

I have been distracted lately. There have been wonderful things in my personal life, and horrible things happening in the world. And with respect to my inner spiritual or religious life of study, prayer and ritual – frankly, it has felt as if the outside has been more important and urgent.

Over the past couple of months, the conflict in Gaza has pulled so much of my attention. Predictably, the most strident, aggressive, condemning and racist voices have taken up residence in my head. Internally, I have argued passionately with those voices – both those who demonize Israel and those who dismiss Palestinian suffering.

It would be human to move on since the cease fire took effect and Israel and Gaza have drifted off of the front pages. It would be healthy to focus more on the needs of the moment and put the Gaza war, and the ongoing, unresolved conflict out of my head. But when I do, and when I realize that I have, I regret it. When my attention wanders from Israel and its numerous conflicts, I feel as if I've lost something. Because I believe, at least for every Jew, there is profound work that we do when we sit with the pain of this conflict, and take it on personally, and take the leap to imagine we can actually do something about it. Even though we certainly cannot know everything; and often I and many of the people I talk to aren't sure what we think or believe. It is imperative, I think, to be connected to this conflict, even though we live thousands of miles away and even if we don't know for sure how engaged we want to be with the collective Jewish story or our own.

I keep this conflict close to my heart, and I struggle with it, because doing so is an essential part of my Jewish path. It is sacred work in a uniquely dialectic and Talmudic way. To hold this conflict close, and to listen to the different voices that emerge is to develop the ability to hold multiple versions of reality. This, says the great Israeli writer and peace activist Amos Oz, is the antidote to fanaticism, which is the real enemy, and the cause of so much pain. And if fanaticism – the kind of demonizing and impermeable self-righteousness to which all people are vulnerable – is the true enemy, the Other whom we envision and demonize is not.

This, to me is the great existential question that challenges me this Rosh Hashanah: can I listen to the Other, whoever that Other may be? At times, that Other is the friend or neighbor who can only condemn Israel without any regard for the Jewish narrative – a story not only of suffering, but of longing and heroic resilience. Sometimes the Other is a rabbi friend who refuses to acknowledge Palestinian suffering – a posture that I believe contradicts the core ethics of our tradition. I, too, don't want to believe the figures of how many civilians are dead, and I want to believe in the justness of this war, and so sometimes innocent Palestinians, non-combatants, are my Other, because I want to turn away from their suffering. And with my anger at those who made the decisions to bomb homes and civilian centers – knowing there is no such thing as precision bombing – they are my Other as well.

I can imagine finding a place in my heart for all of these Others. For the moment though, I am leaving out Hamas militants – there is a part of me that does not want to even go there. And yet, I have to ask, if I had the opportunity, in a safe setting, to hear the full story of how a young man, growing up in the misery of Gaza among loving parents and siblings, saw no other opportunity but to take a job where he would be fed, and given money, and a sense of pride, could I at least listen? Even though I would remain horrified by his decision, could I also find sympathy with his very human pain? And then, just to be honest, I have to ask, does my sympathy with his suffering even matter when Israelis of all ages, and ethnicities and religions live in fear of when and where the next missile will come out of Gaza?

Attending to these kinds of questions, and the internal listening they demand, is central to our work on Rosh Hashanah. Because by commanding us to listen to the sound of the shofar, the Rabbis direct our attention to a deep inner voice, but also to the pained voices of those who suffer, no matter who they are.

According to the Rabbis of the Talmud, the specific sounds of the *teruah* from the shofar – those three blasts and those short, staccato notes – represent the anguish of a mother who has just lost her son. The mitzvah to make the sound of the “*teruah*” comes from the Torah, and the Rabbis wondered about its precise meaning. Based on an obscure Aramaic translation, the rabbis assert that the “*teruah*” refers to the mournful cry of an unnamed mother, whose son was Sisera the Canaanite warrior, who died after a battle with Israelite troops. The rabbis further speculate whether Sisera’s mother expressed her grief through groaning or wailing. They couldn’t decide, so they said that the word “*truah*” encompasses both. And so, we have the custom of hearing two different sounds: the heartache expressed by the 3 “*shevarim*,” those three longer notes, and the sobbing as expressed by the repeated short notes of the “*teruah*.”

These allusions are powerful enough to direct our hearts and minds to universal pain and suffering when we hear the sounds of the shofar. But these allusions go even further. Sisera is, in the Hebrew Bible, the ultimate Other. The Bible celebrates the killing of Sisera at the hands of hero Yael, who is lauded for her cunning and bravery. After recounting the story in all its gripping detail, the Bible celebrates his defeat again in the great poem of the prophet Devorah. And so, the Rabbis linking our experience of the shofar to Sisera’s mother is even more remarkable. If we can, and should recall the pain of this unambiguous Enemy of our ancestors, then in every generation, we need to consider the humanity of the Other we encounter. And then again, as if to up the ante, the Rabbis give us this interpretation of the shofar’s sounds while knowing that listening to the shofar is the most sacred thing we do today – more important than praying, or casting our sins away in *Tashlikh* – it is the only thing the Torah specifically commands us to do on Rosh Hashannah.

While morally clear and urgent, there is nothing easy or facile in attending to the voice and pain of the Other. Our Torah reading for today shows us both how hard it is, but how necessary it is, to hold close the stories of the people we most fear.

In our Torah reading from this morning, we see Abraham, our hero, failing. He is the patriarch, but he can't keep the peace. In our tradition, he is the paragon of love toward God and humanity, but here, he can't quell the simmering hatred and fear among Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael. He *can* listen to God, but even this exemplary act of spiritual devotion is not enough to hold all the competing narratives within his own family.

Instead, the task of holding the full story falls upon God. At the climax of the story, when Hagar and Ishmael are about to die of thirst, Ishmael cries out, and the Torah tells us, "God heard the voice of the child." What is remarkable is not only that God pays special attention to Ishmael and Hagar as outcasts. It's remarkable that God favors Ishmael and Hagar as the Enemies, the people whom Sarah sees as threatening Isaac's existence and Abraham's legacy. And instead of undermining everything, only good comes from hearing the child's cry, the supposed enemy. The Torah tells us that Ishmael will grow to be a wealthy and powerful man, like his father, and similarly, the father of a numerous and strong people. And in this prophecy, there is no indication that Ishmael's flourishing will in any way diminish the fortunes of Isaac and his descendants.

It would be enough for us as readers to hold this story with the expansive compassion that God does. But once again, rabbinic tradition challenges us to go further: to not only listen to the Other, but to suspend judgment of our imagined enemies when they suffer. The key phrase in the Torah is that God listened to Ishmael, "Ba'asher hu sham," literally, in the place where he was. That place is not just a location obviously, but a metaphor. The Rabbis and Rashi emphasize this phrase to mean that God listened to Ishmael because he was suffering, and that his human suffering should override any fear that Abraham, Sarah or we would have over what Ishmael or his descendants may do in the future. So through this interpretation the rabbis charge us – when there is suffering, listen most closely to those voices we fear and dread "in the place where they are," with openness toward their pain and without judgment.

At this point, we can ask, "Did the rabbis mean for us to suspend judgment of Hamas?" It's a fair and necessary question, and the Rabbis were clear on the need for self defense. But as these interpretations of our story show, there is a human being behind an act of evil who, under certain conditions, calls for our attention and some kind of human response. And so I find myself wondering about how we draw on these extraordinarily compassionate teachings to conduct ourselves in a world in which conflict and violence appear intractable, and whether these micro changes we make as human beings can at least restore a sense of hope.

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, who will visit here at the end of November, is a firm believer that listening to the Other makes a difference. She calls such a practice "peacebuilding." In her book, "From Enemy to Friend," she asks us to examine ourselves and our middot, inner qualities of compassion, generosity, patience. Through this inner *chevbon nefesh* – accounting of our soul – we develop the ability to attend to the voice of the "Other." Rabbi Eilberg documents the variety of situations in which she has found herself as a

peacebuilder – yes, in Israeli/Palestinian encounters and in interfaith dialogue, but also in facing conflicts with other Jews, at her workplace and in her family.

Her book calls to mind the thoughts of the great Hasidic rebbe Shalom Noach Berzovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe who died in 2001. He writes about how really listening to the shofar enables us to surmount the gulf separating us from God, but he could just as easily be speaking of bridging the chasm that people impose between each other.

He says that our greatest burdens aren't the things people do to us. Rather, it's the isolation we impose on ourselves. We isolate ourselves socially, but more than that, we isolate the mind and heart, limiting our ability to think and feel. And so we come to this day, perhaps filled with expectation that it can work to bring us out, to renew us, and we go through the prayers, but it doesn't work. Saying words, he says, won't bring us out of our isolation. But, he promises, the act of listening deeply to the shofar can. He says that listening to the shofar "shatters the bonds" and "splits the walls" that hide and conceal. The act of listening "opens the gates" of the mind to imagine and the heart to feel so that we may be a well for the Divine Presence.

There are ways in which such lyrical talk about deep listening can devolve into a caricature, as if a big family therapy session will solve the Israeli Palestinian conflict. But consider this: The Slonimer Rebbe and Amos Oz both challenge us to change the way we see the world, they have lived in Jerusalem at the same time and they couldn't be more different as people. And yet, despite that difference, they both attribute our pain and fear to a failure of listening and imagination. And each, one a novelist and the other an author of volumes of Hasidic commentaries, would say that we begin to make change and restore hope by giving ourselves these moments of quiet and contemplation in which we go deeply into ourselves so as to connect to the vastness of reality all around us. For the Slonimer, the reality all around us is God, and for Amos Oz, it's the depth of humanity – but they are talking about the same reality – in the name of restoring order, it's on us to hold the different versions.

I want to invite us, challenge us, this year to work on becoming a peacebuilding congregation. I only have a vague idea of what this means, and to my knowledge, it's not a term that's widely used. But I have a sense that if we really despair of violence taking place in a part of the world we call home, affecting people we love, and sometimes taking place in our name, then we ought to find a public way to raise the possibility of an alternative, and through our efforts cultivate some hope.

Over the past couple of months, I have made it my practice to reach out to people who have been "other" in my experience with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. And on this note I am proud to say how proactive the Israel Committee has been in hosting weekly dialogues where people of varying opinions have shared thoughts in a respectful and productive way. I have also learned immensely from the experience of the committee bringing concerns to our city's Human Rights Committee. I have met face to face with UCC ministers, whose churches will be considering a divestment resolution this Spring at their State convention. And I have met with people who organized and participated in

anti-Israel protests downtown this summer. Everywhere – and I mean everywhere – I have experienced respect for our story as Jews, what we stand for as a community, and a desire to work with our community to create an inclusive and informed public discourse.

Over the next couple of months, I am teaching a 6-session class on peacebuilding, and it will culminate in a Shabbaton and workshop with Rabbi Amy Eilberg. We will have other visitors: Ali Abu Awad, a Palestinian peace activist who embraces the non-violence of King and Gandhi, and Gershom Gorenberg, a journalist who has written eloquently about Israel's need to uphold universal values and human rights that at its core identity as a state.

I have taken on this work of peacebuilding – which is micro and slow - as essential to who I am as a Jew and as a rabbi. I have decided, after many years of wrestling and skepticism, that it makes a difference. I hope you will share this journey with me, and together, perhaps we can all become examples of people who seek and pursue shalom that the world sorely needs.