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HIR-The Bayit

Anat Sharbat

Struggling with the situation in Israel through parashat Noach: Personal reflection from a recent visit in Israel

Before I start, I want to say that I am struggling with what I am about to say today. I recognize that it might be difficult to hear and it is difficult for me too. My request is that you'll stay with me and together we can go through this thought process that I want to share with you.

We just returned from a trip to Israel that was supposed to be joyous – a trip to celebrate my nephew Shai's bar mitzvah.

But the happiness was quickly mingled with sadness and bloodshed.

On the fifth day of Chol Ha-Moed at a family gathering near the *Kinneret*, we heard the news of a terror attack – a young couple, Na'ama and Rabbi Eitam Henkin, were brutally murdered before the eyes of their small children.

Our girls asked us many questions on the drive home as we passed through many of the Arab villages of the Galilee and northern Israel. Are all Arabs evil? Should we be scared of the Arabs? Do Jews hate Arabs? The Palestinian - Arab-Israeli conflict penetrated our car and became a tangible reality even in our sheltered lives.

On the next Thursday, too, – as we set out to the *kotel* to celebrate with Shai his first time being called to the Torah, his first time putting on *tefillin* as a Jewish adult, throughout the day of family celebration, we heard reports of another attack, another stabbing, another murder.

And it hasn't stopped!

A sense of despair envelopes us all, an inability to resolve the conflict, an inability to do anything to help, to change something, to have an influence; A feeling that the Arab-Israeli conflict, decades-long and war-filled, is larger than us all.

So I ask the question we still must ask: What can we do? What can I do?

It is true that we are unable to help on a diplomatic level; most of us have no influence with senior officials. We are not members of the Knesset or the Israeli security cabinet.

So how can one nevertheless feel useful, active, significant? How can we feel we are making a difference?

I deeply believe that each and every one of us does have a small influence on the world. As the Rav kook says: "מעט מן האור דוחה הרבה מן החושך". "A little light dispels much of the darkness".

As we read in the *parsha*, Noach's world, the environment in which he lived, was devoid of love, compassion, and acceptance of others but rather

וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חֲמָס

"the earth was filled with violence"

and this corrupting world was destroyed.

The sign of the covenant given after the Flood was the multi-colored rainbow, a symbol of different nuances, variety, together creating its beauty, together creating the covenant.

Why? Why is the rainbow the sign after the flood? How is it an opposing force against the חמס violence that caused the world's destruction?

The message of the rainbow-shaped covenant is, in my opinion, that to prevent the destruction of the world, we must allow ourselves to see the different shades of color, we must allow ourselves to be sensitive to the different voices among us and on the other side, of the other. Out of just such listening and acceptance of everyone in the rainbow, will the message of peace come.

But is this realistic? How is it possible to accept someone whose neighbor, whose relative threatens us, who fights and kills us? One of this week's terrorists was an employee of Bezek, the Israeli telephone company, an Israeli citizen from East Jerusalem.

How is it possible not to paint everyone in the same color, even if only for the sake of caution? Many questions have been raised in recent days in Israel, questions such as whether to relent to parents' calls to fire all Arab sanitary workers in schools and kindergartens thereby distancing what maybe seems a danger? What level of caution should we adopt?

It is impossible to leap to a place of acceptance from one of remoteness and lack of contact, and it is impossible to accept out of fear. We therefore need to build it in stages.

According to Midrash Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Noach built the Ark for 120 years in order that the people of his generation see and ask him, and so that Noach's explanation would cause them to repent.

We can learn from this that the change in the perception and behavior of an entire generation doesn't occur immediately – it's a long process, maybe even a 120 year process; a process whose results will only be seen a few generations later.

The first stage is to see, listen and be ready to open the heart to the other, despite the fear: the fear of the other side, the fear of what we may discover within ourselves, the fear of the positive emotion that we may develop towards someone that until now we demonized. It would be nice if we implement this not only with our opponents or in times of conflict but rather, in every interaction, check ourselves how open we are to listening to other opinions and allow them to touch us, to change us, to engage in a dialogue with us.

When we do this, we naturally understand and recognize the fact that maybe not every Arab is necessarily an enemy, but rather, another human being born in God's image, and maybe he, or she, too is scared.

What I'm trying to say is that I believe the first step should be our ability to recognize that They, The Palestinians are not a solid group of terrorists. There are some who are terrorists, but a lot of others who do not agree with violence. Therefore we should not paint them all as terrorists, but being able to look at them as human beings.

When I was in Israel I felt how critical this message is there, and here, too, I feel it must be said.

We must leave our comfort zones to be able to walk in that path. Thinking differently requires courage, the re-education of a new generation, but this is the way to raise tomorrow's leaders, from a perception of peace.

When I discussed this idea with my mom, she asked me: "So now you're going to go to the Arab schools and teach them to love us? You're going to change their history books and their theories about us?"

Martin Buber, in his commentary on the Torah, explains the meaning of "ואהבת לרעך כמוך" – "Love your fellow as yourself". ואהבת – it is our mission as the Chosen People, our responsibility to love, to care for the other . Does "your fellow" mean only your fellow Jew? According to Buber, "your fellow" can be interpreted as any person created in God's image. It is our obligation to spread that positive, constructive feeling in the world and not to wait for something to change in others. We must take the responsibility for making the change.

Noach didn't pray for his generation because he didn't believe that there was any room for change, because he didn't believe that there was a chance for *tshuva* from such a low moral position.

Regardless of our view – right wing or left – it is incumbent upon us to leave our comfort zone and spread the message of abstaining from hostility, from hatred, from religious jealousy, and even from being right. We must understand, accept, contain, find favor, enable. And we must practice it every day. This will bring about change. This will change the world.

Success is not instant – it requires 120 years of patience and time.

The time spent in the closed Ark also transmits the same message of tolerance and concern towards the other – a lion with a lamb, a cat with a mouse – all found their place in the crowded Ark, living in peace. It is possible. The life together in a small place like the Ark taught all those there of the need for concessions, for accepting the other and acknowledging his existence.

I want to end with a תפילה that God will give us strength to go through these difficult times.

ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום