Listening to and making space for the “Other”

There once was a man named Hamsa who lived in the same community as another man named Bar Hamsa.  A prominent man, also from their community was  marrying off his daughter and it was the celebration of all celebrations.  Everything for the wedding banquet was done with great extravagance – including the invitations which he hired someone special to hand deliver to each of his invited guests homes.

Well, the host and Bar Hamsa weren’t exactly friends.  But the father of the bride and Hamsa were, so the prominent man arranged for the invitation to be sent to his friend Hamsa.  But there was a bit of confusion and the courier inadvertently brought the invitation to Bar Hamsa instead.

Bar Hamsa was shocked and thrilled when he received the invitation.  Maybe the host was finally willing to let go of his bad feelings towards him, Bar Hamsa thought.  Maybe this was his way of saying that he was ready to give their friendship another shot.  He was relieved at the very idea of it and…. cautiously optimistic.  Soon enough the wedding night arrived Bar Hamsa put on his tuxedo and headed to the wedding of the century.  Or so he thought…

Everything was going well: The venue was breath-taking, the bride and groom were basking in their love, the food was a feast fit for royalty.  So, Bar Hamsa stopped by the gift table, put down the magnificent gift that he had chosen for the bride and groom after searching far and wide for something that they would love, and then he went to the table where dinner was being served.

In that very moment, the host saw him from across the room and began walking towards him.  He came close to Bar Hamsa and he whispered in his ear “get out of my party!”  What?!  Thought Bar Hamsa.  Get out?!?  But he invited me…  What was he talking about?  What was happening?   All of these thoughts and questions swirling around in Bar Hamsa’s mind but he couldn’t SAY a word.  He was stuck.  Paralyzed.  Shocked.  Clearly there had been some sort of misunderstanding…. “But…. I thought you invited me to your simcha – he said…  “I would never invite you to my simcha! Said the host! Now get out of my party….NOW!!!!”  said the host.  Bar Hamsa was mortified.  He couldn’t think fast enough but suddenly the words came pouring out…. “Don’t do this, he whispered…. It was just a misunderstanding.  How about this…. I’ll pay for my meal, I’ll eat and then be gone…just don’t embarrass me by making me leave right now, “ said Bar Hamsa.  “NO!”  said the host.  Getting louder and louder heads were starting to turn towards them…. “Get out of here NOW!”  He said.  “Okay…. Let’s try to figure this out, offered Bar Hamsa…. How about this:  If you let me stay and eat my dinner and then casually slip out, I’ll pay for ½ of the entire event”  “NO!!! I said!!!” hollered the host.  “Guards!!!” he shouted.  Bar hamsa was desperate and humiliated at this point as *everyone* seemed to be watching.  “I’ll do anything” said Bar Hamsa….I’ll pay for the entire wedding banquet for your daughter just don’t throw me out of here and embarrass me in front of my community and rabbis and the sages and elders.  But the host refused his offer.  Within seconds the guards came for Bar Hamsa and escorted him out the door.  No one said a word…

Now, what happened between Hamsa and Bar Hamsa was recorded in the Talmud because of the ramifications on our history -- which were serious and ultimately, the rabbis claimed that it was this event (and others like it) that lead to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

But for me, the far more important question, is this: How could it have been that the host was surrounded by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people and not one of them had the ability or desire to help him do the right thing.  How could it be that no one, at that entire simcha…. Could help him find a way to empathize with Bar Hamsa’s feelings or pleas?  How is it that no one pulled the host aside and said, “Look, I get it.  He’s your nemesis.  We all know that.  But let him stay.  Take the high road.  Stay away from the table for a little while as they’re eating and focus on all of the other people here that you DO LIKE…. He’ll quietly disappear in the meantime and we’ll all go on celebrating your daughter and your new son in law’s marriage.  Just let it go….”

The truth is ….that we live in a world where, not too many people have these relationships anymore.  Mostly, people have begun to share their lives with people who share their ideas, values, and even their politics and to dismiss those who don’t.  Even social media sites like facebook and twitter and Instagram perpetuate the polarization.   I was heartbroken to learn that they all now use algorythyms to send us all more of what we already believe.  which means that we’re all living in an echo-chamber.  And when someone doesn’t share your opinion… it is now offensive.  What social media users are saying over and over again is that they’ve had to “unfriend” people, because they can’t stand listening to their rants anymore.

But now I want to tell you a different story…. an incredible story about two other men who were friends who were very different from each other in all imaginable ways.  One of the men’s name was Yochanan and the other was Reish Lakish.  Now Rabbi Yochanan was the esteemed head of one of the great Torah academies.  Reish Lakish was known, in his early years, to be a bandit, a thief, robber.  And wouldn’t you know that he kept company with other people who were, for all intents and purposes – up to no good.  Rabbi Yochanan was very blessed – with an incredible mind as well as beauty that stopped people in their tracks.  In fact, he was so beautiful that the other rabbis shared that he used to sit outside of the mikveh (the ritual bath house) so that when the women were on their way home from the mikveh, they would see Rabbi Yochanan and get so excited by his beauty that their nights would be filled with great romance.  But I digress.  So one day … Rabbi Yochanan was swimming in a lake when Reish Lakish came by for a quick dip.  Reish Lakish jumped into the water and Yochanan was taken by his strength.  “Your unusual strength [commented Yochanan] should be applied to the study of Torah.  Said Rabbi Yochanan.   Reish Lakish, perhaps amused by this [beautiful] stranger’s attempt to get him engaged in the study of Torah responded in kind, suggesting that Yochanan’s beauty should be reserved for women.  With those words, Rabbi Yochanan had a proposition for Reish Lakish:  If Reish Lakish would repent from his old ways and give up being a bandit and become a scholar, Yochanan would offer him his sister’s hand in marriage.  And… said Rabbi Yochanan to Reish Lakish: “My sister is even more beautiful than I” (Baba Metzia 84a)

The great Rabbi Yochanan was right about Reish Lakish’s strength and potential.  He achieved greatness in the Academy and the Talmud shares that the two men, became chavruta – study partners – “although they were always at odds in their opinions.” Even with those different opinions though…the two men sat down together each and every day and spent and busied themselves day and night in studying together, arguing passionately yet respectfully, sharing ideas and listening – really listening to one another.

Until one day… things went awry…. A group of sages were studying and needed to know the Jewish law pertaining to knives.  As usual, the two friends and study partners (and now brothers in law) found themselves in their usual predicament:  they both had different opinions but on this one day…. (maybe Yochanan was tired or hungry or just out of sorts) because he muttered under his breath, “A robber understands his trade.”  (a not-so subtle allusion to Reish Lakish’s shady background.)  Reish Lakish responded with an equally hurtful comment and Reish Lakish was so upset about what had transpired that he became ill and died.  Rabbi Yochanan, grew inconsolable…. Without Reish Lakish in the world to study with, to converse with to debate with…he eventually lost his mind. (*Baba Metzia* 84a).

The Talmud shows us the story of two men, who disagreed about everything and yet understood in the deepest recesses of their hearts and souls that they needed each other.  Without Rabbi Yochanan, Reish Lakish couldn’t thrive and without Reish Lakish Rabbi Yochanan couldn’t thrive.  In fact, without one another, their fates turned out to be doomed

We live in a day when we’re all so polarized.  In our politics, in our discourse, even in the friends we keep.  We also live in a day and age where anxiety fills our world – where we all have profound fears about what our world will look like not so far from now…. If we will be safe…. And what fights and causes we need to take on and care about.  And yet, all of this fighting, name calling, accusations, all of this vitriol and hate is not only consuming us but it’s diminishing our greatness.  Diminishing our ability to dream, to imagine, to try and to fail.  Because there are too many people prepared to pounce.  Too many people ready to delight in the downfalls of others.

Fighting, disagreements, hurting one another…. Dates back to Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Chana and Penina, Sarah and Hagar, Joseph and his brothers, hamsa and bar hamsa…. But what if we tried a different model?

What if we recognized that each of us needs the other.  What if we pursued wise friends or study partners whom we could value – people who DON’T share our opinions and began to listen, to really listen.  What if we turned on Al Jazeera if you’re a lover of Israel or read HaAretz if you feel it’s hard to love our Homeland.  What if you turned on Fox news if you’re a regular MSNBC watcher and MSNBC if you typically watch FOX.  What if every republican found a democratic friend and every democrat found a republican friend and we all just stopped being “right” all the time and started to be in relationship again.  A wise friend and therapist once shared that “you can either be right or you can have a relationship”.  Maybe it’s time we were a little less right and a little more related.

As the famous poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

“From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.”

But how can we do this?  When “those people” drive us crazy?  Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, a great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, gave us the answer in his collection of teachings called Likkutei MoHaRa’n and this is what he said;

“You have to judge every person generously.  Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked.  [I love that, right?! Because there are people that you might think are ‘completely wicked’ and Rabbi Nachman got that human tendency and possibility].  “You have to judge every person generously.  Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked, it’s your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness and judge that person that way, you really may raise her up to goodness.  Treating people this way allows them to be restored, to become their best selves. What Rabbi Nachman knew was that “if we judge even the most sinful of people generously, so generously… if we search so hard to find that little place within them where there is no sin (and Rabbi Nachman believed that every human being has that place!), then we can connect to them in their goodness, believe in who they have the potential to be and we can change their lives. “Even the person you think is completely rotten” shared Rabbi Nachman…. Even that person… how is it possible that at *some time* in his life he has not done some good deed, some mitzvah?  Your job is to help him look for it, to seek it out, and then to judge him or her in that way.  And if you do, then you will find that that “wicked person” is no longer there, because in seeking out that little dot of goodness

Little dot of goodness, you allowed for teshuva to take its course.”

Rabbi Nachman then takes this idea further….he says that once we know how to treat the wicked and find some bit of good in them – it is time for us to do them same for ourselves! That this work will keep us far from the sadness and depression that Rabbi Nachman himself grappled with himself). “I know what happens when you start examining yourself.” He said. You say find that when you look within you see that you’re full of sins. Rabbi Nachman warned us not to fall into the clutches of “old man gloom”, “the one who wants to push you down.”  “That’s why I said, ‘Now go do it for yourself as well.’”  You too must have done some good for someone sometime.  Now go look for it!  And when you discover that even the good things you’ve done are full of holes, when you know yourself too well to be fooled: when you think to yourself; even the good things I did, I did for the wrong reasons, with impure motives. Then, keep digging. Dig until you find even the smallest dot of goodness – your *nekudah tovah*.  And when you find it, you will find life and joy. Because that – that is who you really are. From there, you are on your way to becoming your best self. And then Rabbi Nachman concludes with a brilliant insight:  “It’s that first little dot of goodness that’s the hardest to find.  The next ones will come a little easier.  Each one following another.”

This past Sunday night, we saw Rabbi Nachman’s words come to life.  After 90 minutes of Fighting.  Bickering.  Scowling.  Name calling,  Derision.  Diviseness.  And Threats.   After what feels like an eternity of living in a divided nation, being a part of a society where people are no longer able to hear or find anything worthy in the “other” – in the last minutes of the debate, Karl Becker, an audience member was given the microphone and the opportunity to ask the last question of the night.  And Becker chose this question:  *"Regardless of the current rhetoric, would either of you name one positive thing that you respect in one another?"*  Secretary Clinton went first, sharing that she respects Mr. Trump because of his children.  She found that small dot of goodness.  Next, Mr. Trump shared that what he respects about Secretary Clinton:  That she’s a fighter who doesn’t give up.  He too, quickly found that dot of goodness within her.  And then two things happened:  our country was able to exhale.  The tension dissipated for just a moment when we could breathe a little easier, and feel for just a few moments a sense of hope that things might just turn out alright.  And then…. The two candidates who hated each other and had hurt each other so much that they couldn’t even shake hands as they entered the room, without prompting, with just one small acknowledgment of one thing they respected about the other, BOTH candidates moved towards one another and reached out their hands.

There’s so much that’s beyond our control right now.  We won’t be able to change our nation’s political situation,  and we surely won’t change the new strategy of Instagram, facebook, twitter and social media, we just don’t have that power, not alone and not even together.  But what we CAN change, what we can change…. is ourselves and our community.  We can work this year on becoming better listeners.  Having more tolerance for others –even those with different views.  We can work on finding a friend in our lives who we can respect who can share with us a different perspective which we all so desperately need.  And we can push ourselves to be a little less “right” and a little more connected.  And we can try, to carry both Karl Becker and Rabbi Nachman with us as we go out into our everyday lives:  finding a little dot of goodness in everyone.  We must go forth and  remember that “finding that first little *nekudah tovah* – that first little dot of goodness – is the hardest, but the next ones come a little easier.  Each one following another.”  For a point of goodness dwells within each and every one of us.  Our work on YK and in the days to come, is to uncover it, reveal it and set it free in ourselves an in others.  When we do this, I am sure that we *will* be able to shake more hands, feel more connected and ultimately, to change the world for the better.  Just search for good and change will be inevitable!