I’m reminded of a retreat I was headed to last summer, off to the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, where we had been practicing how to be centered and connected to goodness and safety and peacefulness all spring, so I felt spiritually balanced. I wanted to try out my new Zen superpowers. And so when my Uber driver dropped a couple of sentences about the lying, liberal media, I was ready to engage. Our banter began cordially enough but within about literally ten seconds, we were both exchanging insults and thinking unkind thoughts about the other.

I have never gotten out of an Uber so fast and I don’t think he’d ever unloaded luggage so quickly either. Conversation fail! It was so hard! I felt awful all week as I replayed the car ride…it was painful to hear the lies he was speaking, and it was terrible to feel so unable to combat his verbal attack with actual facts of my own (as I had made a commitment not to make stuff up). The worst part was the way he looked at me through his review as he slowed at the airport – it wasn’t anger as much as disgust, like there was an alien sitting in his backseat instead of a person.

I know that this type of conversation has either happened to you or someone you love, again on either side of any hot topic today, political, social, economic, or otherwise. We live in politically charged time, to say the least. And we are exhausted. When Pharaoh’s heart is hardened in the Torah, the Hebrew “*hach’bed et libo*,” literally translates as “he makes his heart heavy.” The stress we experience these days has hit a point of overwhelm; it’s too heavy. The input comes from every direction – the news, social media, our friends, our family. This constant state of feeling under attack is unrelenting, feeling the need to fight or flee. But now, instead of engaging in real conversation, we get disgusted, shut down and we off. Our disgust with the other side allows us to dehumanize the other, making it easy to believe terrible things about them.

If we are honest, we can admit that in some way for each of us, our hearts are a little harder this year than last. It’s because this divide plaguing our country has added layer upon layer of pain, anger, and frustration to our hearts that it’s beginning to grow a callous to protect itself. Here’s a story in which we can witness this process occur.

Forty congregants were inside. Here’s what I witnessed during that time.

For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don’t know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn’t take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them. Perhaps their presence was just a coincidence, and I’m paranoid. I don’t know.

Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, “There's the synagogue!” followed by chants of “Seig Heil” and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.

When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups.

These are the words of the synagogue president Allen Zimmerman from Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, VA, describing the Shabbat when white supremacists descended on his town. He goes on:

After the nation moves on, we will be left to pick up the pieces. Fortunately, this is a very strong and capable Jewish community, blessed to be led by incredible rabbis. We have committed lay leadership, and a congregation committed to Jewish values and our synagogue. In some ways, we will come out of it stronger – just as tempering metals make them tougher and harder.

Tougher, harder, like metal. I ache to read this report. To know that there are people who so hate who we are, to know that our brothers and sisters in Charlottesville felt this fear and heartbreak, to know that they needed to toughen and harden to responsibly address the world in which we live. As deeply disturbed as I am by the hatred that surfaced that weekend, I am equally saddened to witness the hardening of a heart. Which is not to say that being tougher is the wrong response; in fact, adding more security and creating strategies to deal with this kind of situation in the future is the responsible thing to do. But what I want to focus on is the effect of the whole ordeal on the heart, and the costs to that heart if left unattended to, unhealed.

As we deal communally with our hardening hearts, we experience it way too often on the personal level too.

In our very own community, we’ve seen numbers of congregants on both sides of the divide break up with long-time friends or cut off family members from their lives. We have members that now refuse to speak with other members or serve on committees together or say just plain awful things about one another. Diversity is one of things of which we are most proud in our Temple, but diversity of opinion in politics is less tolerated now than in the past. We have very little patience for the other’s perspective, very little curiosity about their reasoning, and very little kindness to offer them in a world that desperately needs it.

As your rabbi, I want to know, how is your heart? For, dear friends, there is always a cost to hardening our hearts. What is the cost to our hearts in times such as these? What happens to our trust in others? What happens to our willingness to reach out to the stranger in our midst, as Torah commands? Are we more suspicious, less able to give the benefit of the doubt? What happens to the way we see ourselves?

With love, I ask each of us to reflect: How is your heart? For even as we must draw the line, speak our truths, and hold accountable those who are responsible for our safety and public welfare, we must also be even more vigilant about how *we* orient our inner lives in times of crisis. If, like me, you are struggling to keep an open heart, like a reed and not an oak tree, we must find some relief and some way to inspire change.

While the gap between the right and left may be driving our division today, the problem of a hardened heart is as ancient as our Torah. While consoling the people of Israel after their biggest screw up yet, the Golden Calf, Moses pleads with the people: “Circumcise your heart.” Dramatic imagery, but effective if we think of the callous that may be growing around the heart. What does it mean to circumcise the heart? It means that one answer to our healing is to increase our sensitivity towards others.

In Brene Brown’s new book “Braving the Wilderness,” she tells the story of a grown son returning home to visit his father, with whom he’d been arguing a lot over the past few years. He vowed to do better during this visit and find a way to keep the peace. He entered his father’s house, stood in the kitchen, and they began chatting about this and that and the neighbors that had just moved in down the street. “Yeah,” said the elderly father, “they are great, we are becoming fast friends. They’ve invited us over for dinner next week and their Oriental so she’s making her favorite dumplings.” The dad stops as he sees his son’s face go red with anger: “Oriental? Jeez dad, are you kidding? Racist much? ‘Oriental’ is so racist! Do you even know where they are from? There’s no country called ‘the orient.’ How embarrassing!”

His father stood silently, leaning against the wall. Finally, when his son was done, he said in reply: “I’m sorry, son, I have no idea what I have done to make you so angry with me. Nothing I do or say is good enough for you.” The father picked up his keys, and said as he walked out the door: “I’d stay and let you continue but I’m taking the neighbor I supposedly hate to pick up her husband from cataract surgery. She doesn’t drive and he took a cab this morning.”

What if the son had responded differently? What if he could have instead taken a deep breath, and said: “Look, dad, I know you would want to know this, because I know you would never want to intentionally hurt anyone’s feelings, but we don’t use the word Oriental any more. Instead, we try really hard to use the proper name of their country of origin. I just know you’d want to be that respectful.”

This is so difficult to do, especially when we feel triggered, angry, disappointed, hurt. But this is the mighty spiritual work that our times call for. This is part of our teshuvah. Circumcising the heart, and being more sensitive can only happen, of course, if our imaginations are open to the possibility that the people are more than the sum of their political beliefs and ideologies.

There’s a great saying from the mishnah, over 2,000 years old, written before the book was even invented, it went like this: *Al Tistakel B’Kan Kan, Eleh B’Mah She Yeish Bo*. In English, Don’t look at the outside of the jug, but rather what is inside of it. Sound familiar? But we sometimes don’t recognize the complexity that makes up the totality of another person and instead jump to conclusions.

I learned this first hand while visiting my grandfather’s farm a few years ago. See my mom’s family is from northern Tennessee and we still own the proverbial family farm. We go there for holidays. And while we were having lunch, a neighbor pulled up, someone I’d never met but my mom recognized as the guy who was leasing the farmland from us. This guy was classic country – suuuper thick drawl, pick up truck in the drive way with a gun rack in the back window, work boots, missing a tooth. We got to talking about farming and the ways it had changed over time.

And he suddenly said: You know, I’m worried that we are going to have to sell part of our business. See, we are partner with a larger agricultural company, and they use all kinds of pesticides to increase yield. And I am so against those nasty things – all of us around these parts depend on the underground aquifers for our drinking water, the same place all these pesticides are seeping into, and I’m worried people are going to get sick. Plus, they just work the earth until there are no more minerals and nutrients left in the soil and it’s all going to blow away. It’s going to be tough, but it’s the right thing to do.

When I understood that here was a man who held very different views on so many things about which I feel deeply, but shared my belief in protecting the environment for the safety of the people in that community, my mind was blown. Buddhist teacher John Makransky teaches that “no one is merely what our narrow, self-centered thoughts make of him or her – merely a “stranger,” merely “unlikeable,” merely “my friend,” merely contemptible, merely impressive or unimpressive, merely stupid or smart. Everyone is much more than that.” It’s why Jewish tradition says: When you save a life, it’s like you’ve saved an entire world. Each of us IS an entire world inside, as vast as the universe and just as complex. If we can take the time to listen and engage, we learn that others are so much more than meets the eye.

And we might even find a few surprises, if we are open to it. The Psalmist says: *Ani Asheina, v’Libi Er; Kol Dodi Dofek: Pitchi Li*. “I am asleep but my heart is awake. Listen, my beloved is knocking, saying: Open to me.” When our hearts are awake, we can hear something unexpected and precious knocking, something that might even heal us.

That’s the way Black Lives Matter New York chapter president felt when he and a dozen others arrived at a pro-Trump rally recently to protest. Decked out in slave chains and other forms of visual protest, he says that they arrived that day expecting to chant, to stand with their fists in the air and to probably exchange insults. Instead, and to their great surprise, one of the pro-Trump rally organizers, for reasons unknown, began to cite the right to Free Speech and invited the Black Lives Matter protestors to the stage.

As the BLM president took the mic, he heard some jabs but a mostly silent, listening crowd. And so he took a deep breath, and he spoke to them, about his truth. He spoke to them about wanting justice in America for all people. And the crowd cheered. Someone in the crowd angrily shouted out: All Lives Matter! To which he calmly responded: Yes, all lives matter. But right now, you can be strangled to death on camera as a black man and it won’t matter. Nothing will happen. And he went on for another couple of minutes, saying how proud he is to be an American, a Christian, and how he hoped they could work together for a better future.

Then, as he and his colleagues came off the stage, they began talking with the people gathered. The BLM president said: “If not on a grander level, but just person to person, I think we made some substantial steps without either side yielding anything. The head of a 4,000 person militia came up to me and said that he really identified with me. The head of Bikers for Trump came up to me, shook my hand, and asked me to take a picture with his son, little blonde headed boy named Jacob. That’s special. Here I went from being their enemy to someone they want to take pictures with their children. That’s the power of communication. We came out here to demonstrate but instead we just spoke. It worked. I’m happy about that.”

Listen for the knocking, something unexpected might happen, like a Black Lives Matter president leaving happy from a pro-Trump rally. See, hope is real.

When it’s all said and done, being Jewish is, in large part, about softening our hearts and learning to care, about cultivating generosity of spirit because we value human lives above all else. The heart of Torah, after all, is chesed – love and kindness. But it’s not easy; this is a relatively new problem in the scope of things and we need to practice. So, I want to challenge us all with two things, a very short to-do list as we leave here today.

Number One: Find someone with whom you disagree, and talk. If it’s someone you’ve really disagreed with, just talk about anything, the weather, sports, just break the ice. If it’s appropriate, have the tough conversation about why you haven’t spoken for a while, and invite the person to engage. Establish the care you might feel for them; establish their connection to values you share like integrity, respect, kindness; establish your hope that things can get better. **For some of us, this may be the most difficult thing to do in our lives.** But we got to this place as the result of millions of conversations that people got wrong. I know it’s totally unsatisfactory, to some degree, but the only way to fix this problem is by having millions of conversations that go right, or at least better.

I would add that there are two cases in which I hope you cut off the conversation, two boundaries we should draw: one is in the case of physical safety. And the other is in the case of being subjected to dehumanizing language. If someone is using language that makes it clear he or she does not see you as a human being, you do not have to engage that person.

Number Two: Do something to fix our problems. It’s important to cry over the world, but then it’s important for our own souls to move into action. Join a Rothschild Social Justice Group, or any other organization doing great work. And do the work. AND as important as the work we do is remembering that we cannot slip into dehumanizing the other side. Any time we hear blanket generalizing negative statements, anytime we hear people referred to as pigs, dogs, or aliens, anytime we slip into our own state of disgust, we must remember: We are all made in the image of God. We can become more sensitive to others, resist our assumptions and approach instead with curiosity, and wake up to something unexpected and wonderful knocking, as long as we ground ourselves in the awareness of our inextricable and utterly precious human connection.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches us that the Jewish love note to God, the V’ahavta, says that the loving words of Torah rest “*al levavcha,”* upon the heart. Why, he asks, does it not rest *in* the heart? Why *on top* of the heart? His answer: The wisdom of the Shema and all of Torah, the radical oneness of humanity and our interconnection, rests there until our hearts are broken open and it can fall in. My prayer for us all is that the words of love we have spoken here today will fall into our broken open heart in these days of Awe, and by way of our spiritual spelunking, we’ll become more resilient and better able to co-create the world in which we want to live for our sake and for the sake of our children. Amen.