

One of the great collective losses over the past several months has been the death of John Lewis.

The documentary about him, *Good Trouble*, provides a portrait of someone whose life was defined by protest, fueled by a love of humanity, and an intolerance for the pain and suffering brought on by cruelty. What emerges from this portrait is the idea that protest isn't merely what we do; it's a mode of living. And today, we can reflect on how that mode of living is necessary for all of us, driven home to us by work and inspiration of Rosh Hashanah.

To dive a little deeper, I want to share this sketch of a young John Lewis from Taylor Branch's book *Parting the Waters*, his majestic 3-volume history of the civil rights movement. He describes how in the late '50's King and his fellow organizers were looking for people who were, like them, committed to creating a nonviolent movement to end Jim Crow. Those young people were hard to find.

Then he met an 18-year-old John Lewis, a young man with a stammer who could barely finish a sentence. The son of farmers from rural Alabama, his home had no running water and no electricity; he was the first ever in his family to finish high school. He had grown up so far back in the country that he couldn't recall even SEEING a white person as a child. And in the eyes of more seasoned organizers, he was considered unrefined.

But when King's partner Ralph Abernathy met Lewis, he called his friend to come over right away. Lewis had caught the attention of NAACP lawyers in Montgomery because he was willing to file a lawsuit to become the first Black student at Troy State College. King and the others saw the passion in him, and Lewis said he was ready to die for the right to attend Troy State, but believed he could avoid dying if he followed nonviolent principles. From then on, King called Lewis "the boy from Troy," as he became a leader in the non-violent struggle: among the first to sit at an all white lunch counter; speaking at the March on Washington; nearly dying after brutal beatings in Selma.

But as much as giant as John Lewis was in his accomplishments, it's the middot, the inner features, of a life of protest that are most relatable. Humility; passion; conviction; consistency and dedication; a vision of justice, love, and compassion held close; an unrelenting belief that people can and should be better.

This holiday pulls us in to persuade us that protest should be an abiding feature of our lives, internally and in our actions. We see its expression EVERYWHERE in this holiday. The Torah stories, today and tomorrow, seem designed to elicit passionate objections to Hagar and Ishmael being banished, and Isaac being sacrificed. Argument and protest is THE central feature of Hannah's story, as she bitterly challenges God to treat her with justice and compassion. Nearly every page in this Machzor enjoins us to be like Hannah, or Moses, to argue with God on behalf of a broken world dominated by tyranny and cruelty. The U'ne Tane

Tokef, where we ask, who will live and who will die, may be the greatest protest of them all, railing against the arbitrariness of human life and suffering.

Yesterday, I tried to evoke the existential challenge we are in - trying to find realistic hope in a time dominated by cynicism and lies, wondering aloud about how we transform ourselves into agents of change. But something I saw this year is that, from the perspective of our tradition, protest itself IS that vehicle for personal and communal transformation, turning our yearnings and despair into purposeful and meaningful action.

Here is one story that to illustrate the point:

It's a story centered on Tisha B'Av, the commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its inhabitants to Babylonia. Traditionally, these calamities were understood as God's punishment of the people for failing to create the kind of the society demanded by the Torah - one that takes care of the poor and vulnerable. And though the tradition generally seems to accept the justice of the destruction and exile, that acceptance is not universal.

In a midrash, our ancestors, beginning with Abraham, come forward to launch a series of arguments against God on behalf of the people.

Abraham, the great devotee and arguer before God, said, "I did as you said, I made my heart cruel and showed my son Isaac no compassion. I bound him myself on the altar for you. And you can't show compassion to your own children, my descendants?"

Isaac came forward and said, "when my father bound me on the altar, I did not hesitate - will you not remember me and have mercy on my descendants?"

Jacob said, "I raised my children with great trouble, and risked my life for them when I went to face Esau. Will you not remember this and have mercy on my children?"

Moses said, "Did I not lead the children through the desert for 40 years as a faithful shepherd, and I died outside the land, and now my descendants will die outside the land?" He wept, and continued to protest against God - "Mothers and children have been killed together, and yet you remain silent?"

And in the face of all these protests, God remained silent.

So all the ancestors left - except Rachel. Rachel reminded God that when the time came after 7 years for Rachel to marry Jacob, her father Lavan insisted that Rachel substitute her sister Leah. And despite this horrible situation, Rachel did not expose her sister to shame - she did not ridicule her, she even made preparations so everything would go smoothly.

At which point Rachel challenges God, "If I, a person of flesh and blood, could be kind to my sister who married the man I was supposed to marry first, So why should you - the Ruler of Rulers, transcendent in love and compassion - banish your children because of their devotion to idols?"

Now, there are two endings to this story. In the Rabbinic midrash, the Holy One was filled with compassion, and said, "Because of you, Rachel, I will bring comfort to my children, and return

them to the land, and heal them.” Rachel convinces God that the punishment is too severe, and the protest works.

But in the Zohar, written 600-700 years later, God says nothing.

I prefer the second ending, because it suggests protest, even if it doesn't produce immediate or expected results, is still inherently meaningful. The audacity to look to our personal, micro experiences, and then challenge the Creator of the Universe, restores us to a position of power that comes for standing up for human self worth. God's silence in the Zohar is not the silence of rejection. It's the silence that affirms that the very act of protest that restores balance to the world, countering injustice and pain with moral righteousness and a love of humanity, despite everything.

There is something else audacious about this story, maybe even heretical. The ancestors and Rachel all protest about something that Jewish tradition views as the people's fault. How much more forceful and unrelenting would their protest have been if the people were thoroughly innocent?

And the more important question may be, how essential, urgent, and transformative is it to see ourselves as part of the injustices of the world, to experience a measure of that collective pain, and act on our inner yearnings to create change?

I imagine that many of us approach Rosh Hashanah thinking of moments we regret over the past year. But I am certain that we are ALL, in this moment, deeply disturbed by the cruelty, historic hatred, and malign neglect of this world that cause suffering, and that we would be willing to do something - anything - to make it go away. And I would add that the depth of those yearnings to change, and the powerful impulses to envision deep structural change, is what makes protest as a mode of living and exercise in radical transformation.

And today, we are reminded of how the shofar is both the vehicle and symbol for that radical transformation. It's designed to awaken us not only on the level of action, but on thought and feeling as well. Among the verses we chant right before we hear the shofar is “min ha-metzar karati yah,” from the depths I call to you. It is part plea but also part challenge - none of us would be in the depths by our own choosing.

In a famous Talmudic midrash, the Rabbis point out how the shofar is made from a ram to remind the Holy One that God owes humanity - in the form of justice and compassion - Isaac's act of unconditional sacrifice.

But there is something else that I have been considering this year. The authors of the Zohar impress upon us that here is a deeper layer of absorbing what the shofar symbolizes for our lives. The Psalms in fact state, “Happy are those who “know” the sounds of the shofar,” and not merely create or hear its sounds.

What does it mean to “know” the sounds of the shofar? And might it mean to “know” our own internal voice of protest?

The great modern Hasidic teacher, Shalom Noach Brezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe who died in 2001, pays close attention to the sounds of the shofar and how they reflect both the grandeur and transcendence we look to on this day as well as the intimacy of our own experience. The tekia, he says, is clearly a strong sound that is a vehicle for joy. But the T’ruah, whose sound rabbinic tradition never agreed on, embodies the anguish and bitterness of the soul - it is the sound of heartbreak. And then, only after we have given expression to the heartbreak, are we ready to sound another Tekia, a sound of strength.

He doesn’t tell us what all of that anger and bitterness is all about. It could be the expression of profound regret over how we have acted, and over the unfinished work of our lives. But it also may express how we are brokenhearted over the needless suffering we see other people going through, and sometimes experience ourselves, that is simply part of the cost of being human.

And so that T’ruah, bitter and full of anguish, becomes the sound not only of our yearning to be more whole and to be better people. It is also our declaration of our **entitlement** as human beings, from the place of our own deep pain, to live with the realistic expectation of love, companionship and justice.

And ONLY after sounding this bitter protest repeatedly in all its variations - again and again - only then do we have the full measure of joy and satisfaction, the Tekia Gedola.

For those of us who have been part of an act of protest or action for change in the past year, we know what it does for us. Protest galvanizes us; it illumines dimensions of ourselves that we may forget; it both expresses and ignites our yearnings; it reminds us of who we are and who we want to be.

But we need the constant reminder for this mode of living. So as we look ahead to Yom Kippur, I ask that we turn toward the pain we have seen in this time of pandemic - of the abuse and neglect of people of color, of people who are poor, and of people who are immigrants at our border. And in the face of these realities, we can look to our tradition offers us a way to envision and act toward hope and change, if only we feel it in ourselves. We begin by connecting with our inner pain over injustice and dehumanization. But within that pain, we are likely to find a key that begins to unlock new visions, new courses of action, and with them, a spirit of and promise.

The sound of the shofar, after all, resonates, and stays with us, as it rises and transcends all, as we work against the grain of this world to draw out its inner spirit of decency and humanity.

