

If you were asked to identify the 100 most important women of the 20th century, who would be on your list? Fortunately, that daunting task was made easier for us by the Ladies Home Journal. In 1998, the Journal published a book titled, *100 Most Important Women of the 20th Century*.

The text from the inside jacket said:

As we head into the new millennium, one thing is certain: Women will never be the same. Neither will the world. Selected by a team of several top women historians from across the nation and the editors of Ladies' Home Journal, the women in this book helped bring about this major transformation. Narrowing the choice down to just 100 names was a daunting task. But some names practically suggested themselves.

And not surprisingly, among those whose names 'practically suggested themselves' are a number of Jewish women.

I'm certain you've heard of the following important, accomplished women:

Golda Meir
Ruth Bader Ginsburg
Anne Frank
Betty Freidan
Estee Lauder

But did you ever hear of Jean Evelyn Slutsky, who also appears on the Ladies Home Journal List?

Jean Evelyn Slutsky -- hardly a household name -- was better known by her married name, Jean Nidetch. Mrs. Nidetch died this past Wednesday at the age of 91 at her Florida home. And if you don't recognize the name 'Jean Nidetch', I'm positive you've heard of the organization she founded that since the early 1960s has helped millions of men and women.

It was a different world in 1961 for Jean Nidetch, who at the time weighed 214 pounds and wore a size 44 dress. She never ate dessert in public. But at night, by the dim light of the refrigerator, she gorged on cake, cookies, and other goodies. Then one day Jean ran into a neighbor at the supermarket.

"Oh, Jean, you look so good!" the neighbor said. *"When are you expecting?"*

That was it. Mrs. Nidetch, who had tried many times to subdue her compulsive eating -- dieting, losing weight, then gaining it all back again -- had to *do something*. She lost 72 pounds and helped found Weight Watchers, the organization that turned the drab, frustrating diet into an almost-religious mission.

What was the secret ingredient behind Weight Watchers?

Jean Nidetch discovered an important weight-loss tool that was missing from traditional diets: *Empathy*. Even as fad diets came and went, Weight Watchers endured based upon the unique factor of moral support.

There were supportive magazines and books, television forums and camps. Weight Watchers promoted meetings like those for alcoholics, with confessions and motivational speakers. These weekly meetings enabled members to draw empathetic and moral support from one another as they faced the scale.

It was moral support and empathy with those seeking to shed pounds that helped them to lower their weight, lift their spirits, and in many cases gave them back their lives.

Empathy -- true, sincere empathy -- is hard to find.

Melvin was walking on a downtown street one day, and he happened to see his old high school friend Harry a little ways up ahead.

"Harry, Harry, how *are* you?" he greeted his old buddy after getting his attention.

"Not so good," said Harry.

"Why, what happened?" Melvin asked.

"Well," Harry said, "I just went bankrupt and I've still got to feed my family. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Could have been worse," Melvin replied calmly. "Could have been worse."

Continuing, Harry said. "And not only did I go bankrupt, but our house burned down last night."

"Could have been worse," said Melvin again. "Could have been worse."

And then Harry added, "If you think that's bad, after all that *tzuris*, my wife left me!"

Melvin nodded his head and gave a little optimistic-seeming smile, accompanied by his usual words: "Could have been worse."

This time Harry grabbed Melvin by the shoulders.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "I've just told you three disasters that happened to me. And every time you say the same thing --"Could have been worse. *How in Heaven's name could it have been any worse?*"

Melvin looked at Harry and said:

"Could have been worse. It could have happened to me."

The Torah requires us to be empathetic, not simply sympathetic. Ethics of the Fathers says that one of the 48 ways with which the Torah is acquired is through being *nosay b'ol chaveiro* -- to carry the burden of your friend. What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?

Sympathy and empathy are both acts of feeling. But with sympathy you feel *for* the person; you're sorry for them or pity them, but you don't specifically understand what they're feeling. You extend your sympathies. But when it comes to empathy, it takes imagination, work, or possibly a similar experience to get to empathy. Empathy can best be described as feeling *with* the person. Notice the distinction between for and with. In sympathy, we feel *for* the person. In empathy, we feel *with* the person.

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron of Jerusalem tells of a "maaseh" that he was a part of. This story brings out the difference between sympathy and empathy.

A neighborhood boy was playing in front of the rabbi's home. The child fell and received a bad cut. The little boy started screaming. Rabbi Schwadron ran out, put a towel around cut and carried the boy toward the home of a doctor who lived nearby.

An elderly lady saw him excitedly running carrying the child and called out, "Don't worry, G-d will help." She thought it was one of Rabbi Schwadron's children. When he got closer, she recognized that the screaming boy was none other than -- her own grandson. When she saw who the child was, she stopped saying in a calm-and-collected manner, "Don't worry, G-d will help" and started frantically screaming, "My Mayer, My Mayer!!"

And as the rabbi walked down the street carrying the injured boy, accompanied by the distraught grandmother, several neighbors from windows in buildings above called out, "Don't worry, G-d will help."

Rabbi Schwadron noted that when it was someone else's child one can dispassionately go through the motions and say, "Don't worry, G-d will help." *Let it be G-d's worry.* That's sympathy. But when it's one's own child or one's own tzuris, one screams frantically. That's empathy.

What is an example of true empathy?

A current ultra-nationalist Hungarian political party named Jobbik has been described as fascist, neo-Nazi, racist, and anti-Semitic. On one occasion the Jobbik party asked for a list of all the Jews in the Hungarian government. Until 2012 one of its leading members, Csanad Szegedi, was a rising star in the movement and was widely spoken of as Jobbik's future leader.

Until one day in 2012. That was the day Szegedi discovered he was a Jew.

Some of the members of the party had wanted to stop his progress and spent time investigating his background to see whether they could dig up any dirt on Szegedi. What they found was that his maternal grandmother was a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz.

Szegedi's opponents started spreading rumors about his Jewish ancestry on the internet. Soon Szegedi himself discovered what was being said and decided to check whether the claims were true. They were. After Auschwitz his grandparents, once Orthodox Jews, decided to hide their identity completely. When his mother was 14, her father told her the secret but ordered her not to reveal it to anyone. Szegedi now knew the truth about himself.

He decided to resign from the party and find out more about Judaism. He went to a local Chabad Rabbi, who at first thought he was joking. Nonetheless he arranged for Szegedi to attend classes on Judaism and to come to the synagogue. At first, Szegedi says, people were shocked. He was treated by some as "a leper." But he persisted. Today he attends synagogue, keeps Shabbat, has learned Hebrew, calls himself Dovid, and in 2013 underwent circumcision.

As the realization that he was a Jew began to change his life, it also transformed his understanding of the world. Today, he says his focus as a politician is to defend human rights

for everyone. "I am aware of my responsibility and I know I will have to make it right in the future."

What happened to Csanad, now Dovid, is an example of empathy in action. Through a role reversal and complete paradigm shift, Dovid was a hater who discovered that he belonged among the hated. *What cured him of antisemitism was his paradigm shift through the discovery that he was a Jew.* Previously absent of even sympathy to Jews, Dovid was now empathetic not only to the oppression of Jews, but to the neglect of human rights of others.

Short of a life-changing discovery of the type that Dovid Szegdi experienced, how can we develop true empathy?

The composer Shlomo Carlebach told of a Shabbos he spent in a community in post-war Europe. When he came to shul, he was disappointed with the cantor. The man was skipping words and had a feeble, weak voice. Worse still, his pronunciation of the Hebrew text was dreadful. Reb Shlomo thought to himself that the horrible cantor must have paid off the synagogue to let him pray! Reb Shlomo was so disgusted, he decided to go to a side room and pray alone. He decided he would only come to the main shul to listen to the Torah reading.

When he returned for the Torah reading, he noticed that the cantor was holding the Torah and leading it to the bimah, but was supported by two people. As he looked closer, he realized that the chazzan was blind.

Reb Shlomo asked the person near him who this chazzan was. The man explained: Before the war, he was the chief cantor of the grand Jewish community of Lemberg (Levuv), in Poland. When he conducted services there, his voice was as powerful as a lion's roar: it shook the very pillars of the synagogue and penetrated the heart of every worshiper. >From all over Europe Jews came to listen to his heart-stirring prayers.

Then the Nazis came. The chazzan was sent to Auschwitz, where he endured unspeakable torture. He became blind. He survived the death camp, but has lost his vision, his voice and his diction.

"We always beg him to pray for us," the man continued, "but he always refuses. Today he agreed."

Reb Shlomo wanted to bury himself from inner shame.

Overwhelmed by my sense of guilt and shame, I waited for the old chazzan to approach. When he did, holding the Torah scroll, I kissed his saintly hands. He asked, 'Who just kissed my hands?' They told him: 'Shlomo Carlebach.' He said: 'Shlomo, I love your niggunim (melodies).' He gave me back my soul.

Can you imagine what what Shlomo Carlebach felt at that moment?

This is the truth of life: We know nothing of the trials, sorrows and temptations of those around

us. We're oblivious to the pillow wet with tears and the life-tragedy hidden behind the smile we see on the face of a familiar friend. We're unaware of the secret cares, struggles, and worries that leave their mark in facial creases and hair prematurely whitened.

Let us not dare to add to the burden of another the pain of our judgment. *Dan l'kaf z'chus* -- Give others the benefit of the doubt. The Torah is telling us to think before we speak. You never know the "whole story" of that other person's life. And if we can become accustomed to giving others the benefit of the doubt and seeking to see the other side of the story, we'll develop the trait of true empathy.

We began today's remarks with the story of Jean Evelyn Slutsky -- Mrs. Jean Nidetch, the founder of Weight Watchers. What was Jean Nidetch's legacy? The following comment appeared in the New York Times as a follow-up to Mrs. Nidetch's obituary. It was written by 'Rita from New Jersey':

I was 19 when, after another Friday night of going out with my friends to the "meat market" and not meeting a guy, I lay prostrate on the bathroom floor, weeping and considering suicide due to my lifelong weight problem. I vowed that the next day I would either start a diet and stick with it, or end my life. I joined Weight Watchers, when it was in its first strict incarnation. Though I stopped going to meetings after a few months, I stuck with the diet, though I made substitutions on my own, much in the way that's permitted now. A year later I was 60 lbs lighter and no longer had to steel myself against all those do-gooders saying: "You have such a pretty face; if you'd only do something about your weight..." Weight Watchers changed the entire trajectory of my life. It has been 46 years since that awful Friday night, and today I weigh four pounds more than I did after losing the weight. I still believe it's the best diet out there, because it's not a diet, but a way of life. Thank you Jean, for all the people you helped to help themselves, and may you rest in eternal peace.

Quite a legacy, isn't it?

Jean Nidetch earned her legacy -- and quite possibly, a front-row seat in the World to Come -- through her highly developed empathy.

For empathy to be sincere, one must demonstrate that he or she truly understands the extent of the other's unhappiness, misfortune, or discontent -- and if possible, provide relevant actions and suggestions to improve the situation. Don't just be sympathetic to the troubles of those around you. Be empathetic. And deepen your feelings of empathy toward others by giving them the benefit of the doubt.