

Ali Abu Awwad, who spoke here the other night before a crowd of 300, has a story that should compel all of us to listen. In 1990, during the first intifada, in which he took part, he was imprisoned by the Israeli authorities. When I asked him what the charges were, he told me that he wasn't doing anything that his friends weren't doing, except that his mother was one of the central organizers, and the Israeli Secret Service tortured him to get information from his mother, which he refused. There is a secret file on him, which of course he has not seen.

While in jail, Ali says that he went to the best university imaginable. This is something I've heard before, that Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups use prison as a training ground for armed struggle against Israel. But Ali had a different experience – it was in prison that Ali learned Hebrew and English, and studied Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Inspired by these examples, Ali decided that we would dedicate his life to Palestinian freedom, but through non-violence.

The other night, Ali said that Palestinians don't need to be taught hate, because the creations of occupation create it. His brother, who actually worked with the Palestinian counterpart of the Jewish National Fund, was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier in 2001, and his mother died a few years later. In Ali's words, she couldn't take it.

Ali has many reasons to be angry, to hate. But speaking to him, you realize that he hates no one.

As he has said many times, **fear** is the enemy, not people.

I think all of us who were at his talk the other night felt that we were in the presence of a person who had embodied a profound kind of teshuvah. There are many things, global as well as personal, for us to fear. And yet, we can't let our fears rule us, whether we're working for peace, the planet, or just trying to heal a friendship. As an antidote to those fears, we have the resilience that comes when we believe in our ability to make change. Through reflecting on Ali's example, I believe that part of our teshuvah is convincing ourselves that we can and should make miniscule changes ourselves, and that these changes are meaningful.

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Our tradition has always found hope in balancing fear against our ability to make our lives better. Particularly in thinking about this time of year, our Rabbis envisioned everything hanging in the balance. An early teaching about the holiday calendar says, "Four times a year the world is judged. On Passover with respect to the wheat harvest, on Shavuot with respect to the fruit harvest, on Rosh Hashanah, when all humanity pass before the Holy One, who peers into the hearts of all, and on Sukkot, with respect to water." In its context, this teaching expresses the Rabbis' fear of unknown at each of these harvest times. Since they did not know what the yield would be for the coming year, they felt the world could go either way – toward bounty or famine. They believed this precarious balance depended on the integrity of collective human action: the society

didn't have to be perfect, but if it was good enough, people would have what they need for the coming year. If it was not good enough, many people would die.

If this Mishnah were all the Rabbis left us, it would seem that they lived in constant fear. But that is not the case. In another midrash, the Rabbis lay out the experience of the Jewish year as one of increasing joy despite knowing how precarious life can be. Pesach is limited in joy because it's the beginning of the agricultural year, and no one knows what it will bring. But 7 weeks later, when the first fruits have been gathered and it's clear that there will be something, the Rabbis say we let in a measure of joy. And by the time of Sukkot, the Rabbis created a festival overflowing with joy, as the plentiful bounty of the year fuels our optimism for the future.

But as much as the Rabbis were ambivalent about their dependence on nature, they had absolute faith that holy and righteous action would sustain them. As Shimon ha-tzadik said, "On three things does the world stand: Torah, Service and Good Deeds." Even though I don't believe their worldview to be literally true, I take their spiritual activism to heart. I don't believe, as the rabbis did, that the proper distribution of tzedakah insures that the rains come on time. But I do believe that, when confronted by the overwhelming pain of the world, one act of tzedakah IS meaningful, if only to provide a bit of hope that sustains us until the next positive thing we do.

Like our Rabbis, the prophet Isaiah feared for the moral well being of his people, but in facing it, he affirms their capacity to care for each other.

Isaiah anticipates his people returning from exile, but falling prey once again to the kind of hypocrisy and moral complacency that led to the exile in the first place. And while we may see ourselves at a remove from Isaiah's society, we should recognize ourselves in it as well. Like us, Isaiah's society professes to seek spiritual enlightenment – to "seek God daily;" they fast, like us, to cleanse themselves so they can feel righteous, and yet, they ignore and oppress those who are poor and vulnerable. To embarrass and stir his people, Isaiah tells them that their piety is empty, and the real "fast that God desires" is not to fast at all, but to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and house the homeless.

But it's his final injunction, "do not ignore our own flesh," that is most revealing to me.

When we fear, we are all about our own skin, and we lose sight of the other. Our fight or flight response narrows our world so that we only focus on ourselves, like Isaiah's people self-absorbed in their meaningless rituals of contrition. The turning, the teshuvah, toward the silent, faceless "Other," then becomes the antidote to our fear because it brings us out of ourselves. And in doing so, we become more fully ourselves. Isaiah teaches us that when we reach out to the "Other" we actually connect to them by reaching inward, through our "own flesh."

This past year, we did some study about our obligations toward other people that brought us to the thought of the modern French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' family, with the exception of his wife and child, were murdered in the Shoah. As Europe

recovered after the war, Levinas was distressed by a pervasive atmosphere of cynicism in which people failed to account for the past, never meant what they said, seemed unrelenting in their callousness. Levinas sought refuge in Jewish study and observance, and in doing so, came to a view of human beings that compels us to believe in our ability to heal the world, even when we know exactly what we're capable of doing.

Instead of looking at the "Other" as someone we should feel drawn to out of empathy or compassion, like a friend or a spiritual partner, Levinas said our primary relationship to the "Other" is out of obligation. We can and should have all kinds of other feelings too, but if the basis of human interaction is an obligation, that means another person must take priority over us. For Levinas, this is not a philosophical position or the product of law or a religious system – it is how we are inherently wired to live.

For Levinas, we especially realize on Yom Kippur that our role in life is to serve another's needs before our own. As this is a time of repairing wrongs, Levinas notices that once we ask for forgiveness, it seems that we might never stop. He points out, "our wrongs appear to us as we humble ourselves." As we humble ourselves, we realize that "The seeking for forgiveness never comes to an end. Nothing is ever completed."

This is challenging, inordinately so. Like a modern Isaiah, Levinas shows us we can avert disaster by looking within, to basic human qualities and basic human responses, that result in serving rather than destroying humanity.

2 weeks ago, 50 of us went down in a bus to the People's Climate March in NYC, at which 310,000 demonstrated that our role is to serve rather than destroy humanity, even when we have the power to do so, even if that power is supported by overwhelming corporate interests. One of the observations I heard from a number of people was that, despite we were coming to confront something so frightening, so frightening that most people avoid really learning about climate change, the atmosphere was so joyous.

My interpretation of the event was that this joy was real, because all of those people, given the option of fear or trust in the ability of human beings to make change, chose trust.

I have found that same sense of comfort by getting to know young people involved in Jewish organic farming. On a micro level, they absorb the fear we all feel for the future of our earth, and channel it into lives committed to reducing our impact on the planet. They marshal ancient and teachings about spirituality, land and tzedakah and in doing so, they renew our experience and relationship to Judaism in a way as profound as other revolutions in Jewish life over the past 40 years.

Our farm, which started as a mitzvah thanks to Emmett Leader, and now is a full blown farm thanks to Rabbi Jacob and his partners, embodies that spirit of hope and renewal as we face the precarious conditions we live in. Having a farm as Jews means that we have inherent obligations - Pe'ah – the uncompromising demand to allocate food for those without and Sh'mitta – allowing the land it to renew itself.

And the farm helps us see ourselves in creation in a whole new way. When you work on a farm, even for just a morning, and then celebrate its success as we will at our Sukkot Harvest Festival, you feel as if you are part of a nishmat kol chai – a life force that imbues us all.

And that's what Maimonides says is the ultimate goal of teshuvah: to see ourselves, in all of our humanity, as simply part of creation. Because when we do, our whole being becomes one of love – even though we are limited, and imperfect, and even destructive.

He promises us: when a person meditates on creation and considers all created things – from the heavenly bodies through human beings, and understands the wisdom of the Holy One in every aspect, one is overcome with love for God. And, I would add, love for the earth and humanity.

He acknowledges that we don't feel this way because we are afraid, and so we do things to make ourselves feel secure. But as we connect more deeply with creation, our consciousness expands, and slowly slowly, as we try to understand, each of us within our own capacity, we grasp the Oneness that underlies everything.

Everyday, there is so much to fear. But I try to internalize that voice Isaiah, who says that to turn away is to suffer. I listen to our tradition when it reminds us that we live in a web of obligation in which each of our actions matter. And I follow the joy and passion of people who discover ways to bring healing to our world in new and creative ways. All of this stirs my heart with hope and joy, stirrings which I hope will strengthen my resolve to follow a path of change in the new year ahead.