorities at the aircraft door. "I will never understand what happens to people when they get on an airplane," said Sutphen. "Some people check their brains with their bags."

¹ This article is based on Thomas D. Zweifel and Aaron L. Raskin's award-winning bestseller *The Rabbi and the CEO: The Ten Commandments for 21st Century Leaders* (New York 2008: Selectbooks).

In moments like this, Jewish philosophy comes as a godsend (quite literally). The very word for “life” in Hebrew, *chayim*, is a plural term (indicated by the *-im* ending). Jewish tradition holds that without a *minyan* (a quorum of ten Jews) you cannot pray *kaddish* (the mourner’s prayer) or read the Torah scroll in public; no Jew, no matter how great elsewhere in life, can do so unless a *minyan* is present. This age-old rule promotes a collective spirit, just like the Jewish adage that two people sitting together are better than the best person sitting alone. Life does not transpire within an individual, as even the brilliant individual Albert Einstein recognized:

A human being is part of the whole called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. ²

Take a moment to reflect on how your life, in fact your every activity, relies on others. Try to think of one object you could acquire without anybody’s help. It’s impossible to be 100 percent autonomous: your clothes, your chair, your smartphone—you’d have none of them if you were totally isolated. You’d not even exist. There’s no “I” without a “Thou,” for we’re profoundly dependent on each other.

Yes, the recognition of the “I” in individual has brought us far; it has freed us from being mere subjects of tyranny, granted us rights and liberties, and led to universal human rights.

But at the same time, it has given us the illusion that you and I are separate. In the business world, it has led CEOs to protect

themselves jealously from their people and use armies of secretaries to wall themselves off. At the German subsidiary of a global energy company, some middle managers had worked on the ground floors for ten years without ever seeing the president's third-floor office. By isolating themselves, leaders deprive themselves of strategic intelligence from the front lines. And since a leader, by definition, is with the people (you cannot lead without co-leaders or at least followers), such separation can be costly for productivity, loyalty, and morale.

In the extreme, "expressive individualism" (that's what experts call it, meaning: I do whatever I want, as long as I get away with it) has led to a "Me-Mine-Money" culture—note the word "selfie" and the "I" in iPhones and iPads; the Wii has even two "I"s—and to 45-year-olds driving alone in SUVs and guzzling away US energy independence.

Extreme individualism perceives a you-or-me world, a zero-sum game in which we prevent each other from getting what each wants, because the more I get, the less you get. The belief in separate individuals may well be the greatest obstacle we've put in our own paths. And it may cost us our common future.

Life is Plural

Amazing things happen when people recognize they're interconnected. Go back a century, to Armentières, France: Day after endless day, since early November 1914, British and German soldiers had fought each other bitterly, inch by inch in mud and snow, in battles of attrition. But a few days before Christmas the unimaginable occurred. Instead of hand grenades, Saxon soldiers lobbed a tightly wrapped chocolate cake. The British soldiers found a note in the cake: Would it not be feasible to have a truce that evening from 730pm to 830pm? The British accepted. English soldiers stood up from their trenches, listened to imperial German music, even applauded.

On Christmas Eve, Lieutenant Kurt Zehnisch, a high school teacher in civilian life, opened communication with the enemy dug in barely 100 meters away. They agreed to meet halfway between their trenches. Two soldiers from the German side climbed out of their cover and crawled through the barbed wire – a frightening moment. The soldiers on both sides waited, barely breathing. Finally, one Englishman came out of his trench holding up both hands. “In one hand he held a cap filled with English cigarettes and tobacco.” He shook the Germans’ hands and wished them “Merry Christmas.” They wished him “Merry Christmas,” amid screams of joy from both sides.

Enemy soldiers came out of their trenches, smoked and ate together, played soccer, even cut each other’s hair. Josef Wenzl wrote home: “What I will now report to you sounds barely believable, but it is the pure truth... Christmas 1914 will be unforgettable to me.” On May 6, 1917, Wenzl fell in battle.³

Standing With “Them”

Without empathy, you won’t see all perspectives, miss out on vital intelligence, and likely make bad decisions. You must allow those who tell you about their trials and tribulations to have an effect on your heart. Rabbi Shmuel, the fourth Rebbe of Lubavitch, was once asked why he perspired so profusely whenever he counseled people who came to see him. He answered, “If I am to counsel each man well, I must experience his distress exactly as he himself experiences it; I must divest myself of my own garments and clothe myself in his. Afterwards, I put my own garments back on; and when the next person comes, I put on his garment, so for every person who comes in with a question, I have to dress and undress.”⁴ Reb Shmuel knew that to truly help, he had to get into people’s skin. That’s why he sweated so much and had to change his shirt each hour.

Isn’t that going too far, though? How can we be empathic in today’s

world when terrorists are plotting to eliminate our way of life? No: Empathy with the worldview of others doesn't mean moral relativism. There *is* right and wrong. Yet unless you stand also in your adversaries' shoes, you'll not foresee their strategy, let alone defeat them. That's why David, the slayer of the mighty Goliath, exclaimed: "From my enemies I became wise."⁵

Modern-day leaders need a mind-set like the biblical warrior Yiftach who became Israel's army chief, a judge, and quite possibly the world's first diplomat. Why? Because of his openness (his name comes from *poteach*, "open"), Yiftach did not go to war with his enemies until he'd talked to them; and he started negotiations by asking them questions about their perspective, for example, "What is there between you and me that you have come to me to make war in my land?" and only then stating his own people's interests.⁶

For the Sake of Peace You May Bend the Truth

Moses's brother Aaron had the love and compassion to see both sides in a conflict. If two businessmen quarreled, Aaron went to each in ancient shuttle diplomacy. He'd allow himself to stretch the truth a little, just enough to bring about peace. He assured businessman A that businessman B had expressed appreciation and eagerness to resolve their dispute. Once A agreed to sit down with B, Aaron immediately went to B and told him A was ready to make peace. The sages later backed Aaron up: "For the sake of peace one is allowed to change [the truth]."⁷

In 1919, an Arab leader and a Jewish leader practiced the principle of being in the other side's shoes for the sake of peace, and did so in perhaps the toughest place: the Middle East. Emir Feisal, whose father Sherif Hussein of Mecca had led the Arab world in World War I, and who represented the Arab Kingdom of Hedjaz at the Paris peace conference after World War I, met with Chaim Weizmann, the representative of the Zionist organization. Meeting

first in Aqaba, Jordan and then in Paris, they signed an agreement calling for all necessary measures to “encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale.”⁸ In a follow-up letter to Weizmann, Feisal wrote:

We feel that Arabs and Jews are cousins in race, having suffered similar oppressions at the hands of powers stronger than themselves, and by a happy coincidence have been able to take the first step towards the attainment of their national ideals together... We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement... we will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home... our two movements complete one another...and there is room in Syria for us both. Indeed I think that neither can be a real success without the other.⁹

Such empathy or partnership between Muslims and Jews has become virtually unthinkable. Few people in the region say even as much as “I’m sorry” now – and I know from my own Facebook exchanges how hard it is to find common ground. Imagine what would be possible if people had the guts – and the skill – to stand in each other’s shoes.

And it *is* possible. André Azoulay, senior advisor to the King of Morocco, jokes that he’s a member of an elite club with one member – him – since he’s the only Jew to hold such a position in any Arab country. Azoulay feels equally Jewish and Arab. “I’m an Arab because I was born in an Arab country, and I’m an Arab because I absorb Arab culture, and I’m an Arab because I live in an Arab environment,” Azoulay said. “If I could only make peace between Jews and Muslims, I would feel that I had fulfilled my life’s ambition.”¹⁰

And you?

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¹ Pirkei Avot 1:14.

² Thomas Burke, ed., *Einstein: A Portrait* (Des Moines IA: Oxmoor House, 1984), 44.

³ Michael Jürgs, “Singen mit dem Feind [Singing With the Enemy]“, *Der Spiegel*, November 3, 2003; based on Michael Jürgs, *Der Kleine Frieden im Grossen Krieg [The Small Peace in the Great War]* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 2003).

⁴ Rabbi S. Y. Zevin, *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1980), 322.

⁵ Psalms 119:98.

⁶ Judges 11:1-33.

⁷ Joseph Ginsburg and Herman Branover, *Mind Over Matter: Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on Science, Technology and Medicine*, trans. and ed. Arnie Gotfryd (Jerusalem: Shamir, 2003), lvi.

⁸ Feisal Hussein and Chaim Weitzmann, Joint Arab-Jewish agreement on Jewish Homeland, January 3, 1919.

⁹ Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, *The Israel-Arab Reader* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 19.

¹⁰ Orly Halpern, “Moroccan king’s Jewish advisor fights for the Palestinian cause. ‘It makes me a full Jew’,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 31, 2006.