

A number of years ago, I heard a story from a family friend about his grandfather, man named Harry Davidowitz, or Shalom Tzvi Davidovitch. He grew up as a Lubavitcher Hasid in the Ukraine in the early part of the 20th Century, and when he emigrated to the States, he became a Conservative Rabbi while receiving his Ph.D. in English at Columbia. He was fluent in several languages and knew a handful more. He loved the Hebrew prophets and could quote many soaring poetic passages by heart. He loved the democratic traditions of the West and was well versed in English Common Law.

He made aiyah in the '30's, and in Israel became a translator, producing the first Hebrew translations of Chaucer and the first Hebrew complete works of Shakespeare. Though he appeared to be a thoroughly secular person, he would tell people that he was still a Hasid – that spiritual devotion was a matter of the heart, and not something determined by what you wore. He refrained from speaking ill of anybody. And though many admired his accomplishments, he would tell his family that he preferred to be reminded of his sins.

By accident, Harry Davidowitz, Shalom Tzvi Davidovitch, was consulted on the first draft of Israel's Declaration of independence. The member of David Ben Gurion's staff charged with the task had little knowledge of Jewish history and literature and did not know where to begin. One day, over lunch in Tel Aviv, his friends said, "Our neighbor, Dr. Davidowitz, has an ample library. Why don't you go over there." And he did.

I want to take a moment and read the part of the declaration that most probably bears the imprint of this extraordinary man:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Both the portrait of this author and this part of the declaration in which he had a hand convey the kind of Jew, the kind of person I want to become: one who learns from all people, a seeker of spiritual insight, a person who embraces my flaws; a person rooted in the vitality and struggles of my people, and who feels the corresponding obligation to serve all of humanity.

But the hope and aspirations embodied by this man and the Declaration he influenced exist at odds with painful realities that shake the Jewish soul. There are too many examples, so I will mention just a few. I wish Prime Minister Netanyahu had kept Israel's declaration in mind during the elections in March when he warned of "Arabs coming in droves to the polls." Similarly, his inaction on helping the nearly 50,000

Africans seeking asylum in Israel, or refugees fleeing Syria, belie the lessons of Jewish history. Finally, while some parts of the Ultra Orthodox community referred to the LGBT Pride parade in Jerusalem as the “toeiva,” or abomination parade, the real abomination is that there is a Jewish culture in Jerusalem that produced a man who would go to that parade to stab and ultimately kill innocent people.

But I’ll also add that while these examples are uniquely painful, they are just symptoms of the deeper pathologies of callousness and demonization in our world, and these pathologies cry out for our gestures of healing as Jews. We, the Jewish people, through our collective representation in Israel and throughout the world, should be among the loudest voices calling for a swift resolution to this current refugee crisis; an end to the systemic inequalities of racial and sexual violence, and of economic disparities; and we should be leaders in embodying darkhei shalom, ways of peace, and not ways of violence.

The pain of the world is overwhelming, and it is easy to become numb, submit to a feeling of helplessness and the mistaken idea that our actions are futile. But Rosh Hashanah is a time to challenge ourselves. It is a time to make ourselves vulnerable, allow ourselves to feel something new and by doing so rouse ourselves to action.

It is a journey to feel and to act, and so I want to help us on that journey by reflecting on the story we read in our Torah portion this morning as a kind of inner metaphor of our own struggles. It is a difficult story, in which we witness our supposed heroes acting cruel, in the case of Sarah, or rendered impotent, in the case of Abraham. There are all kinds of ways to draw on traditional interpretations to rationalize this story, to make it work and have our heroes ultimately seem wise and clairvoyant. But I believe it is more useful to allow this story to speak to us from its unresolved brokenness, reflecting the pain and unanswered questions of our lives.

This particular story is rife with fear, anger – qualities which could be useful in small doses, but disastrous when they dominate our lives, as they can. When Sarah observes Ishmael playing in an unseemly way with her toddler Isaac, she is justified in wanting to separate the two. But her anger takes, and her actions are grievous to Abraham when she orders him, “Kick them out,” which means, in practical terms, “banish them to certain death in the desert.”

Like all of us, Abraham harbors a visceral moral objection to Sarah’s command, but feels completely powerless to act. He, like us, is caught between loyalties, but also competing fears – he is afraid of Sarah’s anger, as he is of Hagar and Ishmael’s deaths. He does act, fulfilling Sarah’s request to banish Hagar and Ishmael to certain death, but only because God instructs him to “listen to her voice,” leaving this family, and this story, for the time being, completely broken.

But then there is a great surprise in this story, a revelation that shows how compassion triumphs over demonization. Once the human actors recede, we see the character of God demonstrating how we open the wells of compassion through the simplest act of listening. As Hagar and Ishmael are at the point of death from starvation

and thirst, the Torah tells us, “God hears the voice of the child.” And then, to emphasize the triumph of mercy, an angel reassures Hagar, “God heard the voice of the child, in the place where he was.”

For the Rabbis, this phrase teaches us that real kindness knows no judgment, no hierarchy of needs, no qualification. And even though it is God, not a human being who shows this radical, unconditional kindness, the charge is for each of us to imitate the divine middah, and similarly embody this “sh’miyah,” this attribute and act of listening.

It is as if the act of listening is the gateway toward moral obligation as envisioned by the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: when we are faced with the needs of the Other, whoever that Other may be, our obligation toward them is infinite, the only thing that is important.

But to take this inner journey from numbness to feeling, from paralysis to empathic action, is obviously no simple thing. Believe me, I would like to think of myself as one who “hears the other, in the place where they are.” But much more often, I am like Sarah, when I distance myself from people I fear. And I am much more like Abraham, prone to hesitating and inhibiting my own voice and actions.

And so, we have the presence and rituals of this day, as a set of experiences, to help us enact this constant journey from fear and anger to ready generosity. Among the Hasidic masters, it was believed that the very day of Rosh Hashanah itself generated its own renewal – that God, the One without end, renews all the energy of the cosmos on this day.

And I have to say, being together, singing these prayers, knowing that Jews everywhere are joining us in these prayers for our people’s renewal and the renewal of all humanity and creation, gives me a glimpse of what our Hasidic masters had in mind – that renewal from above. But these teachers also understood that this renewal came from us - from own efforts at teshuvah, and through today’s mitzvah of listening with intention to the sound of the shofar.

They teach us that when we listen intently to the shofar, our minds clear in a moment of intentional focus. Our hearts open through this act of listening, just as the Holy One listened to Ishmael. God sees this on our parts, and responds in kind. According to one teacher, the great Kalonymus Kalman Epstein in the 18th Century, we may not realize it, but that moment of listening to the shofar is our moment of standing “face to face” with the Holy One, and it is the moment that unleashes all of the compassion and goodness we need to bring wholeness and healing to our world.

I do not believe in this supernatural way, but I believe in this teaching. I believe that the mitzvah of really listening to the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is an experience that **trains** us to attend with similar depth, awe and reverence to other human beings and all of creation. And I do believe that, through attending to other human beings, we may approach hearing the voice of God. I believe it because I know, from experience, that when we do truly attend to another, focus on them with an open heart, and give ourselves

the time and space to listen, something happens. That “face to face” moment with another is more than meaningful - it is sacred, and I do believe it is the key to unlocking everything that we can do to make this world more just and peaceful, to revealing moral and spiritual truth.

Years after first hearing the story of Rabbi Dr. Shalom Tzvi Davidovitch, I learned through the research of an Israeli historian that his story checks out, with one inspiring quirk. It's unclear exactly what his role was in drafting Israel's Declaration. Perhaps he supplied language and ideas from his deep knowledge of Jewish history, rabbinic literature, democratic traditions and his love of the Prophets. Perhaps he just allowed a guest to check out his library. We don't really know.

I like to imagine that all he did was open the door to his apartment, because that one simple act of generosity demonstrates and reminds us that we all have something to give, no matter how ephemeral or infinitesimal the gesture appears to us.

Our tradition, on the other hand, sees such a gesture as almost infinitely grand. Because it's in these brief, unheralded moments, that we have the space to look inward, to each other, and to our tradition to hear that voice of healing compassion and justice, and to respond to the call to be its vessel, each of us in our own way.