

To Be Human

Some 2,000 years ago, a Jewish sage named Hillel, the greatest rabbi of his day, taught, “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.” (*Pirke Avot* 2:5)

This is the Jewish teaching that has been reverberating in my mind as I struggle to respond to the almost daily onslaught of tragic news. It’s an opening, a way to respond to the question: How do we cope with the *tsuris* of the world? What does Judaism teach that can help us respond to all the pain and suffering around us? “*Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish*: “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

So much of what we read in the news seems anything but human: a disgruntled man kills a reporter and cameraman on live television; refugees suffocate in transit, or drowned when their shoddy boat capsizes, a toddler's body washes ashore, face down in the sand as if he is napping... We struggle to comprehend such events, and to respond to them.

The situation for the staggering number of refugees, especially those seeking a safe haven in Europe, touches a particular nerve for the Jewish community worldwide: We can't help but recall our own desperate flight from Europe during World War II, and countless other expulsions over the centuries.

The numbers associated with today's migration crisis are staggering: 4 million Syrians fleeing their country; 3 million Iraqis displaced and that is just in the Middle East!

Europe struggles to mount a response to this refugee crisis that is human. To be fair, beyond the economic hardship of taking in and caring for hundreds of thousands of destitute people.

Europeans fear the culture clash. Most of the immigrants are Muslim. They bring with them a very different and often conflicting world view. For Jews worldwide, given the fact that Europe is already hostile to its Jewish population, the prospect of adding hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants, many of which come from countries that have been at war with Israel for the last 60+ years, is downright scary! Yet, to be human is to have compassion for all these displaced people. To be human is to find a way to help.

As I’ve watched the immigration crisis in Europe unfold I was saddened but not surprised by Europe’s response: Not in our back yard! Feels so familiar... Yet, there are some exceptions, a

few countries that strive to be human in a region that so easily loses its humanity. For instance, because of a request sent out by citizens on social media, 11,000 Icelanders offered to house Syrian refugees. Germany and Austria have welcomed refugees while many of their neighbors have turned them away. What an act of *teshuvah*! Germany, the epicenter of the worst crimes against humanity the world has ever known, welcoming thousands of weary refugees, while offering up the possibility of giving up to 800,000 asylum status.

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

Of course, we have our own immigration crisis here in America, with millions of undocumented workers and their families on whom our social and economic lives depend, yet whom we refuse to fully embrace. Some continue to call them "aliens"; others devise fear-mongering narratives about "anchor babies" and other falsely perceived threats. But here in California, there are some moves in the right direction: We offer the ability to get a driver’s license, access to medical care, and a gateway to higher education for some. Shomrei Torah has been a leading voice for immigrant rights in our community. We’ve held educational forums and dialogues; we’ve marched and protested; but there is so much more to be done.

What will we do in the year ahead?

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

Perhaps we can learn from Israelis who face the struggle to maintain one’s humanity in a place where one’s humanity can be challenged on a daily basis.

Not too long ago I was talking with my Israeli friend, Melila Helner Eshed. She is a world class scholar of the Zohar... a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute. She also is very involved in peace work in Israel... We were talking about fear: how not to be overcome by fear, how to live fully in a world that can be frightening. And she gave the following example:

“You’re on a crowded bus. It’s hot. You’re anxious to get where you are going and at the next stop, a large, Palestinian woman enters the bus. She’s covered from head to toe.

There is no way to know what she is carrying. She could have explosives strapped to her body. She could also be just another person, another human being on the way to work, to shop, to go home. Terrorist or daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend."

How especially difficult it must be to act humanly for a soldier at a check point in the West Bank, but it is not impossible. After the son of the renowned Israeli author, David Grossman was killed in the last Lebanon War, his father said this at his funeral:

"You were a left-winger in your battalion, and they respected you, because you held fast to your opinions without dodging a single one of your military responsibilities. I remember you telling me about your roadblock policy – you spent a lot of time manning roadblocks in the territories. You said that if there is a child in a car you pull over, you always begin by trying to calm the kid down, to make him laugh. That you always remind yourself that the kid is about Ruti's age. And you always remind yourself of how frightened he is of you. And how much he hates you....and still you will do what you can to make that terrifying moment easier for him, while doing your job."

"Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish." "In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human."

While Israel is demonized a lot in the news, we need to remember everyday Israeli heroes like Yuval Roth, who still find their humanity in the most dehumanizing situations.

In 1993 Yuval's brother, Udi, was coming home from reserve duty in Gaza when he was kidnapped and murdered by Hamas. This happened in the midst of the Peace Process and Yuval, was jerked from a false state of euphoria into the middle of the conflict. He was hurt and angry but he did not seek revenge. Instead, he joined The Parents Circle Families Forum, a pro-peace Israeli-Palestinian organization of families who have lost a family member in the conflict. There he met Mohamed Kabah, a Palestinian from the village of Yaabez near Jenin, who also lost a brother. Kabah approached Roth with an unlikely request. He had a sick brother in medical care in Haifa who couldn't get to the hospital. "So, I drove him," Yuval reported, "thinking this was no different from what I'd do for a neighbor in Pardes Hanna. Then this friend referred another family from his village who needed help to reach Hadassa," the Jerusalem hospital. One referral

followed another, and soon there was too much traffic for one person to handle. “So, I reached out to my circles of friends.”

Eventually, with the help of his Palestinian counterpart, Kaba, in 2006, Yuval created *Derech Hachlama/The Way to Recovery*, an organization that uses Israeli volunteers to ferry 30-50 Palestinians a day from Gaza and the West Bank to Israel for medical care. This is a life changer for everyone involved. Here is how Tablet Magazine describes one day in Yuval’s life as a volunteer:

“Mary, a 6-year-old from al-Yamun, a town in the northwestern West Bank, had to get to Sheba Medical Center near Tel Aviv for a treatment for spina bifida, an illness of the spine. At 7 a.m. on a Tuesday, Roth was waiting at the Barta’a (Reihan) crossing, between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The girl’s father Amjad rolled his daughter’s wheelchair and the smiling girl lifted herself onto Roth’s white Citroen using a special orthopedic outfit. Three months before, Mary successfully underwent a dangerous corrective spinal surgery, but she still couldn’t move her lower body. After a U-turn, Roth was heading toward Tel Aviv, engaging his passengers in a detailed conversation in Hebrew about their medical condition (politics is usually off limits). By 9:30 a.m., she was in the clinic. In three hours, Roth would pick her up as well as another father and daughter, from Nablus, whom a volunteer had dropped off earlier.

“When a friend told me about Yuval I said I can’t believe there were people like that,” said Amjad. “I used to pay 300 shekels a day for taxis and had to leave home at 5 a.m. to make it to a 9 a.m. appointment. We’ve been with Yuval for four years now. Two years ago I invited him to our place, then took his picture and hung it on the wall. Every guest gets to hear about this amazing Jew, whose brother was murdered but chose to take an undertaking for peace instead of revenge. Today everybody in our village knows the story.”

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

Airports have become a place where we regularly lose our humanity...herded like cattle, profiled, etc. Anyone who travels knows what I mean.

This poem, which Sylvia Boorstein shared with us last week, addresses both the dread and the potential for humanness at the airport. It's by the Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye. It's called, "Wandering around in the Albuquerque Airport":

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours

I heard the announcement:

If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic,

Please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,

Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

"Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem?" We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.

Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick,

Sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—

She stopped crying.

She thought our flight had been canceled entirely.

She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said "No, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late."

"Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him."

We called her son and I spoke with him in English.

I told him I would stay with his mother 'till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and Found out of course, they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian Poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up to about 2 hours.

She was laughing a lot by then; telling about her life; answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag— And was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, The lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same Powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers— Non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African-American, one Mexican-American—ran around serving us all apple juice And lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—

Had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing,

With green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always

Carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought,

This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped

—has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

Being human is first and foremost being compassionate, not allowing our hearts to be hardened by our own fear and exposure to so much suffering and loss. Compassion is like the rain in a drought; it revives all that it touches, but compassion alone is not enough. In addition to compassion we must have hope. Hope is like the sun, bringing light and life to an otherwise dark future.

One of Rabbi David Hartman’s most enduring messages was that to be a Jew is to believe in the promise of the future. Judaism is Course 101 in Hope!

Hope is in the DNA of the Jewish people, imbedded in our ancient foundational narratives and at the center of our story up until today.

Hope is the story of Abraham and Sarah, old, homeless and barren, becoming the father and the mother of a great people.

Hope is the story of the Exodus, a slave nation becoming the banner of freedom.

Hope is God's answer to Moses when he asks for God's name. God responds: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. Many translate this to mean, "I am what I am" suggesting something fixed and predetermined. But these translations miss the point, for as the renowned British rabbi Jonathan Sachs writes, "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is best translated as, 'I will be what I will be. God's name belongs to the future tense. God's call is to that which is not yet.'" (R. Sachs)

Hope is found everywhere in our *siddur*, the prayer book...

Hope arises every morning in our traditional prayers, "My God the soul you have given me is pure..."

Or every time we say the *Shema*...

Or even when we remember the dead: *Oseh shalom*...

"May the Source of peace descend on us, on all Israel, and all the world, and let us say amen"...

It is no coincidence that the national anthem of Israel, the home of the Jewish people is *Hatikvah*, The Hope...

As Rabbi Sachs writes:

"To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every *mitzvah*, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging vocation. Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home, of hope."

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.”

To be human is to care; to be human is also to believe and work towards the promise of the future, to be hopeful in even seemingly hopeless situations. This is not easy.

The few issues I have touched on seem interminable, hopeless and I haven’t even mentioned gun violence in this country or climate change! (I can if you want...)

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.” Which means to respond to life with compassion and to keep the glowing embers of hope burning in our hearts and in the heart of the world.

Hope, writes the poet Lisel Mueller:

It hovers in dark corners
before the lights are turned on,
it shakes sleep from its eyes
and drops from mushroom gills,
it explodes in the starry heads
of dandelions turned sages,
it sticks to the wings of green angels
that sail from the tops of maples.

It sprouts in each occluded eye
of the many-eyed potato,
it lives in each earthworm segment
surviving cruelty,
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs
of the child that has just been born.

It is the singular gift

we cannot destroy in ourselves,
the argument that refutes death,
the genius that invents the future,
all we know of God.

It is the serum which makes us swear
not to betray one another;
it is in this poem, trying to speak.

May the year 5776 be a good, healthy, prosperous year for us all.

And when the *tsuris* of the world assails us, which we know it will,

May we remember and live by the teachings of Hillel:

“Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish.” “In a place where no one is human, let us
strive to be human.”

L’shanah Tovah...

