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In one of his short stories, Israeli author Etgar Keret writes about Maya, a young woman who takes a fiction writing class. For her first assignment she writes about a world in which every person could, at any given moment, split into two people, each half his or her age. Some chose to do this in childhood. Others would wait until they'd established themselves financially and professionally and then go for it in middle age. The heroine of Maya's story was splitless. She had reached old age, and at the end of the story she died. Her teacher told her it was a good story, except for the ending, which he felt was predictable and depressing. And that the story raised too many questions.

I would argue that Maya's story raises perfect Yom Kippur questions. My questions would be: How often can I split? Can I split at will? As often as I please? Imagine, every time something uncomfortable or challenging happens and poof, I'm half my age, removed from that discomfort, able to start over. Not bad. You'd never need to face a painful or embarrassing confrontation; you'd never have to apologize for anything or set right any misstep or error in judgment. No grief. No setbacks, no facing the music.

Maya's heroine is the only person in the world who refuses to take advantage of this great escape. Instead of running away from all the physical and emotional challenges of age; instead of evading all the trauma and the loneliness that we all face at some point in our lives she chooses to embrace them.

What makes this a Yom Kippur story? Of course each of us has only this one life. No splitting for us. And Yom Kippur teaches that this is a good thing, because the moments that the folks in Maya's world blissfully miss--the hardest times, the most painful times--those times enable true wisdom, and growth, and ultimately, true appreciation for this life.

We all know this. We don't learn much when life comes easy. We learn the most about ourselves from struggle, from failure, and grief and from pain, from the times that, when we recall them, make our stomachs clench.

In the Torah reading Rabbi Gordon chanted for us, Moses, like Maya's heroine, has reached old age. He stands before the people, at the end of their journey, at the edge of the Promised Land, and delivers an eloquent message:

You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God—to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God....I call heaven and earth to witness before you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—that you and your offspring would live.

Such eloquence and strength. It's almost impossible to imagine that this is the same Moses we met at the beginning of the story. When God first commanded him, "Go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let my people go," Moses pleaded before God, "Please, pick somebody else." He felt small and incapable. And terrified. His first audience with Pharaoh was a disaster. Everyone laughed at him. And throughout the Torah every step forward was followed by a crippling, humiliating setback. Pharaoh's dangerous ego, the perilous wilderness, warring enemy tribes, the people's demanding immaturity. Imagine if Moses could have split in two and just run away.

Most remarkably, the rabbis teach that from each humiliating setback, Moses grew most...in humility. And they give three examples. First, when the rebel Korach challenged Moses's leadership and led an insurrection against him, instead of getting creating an ancient Tiananmen Square and getting defensive, Moses fell on his face and invited Korach to appear before God and make his case. Second, When Miriam and Aaron, his own siblings, gossiped behind his back, sowing seeds of discontent among the people, instead of cutting them off, Moses prayed for them and forgave them. And third, when God sought to wipe out the people after the Golden calf, Moses pleaded for compassion and forgiveness. Moses came to see that justice wasn't about winning, or triumphalism. In each case, Moses sought reconciliation, by listening and modeling humble, empathetic concern.

Think honestly, now, about the conflicts in your lives. How many are enflamed because we care more about winning, than we do about listening, because we enter the conflict already knowing who's right, and who's the idiot. How we are already convinced that they are who they are, and will never change, that there isn't a single kernel of truth in what they have to say to us. So we have two choices, we can get them to see the light, to see how wise and superior we are and get them to back down, or we can walk away.

And we are also good at ignoring our own power to change. We say we are who we are, and we'll never change. How often do we look in the mirror, and see only our limitations, only what we think is wrong with us? Only what we think we can't do? And how often do we use those self-justifications to remain stuck right where we are. As the great Hasidic Alter Rebbe put it, we mistake habit for destiny.

Yom Kippur comes to teach us that when stop listening, or when we refuse to change based on what we hear, we violate Moses's central command to us, Shma Yisrael, listen, oh Israel.

Some of you may be aware that our relationship with the Islamic Center of Long Island made news recently. Many of you have enjoyed our opportunities to be with members of ICLI over the years. Our Brotherhood and women's group have joined in learning and celebration with them. Our teenagers have been together, and some of us have become good friends.

During this summer's war between Israel and Hamas, some of the leaders of ICLI sent a very disturbing letter to leaders of the local Jewish community. It condemned Hamas, but equally condemned Israel, using language we felt was not only wrong about the facts, but even offensive. And it wasn't just the substance of the letter, but that it had

come out-of-the-blue, that our friends had blindsided us with these accusations against Israel, without any preceding conversation.

So, our president Howard Berrent and I met with these ICLI leaders, to see if our relationship could be salvaged. It was a hard conversation, but because we began with a history of good will and friendship, we were able to be honest with each other, without rancor, and with a determination to listen to each other. We learned, for example, that they did not know that for us as Jews, Zionism is at the heart of our Judaism. That Israel is family to us. They had no idea that they had personally offended us, that was a revelation to them.

We told them what we thought of their letter, how they had mischaracterized Israel and that they were wrong about the facts. We told them that Israel was attacked and responded in the way we would expect our own government to. And they asked good questions, listened to us, told us they learned from us. They understood that some of their language was out-of-bounds, and apologized for that. We told them that friendship means dialogue, and that we wished they had come to us first, before venting their spleens in that letter, and they said that next time, they would.

And, we listened to them. We learned that they, as we, prayed for peace for both Israel and Palestine. They didn't back down from their criticism of the Netanyahu government or its behavior. I didn't expect them to. And we didn't back down from our defense of Israel and its conduct during this war. But that's ok. Many in Israel make a good living criticizing the Netanyahu government; much like Fox news makes a fortune here. And because we shared the same aspirations for peace and security for the State of Israel and for the Palestinians.

We also listened as they shared their motivations behind their letter, motivations that touched me. Many of the members of ICLI have deep connections to ordinary Palestinians. They are family, friends and brothers and sisters in faith, and they were watching their family die; children die during this awful war. They were grieving, just as we were in pain for our Jewish brethren.

As I listened to the ICLI leaders then, and during our conversations since, I realized something about my own conduct during this war that made me uncomfortable, and feeling guilty. I realized that during the Gaza War I had made very little room in my heart for grief over Palestinian children. I'm not talking about Hamas militants or those who support them. I mean, the children, because no matter the cause, no matter who is to blame, children are always innocent victims. Every time I read about children dying in an airstrike, or children becoming orphans, I became defensive and I thought to myself, "Hamas is to blame for them." That's a true statement. But I now realize that our moral responsibility and our humanity shouldn't end there. Our tradition teaches that every single life is worth the entire world, not only Jewish life, but all innocent life

This is not about justifying Hamas's terrorism or shifting blame for this massacre away from them. Nor is it about diminishing the magnitude of our own grief for the loss of Jewish life. Rather, I want to argue that the deaths of children must crack open our

hearts, and let loose our grief for them, alongside our own fallen in Israel. That is the first step, I believe, to reconciliation.

So here's what I believe about true dialogue, dialogue extending well beyond interfaith community work and into the dark and raw places in our own lives, and our own relationships when things get hard between us. When you confront a difficult moment in a relationship, you can only be heard when you are willing to listen with an open mind and an open heart. True relationship is created when you ask questions without indicting, when you share your views without denigrating the other person or impugning the other person's motives, unless and until you have reason to. And authentic communication just might open the space—for you to speak your truth, and know that you will be heard. I've listened to you. I've heard you. Can you now listen to me? Just as important, genuine communication forces us to hear hard things about ourselves, things we might not want to hear, things that can make us defensive. But if we are willing take the risk, and to absorb those hard, honest truths, then we can learn about ourselves, and we can grow. And for Israelis and Palestinians, it is our only hope.

No, we will not be inviting Hamas to a Brotherhood Passover seder any time soon. There is such a thing as demonic evil, and we must defeat it. But that doesn't mean that there is no one to talk to, no one to build peace with. As you know our conversations with ICLI led to a joint statement, passed by the leaderships of both Temple Sinai and ICLI. Just before we finalized our joint statement, Dr. Faroque Khan of ICLI added this sentence: *"As two American religious institutions, it is incumbent on us to voice our dreams and desire for the well being of the people of Israel and Palestine."* It was the Muslims who insisted on a statement affirming the dreams and desires of Israelis, and he listed Israel first, a genuine message of connection.

And so, to conclude, our Torah reading taught that God placed blessing and curse before us. Both blessing and curse. Because both blessing and curse are in us, because both blessing and curse touch us. Sometimes we are good, and sometimes not. Those we love are sometimes good, and sometimes not. Yom Kippur's truth is that human frailty and human failure are in us all. Ours is the power to choose connection, patience and kindness, and most important, forgiveness, not by compromising our dignity or our integrity, quite the opposite. By affirming both, and granting each other both. And when we do that, when we listen, and when we forgive, we bring goodness into our lives, and spread goodness into our world. Amen.