

I find myself where I was last year, thinking of Ali Abu Awwad, the Palestinian peace activist who spoke here to a crowd of about 300 people, the evening before last Kol Nidre. In keeping with forgiving ourselves of the vows we make in the year ahead, it's sobering and humbling to think where I was last year, full of inspiration and passion to walk the path of peacebuilding. I can say, honestly, that I took a few steps – I taught workshops, I studied, I invited speakers where I could, I did a lot of talking about peace. And of course there is a lot I didn't do – I wanted to visit Ali on his land in the West Bank, I wanted to connect more robustly with organizations working for peace. Some of these aspirations I will carry over into the next year, and I have concrete thoughts and plans, and some goals will remain elusive.

But perhaps the most elusive goal remaining from last year is a personal one. In the days, weeks and months following Ali's visit, I kept on thinking about what happened to him and the person he became. Years in an Israeli jail, along with his mother; disillusionment with the Palestinian Authority; his brother killed by Israeli border police; his mother dying soon after. He has seen the worst of what the Jewish people and the Palestinian people can do – he has every reason to hate everyone. And yet, he hates no one, and I don't think he really fears anyone either. Instead, he remains committed to his work, believing that through the practice of nonviolence, people can change.

It was several weeks after Simchat Torah ended last year that I realized, after all the talking I had done about teshuvah, I realized that Ali was not only an inspiration and a role model, but was the embodiment of the Torah I was trying to understand and embody myself. As one friend of mine put it, something happened to him spiritually. And however he got to that place of letting go of all hatred, and anger and fear, and letting in generosity and commitment, I wanted to get there myself.

The great allure, as well as the elusiveness of this spiritual task is encapsulated for me in a teaching from the school of the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. This teaching, most likely brought down by one of his disciples, begins with a question: what does the verse from Psalms, "Shiviti Adonai l'negdi tamid, I hold God before me always," mean? His answer: Shiviti is l'shon hishtavut – the Hebrew term "to hold God before me" is a peculiar linguistic form that refers to a specialized state of equanimity. To hold God before us, to be in this state of equanimity, says the Ba'al Shem, is to be attached to a kind of spiritual reality that makes us impervious to the stimuli of this world – desire and revulsion, relief and fear. And so, in the language of the Ba'al Shem Tov, a holy state is one in which we don't particularly care about what we eat or drink, whether we gain or lose money, or, most importantly, whether people praise us or ridicule us.

On any given day, I would love to be in such a state – able to detach from how much I need approval from other people, not to live in fear of other people's judgments. I would even welcome being free from the passing material pleasures I enjoy – just to be able to be present for the ephemeral spiritual pleasures – noticing and taking in the grandeur of this world, taking in the wisdom of other people and responding to their needs.

However, warns the Ba'al Shem, this is an extremely high level.

This day, then, is such a precious gift, because it imposes upon us the conditions that enable us detach for a little bit, and perhaps in that detachment we can have a taste of such equanimity. I know that many of us see this as a day of burdens – fasting, long services with difficult liturgy, wrestling with troubling thoughts as we reflect - and the Torah does speak of this day as one on which we “afflict our souls.” But in another sense, it is a day of complete freedom, a “Shabbat Shabbaton,” a Sabbath of Sabbaths, a complete release from the rest of our lives. So for one day, we are not beholden to the standards and judgments of others; by submitting ourselves to an ultimate existential accounting, perhaps for some of us an accounting before God, we may paradoxically feel there is no one we have to impress, secure their approval, win their love – at least for today.

But I have strayed from Ali. Ali is a living example of how, amid a daily Kafkaesque reality, one does not need to live in fear of the Other, and one does not have to nurse anger toward the Other. In fact, following Ali’s example, one should face the Other, engage and argue, and by doing so draw closer. Let’s call it holy, respectful argument. And if it is true for Ali, it should be true for all of us, each in our own way.

I have no answers as to how we get there, to this place of equanimity in which we can have a mutually respectful confrontation, but I found something in my study for these days that I found quite compelling. There is a way in which being present for conflict with other people, while holding an attitude of respect and justice, can be so healing. I am thinking of moments in my life when this has been true. But to start, I want to take us back to the story that we read actually on the 1st day of Rosh Hashanah, a story that receives short shrift because it follows the wrenching drama between Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael and Abraham.

Following this foundational story, we read about Abraham and his conflict with the Canaanite king Avimelekh. The conflict is over something essential, but that seems so pedestrian – who has the right to wells. These are wells that Abraham dug, so presumably they are his. But the servants of Avimelekh, thinking they belonged to him, chased away Abraham’s shepherds when they brought their flocks to drink. Now, Avimelekh was powerful – he was a king. If we were Abraham, we would have had reason to be afraid of him. At the very least, it would be daunting to even envision a conversation in which we work out some kind of compromise. But Abraham does more than that. He confronts Avimelekh – he says, basically, “this is my land, these are the wells which I dug.” And then, the two agree on terms, and they make a brit, a covenant, so the place becomes called Be’er Sheva, the well of an oath.

But the thing that drove this story home to me was a rabbinic gloss – just one line summing up Abraham’s example in confronting Avimelekh: that *tochachah* – rebuke – brings shalom. Rebuking someone is actually a *mitzvah* from the Torah, but the rabbis approach it very gingerly – when was the last time you rebuked someone and it went well?

And yet, here, in the midrash on this story, the Rabbis say that rebuke leads to Shalom. In another place, the rabbis teach that when we are “rebuked” by someone we respect, that rebuke engenders love.

Perhaps, in responding to this story, the rabbis’ view of *tochachah* is different from what we normally think of as “rebuke,” because what Abraham says to Avimelekh doesn’t really feel like rebuke as I imagine it. Abraham doesn’t accuse Avimelekh of being malicious. He doesn’t confront him with his flaws. He simply says, “this is my space, I’m claiming it, and we need to come to an agreement about it.”

I like this idea that rebuke – the feared confrontation with another – is really an expression of claiming our space, because that is something we all need to do, and all have the right to do. I think of so many times in my life when I haven’t claimed my own space, and I have always regretted it, and each time I failed to do so because I thought I was being more considerate to others. But in retrospect, all that did was allow the fear and resentment to build, and I was helping nobody. Instead, I should have entertained the rabbis’ proposition that claiming space, what they call *tochachah* in this case – actually IS the more considerate thing to do, because it leads to greater understanding, and through that, to shalom.

I think, with real wistfulness and longing, about a rabbi who had a profound impact on me as a young person. He was an amazing rabbi – charismatic, smart, funny, a pied piper, very caring, counter-cultural. He worked constantly – every need was worthy of his attention. But as I became a rabbi, I saw that he was so focused on pleasing other people, meeting their needs and avoiding any conflict with them that he failed to take risks that would have been good for everyone. He was so creative, but held himself back against saying or doing things that would be regarded as too controversial. Eventually, he experienced a medical event, and instead of re-integrating into his rabbinic work after his recovery, he left the rabbinate, abruptly and completely. Maybe that was one of the healthiest things he did. I don’t judge him, because, frankly, I recognize the same qualities of fear, inhibition and second-guessing in myself. Perhaps we all do.

A compelling teaching about the need to enter conflict *l’shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven in a spirit of “loving rebuke,” comes from a powerful and persuasive source, a moral witness, the great Hasidic master Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. Kalonymus was someone whose mission was to embody a kind of Torah in the service of wellbeing for his entire community. And when the Nazis turned his section of Warsaw into a Ghetto, he taught and showed kindness to all. In one of his *drashot*, he talks about the so-called “wicked” child on Passover. For the Rabbis of the Haggadah, this child really does instill fear through his declaration of self-imposed alienation. If we remember, this child asks, “What does this service mean to YOU?” For the rabbis of the Haggadah, this is a well-informed child who nevertheless makes the choice to stand apart from the community. Their response is to “set his teeth on edge and say this is what God did for ME when I went out of Egypt.” For ME and not for YOU.

It’s harsh. But Kalonymus interprets this moment as emblematic of facing the one we fear by engaging with him, directly yet lovingly, for the sake of shalom. To “set

his teeth on edge,” says Kalonymus, is actually an obscure Talmudic saying that refers to a moment when you go into your neighbor’s courtyard to take something back that rightly belongs to you. Like Abraham and Avimelekh. And so, with the person who stands apart, who threatens you, you challenge them with love, saying, “I am taking you back. You belong to me. I am not going to let you walk away from this encounter.”

I know for myself, when I find myself in a space of conflict, it feels appealing to say, “let it go.” But if I do that, I know that I’m also letting the person go – not just off the hook, but letting them out of my life, instead of engaging them in working harder to reach a common understanding. There is a time to let go – let a person go. But there is also a time to confront them in love, and this is essential to teshuvah – turning past the fear and anger, and toward each other to reach a deeper understanding – it is the holy thing to do. I witnessed such a moment this past Spring.

In early June, we were able to welcome a man to CBI, Dr. Mohammed Sawalha, who is a linguist at An-Najah University in Nablus, in the West Bank (check). As a volunteer, he is the director of the Palestinian House of Friendship, a community center that provides educational, arts and recreational programs to Palestinian children with the idea that it’s these kinds of experiences that enable young people to grow into peaceful, nonviolent adults. When we had coffee beforehand, it felt like we knew all the same people, spoke the same language. He even brought his son, a tattooed, cologned, charming young man who loves rap music and floored us with his spoken-word poetry in English.

Dr. Sawalha then gave a slide presentation, and in the middle of it, there was an image of a children’s art project, an embroidered map of Israel and the West Bank, but without any lines of demarcation, and the heading on top simply read, “Palestine.”

Afterwards, we had a question and answer session, before which I laid down the ground rules: questions only, no opinions, no judgments, no “You” statements, only “I” statements. The first several questioners followed the rules. I was happy. And then, a man got up and violated all of them, calling Dr. Sawalha on his inaccurate and politically provocative map of Palestine. And then, a woman rose, similarly violated all the rules, confronting our speaker on more problems and unresolved questions about the map.

To smooth things over, I acknowledged that we’d had a disagreement, but it was a disagreement among friends, among people who could talk to each other. It took several minutes to realize how true that was. Because about 10 minutes later, the two people who so forcefully challenged Dr. Sawalha were speaking with him earnestly. They talked about their work. They traded business cards. They laughed together and closed up the place. I like to think that, both of them having spoken and received each other’s truth, each other’s moral integrity, that their mutual *tochachah*, their mutual claiming of space, had dampened the fear, the strangeness, the anger of that moment, and brought just a bit of *Shalom*.

May we all find the ways in which we can bring this healing teshuvah to each other and to the world in this coming year. *Shanah Tovah*.