

The Challenge of Reconciliation:
Listening and Loving in a Contentious and Divided World

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Hayom Harat Olam / Today is the birthday of the world. On this birthday we find our world more dangerous, more violent and more fractured than at any time most of us can remember. There is no magic we can conjure, no panaceas which can cure the deep and divisive ills of our world. Instead, today I suggest that we focus on beginning a process healing by taking just one step . We must begin somewhere. This morning I suggest that we begin by considering the notion of reconciliation. And for that, I turn first to this morning's Torah reading.

In this morning's Torah reading, Sara, our Matriarch, has been unable to conceive. Begrudgingly, she suggests that Abraham father a child with Hagar, Sara's maidservant. Abraham agrees and from the union of Hagar and Abraham, Yishmael is born.

Sometime later, finally, Sara conceives and Isaac is born. With the birth of her son, Sara banishes Hagar and Yishmael. She sends them alone into the desert with nothing more than a morsel of bread and a skin filled with water. Soon, Yishmael, who is little more than a child, grows weak and cannot endure the heat. Hagar cannot bear to hear her son cry or to watch her son die a slow and painful death. She places the boy beneath a tree and runs for some distance so that she would not hear him calling out to her.

And here, we reach the story's climax: **Hagar cried out and, the Torah records, God heard her cry.** God saved the boy and Hagar and promised that the boy, Yishmael, (whose name, fittingly, means "God will hear him") would not only survive but that his offspring would become a great and powerful nation. As you know, Islam traces its authority and authenticity to this story, to our shared Patriarch, Abraham, and to Yishmael. The bedrock of meaning in today's scriptural readings is here, in the moment in which God hears Hagar.

The idea that God will hear our voices is intrinsic to the prayers of Rosh HaShana. As we spend these long days of prayer and thoughtful meditation, more than anything else, we want our voices to be heard:

God, please, *Shma Koleinu* / hear our cries just as you heard the pleas of Hagar.

Listen to our voices, God, just as you listened to the prayers of Hannah (in the *Haftarah*).

Knowing that God heard her voice gave Hagar strength, fortitude and confidence. Knowing that God hears our voices gives us comfort, dispels darkness and brings hope to our lives, especially on Rosh HaShana. People of all faiths go to great lengths to find, both geographically and spiritually, those places and times when they feel that God will hear their prayers.

We yearn to be heard.

For Jews, the holiest spot in the world, the place where, presumably, our voices are heard most clearly, is at the Western Wall, the Kotel in Jerusalem. Standing at the wall, we recall the glory of the ancient Temples that once stood there, we feel the devastation of Temples' destructions, the attempts of our detractors to banish us from Jerusalem. And we remember the tenacity and dogged fortitude of our ancestors, never to abandon or forget our history, never to forsake the yearnings for return to "Zion and Jerusalem", as we state in our prayers.

At the Kotel, prayers transcend words. We stand together and recall our collective history. We feel bound to other Jews by our common past. We are bound together, as well, by our common destiny.

Throughout Jewish history, whenever Jews prayed, no matter where in the world they were, they prayed facing Jerusalem. Standing at the Kotel, one senses the prayers of all Jews, throughout Jewish history, focused on this wall. The Kotel, at least for me, is the embodiment of *Clal Yisrael*, where Jewish peoplehood and a sense of connection between all Jews, past and present, is almost palpable.

At the same time, this is the place where our voices today are being silenced. Today we are being told that God will not hear our voices at the Kotel, at least not in the way that we pray together. At the Kotel, you see, egalitarian services in which men and women participate and stand together, has been banned. We are prohibited, by the official Rabbinate in Israel, from adding our collective voice to those of all Jews, from every age, if we are standing, men and women together, at the Kotel. Our collective voice has been silenced at the Kotel.

In response to this issue, in recognition of the injustice being perpetrated against us, the Knesset of Israel voted and approved a negotiated plan to accommodate non-Orthodox services and women's minyanim/prayer services. Our services would be held at a different part of the Western Wall, neither in close proximity nor visible from the area of the current Kotel. Representatives of the Conservative and Reform Movements and several women's groups in Israel, painstakingly, worked on, and agreed to support, the compromise bill.

That agreement was tabled last year by the Prime Minister to prevent a major confrontation, a possible toppling of the coalition in the Knesset over this issue. This summer, however, the Prime Minister summarily rescinded the agreement. No more discussion. No more compromise from the side of Israel's government. And even from our side, a new deal will be difficult, especially after the statement of the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem who, three weeks ago declared that non-Orthodox Rabbis are worse than Holocaust deniers. We are portrayed as enemies of the Jewish State. How can we find room to compromise when the former Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem describes you as "worse than Holocaust deniers"?

As we endure the scorn and demonization of non-Orthodox Jewry once again, we will continue the fight for religious freedom and the right to raise our voices in prayer our voices at the Kotel. But, before we engage in another confrontation with those government appointed rabbis, it is important to understand the motivation behind the ban against us and behind our desire for access to the Kotel:

For us, our motivation, as I said, is to gain access and pray at the holiest place in the world for Jews. And that motivation is reinforced by our right, as Jews, to worship at that sight. That Wall, the Kotel does not

belong to Israel or to the Rabbinate. It belongs to us, the entirety of the Jewish people. We have the same right to worship at the Kotel as any Jew.

Why, then, do the ultra-Orthodox oppose us with such adamancy? Why does it bother them if we hold our services, unseen and inaudible to them?

Beyond the cruel and condescending comments which the Rabbinate uses to justify their prohibitions against mixed services or women's *minyanim* at the Kotel, something else is at play here. Using their political power and the control of prayer etiquette which they wield at Kotel, it is now their mission to determine which voices will be heard by God and which voices are illegitimate and, therefore, must be suppressed. They want to control **access to God**, to demonstrate that God listens to them, not us. Their desire is to have their voices, and only their voices, heard at the Kotel. And this seems to be an emerging theme: Everyone seems to want control so that theirs will be the only voice God hears.

Over the summer, the entire Moslem world was incensed at the placement by Israel of metal detectors at the gates outside of the Temple Mount. Did you wonder why the anger was so intense and that it spread so quickly, causing rioting in Jerusalem, Jordan and elsewhere, rioting which degenerated into an international crisis? What was the big deal?

The metal detectors were perceived as an affront, not because those who pray there necessarily want to facilitate terrorists bringing weapons to the Temple Mount. The metal detectors, placed at the entrance to the Temple Mount, were an affront because they gave the impression that it was Israel, not the Waqif, not the King of Jordan nor the Palestinians, that controlled access to the place where God hears Moslem voices. That was not the intent of the Israeli Government, but that was the impression which created the anger and ignited the riots and bloodshed.

Truth be told (it is Rosh HaShana, after all) I don't worry so much about God hearing my voice. I do worry, however, about the government and the State of Israel not hearing my voice. I fear that our Jewish and democratic State has created a situation in which only one voice can be heard, in which different voices will not be tolerated. I fear for a Jewish State in which there are no publicly supported religious places for me, for my Judaism, for my community or for my voice. And I fear for a State which empowers one group to control access to God, to restrict proximity in order to determine whose voices will and will not be heard.

When one feels that his or her voice is not being heard, anger and resentment are generated. This is certainly the case when Jews or Moslems feel that they have been denied access to their holy places, that their voices are not heard. And that same frustration can be felt in the sphere of interpersonal relations. When we feel that our voice is not being heard by those who should be listening, the resulting frustration can even jeopardize our most important personal relationships.

Paths to reconciliation, begin with communication, with voices on both sides being heard. Reconciliation requires that words are carefully chosen and that each partner is "actively listening", a term I first learned when I was in Social Work School. If you can look the other in the eye and actively listen to what they are really saying, if you are willing and able to hear their voice, you have learned the first step toward reconciliation.

There is also, however, second step: To reconcile requires an understanding of that which divides you and an appreciation for how much you have in common with the other. Reconciliation must be built upon the foundation of that which is shared by both upon a base of trust, shared experiences and loyalty. Dr. Elana Stein Hain, a young scholar at the Hartman Instituted, recently gave a new twist to, arguably, the most important verse in the Torah. Without going into a lengthy explanation at this moment, I share her central point which articulates this second ingredient necessary for reconciliation.

V'ahavta li're'echa kamocha, is most often translated: Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). What does it mean to love your neighbor? Certainly, what is intended here is not romance or deeply held emotions. By comparing verses in the Tana"ch, what emerges is not so much "love" but qualities of loyalty, a sense of shared experience, a sense of allegiance and concern for the other. *V'Ahavta lire'echa kamocha* means that I cherish our relationship because you and I are so similar. We have so much that we share: our values, our history our experiences.

You are very much like me. I am just like you. And we must find our way back to each other because of all that we share.

I believe that Dr. Stein Hain is correct: At the core of any relationship there must be a sense of mutual concern for the other's well-being, an appreciation of how much we have in common. That is the second step toward reconciliation

And the third step: whether speaking of Palestinians and Israelis, Haredi Jews and non-Orthodox Jews, or the relationship between a husband or wife and their spouse, reconciliation can proceed only if both sides want peace more than they want to be right. If antagonists want to reconcile, that reconciliation must be based, not on determining who is right and who is wrong. Disputes continue and intensify with time because on each side there is truth and validity. Each believes that he/she is right. Reconciliation can take place only if we can endure the idea that in any disagreement, it is possible that both might be wrong or, even more likely, that both might be right.

Judaism was created as a religion in which different, divergent and opposing voices are not simply tolerated, they are celebrated and embraced. We hear, loud and clear, the alien voices of Hagar and of Yishmael. But, we hear, loud and clear, the voices of our progenitors, Abraham and Sara. In the Mishnah and Talmud, we hear voices of both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. These two schools of thought argue consistently and relentlessly for and against rulings on matters of Jewish Law. Each is convinced that they are correct.

The *Tosefta*, a collection of Mishnaic and Talmudic passages, explains, by way of a beautiful metaphor, how it is possible that two groups, two different rabbis, or even two who are in a loving relationship can reconcile without declaring one right, the other wrong:

Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who declare impure and those who declare pure. (*Sotah* 7:12)

Reconciliation is not about determining which view or opinion is right and which is wrong. It is not about whether we can agree on whether something is pure or impure. At some point, it is no longer our

job to decide which is right. Our job is to make room in our hearts for multiple voices and divergent views. The deeper questions, therefore, are about how to live with those whose opinions differ from yours. *V'ahavta lereacha kamocha* is a mitzvah which is fulfilled when two who differ can say: our differences are not who we are. What we share is greater than what separates us.

Several months ago, as part of a program of the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis, I visited a mosque, the Al Aqsa Mosque in Northern Liberties. It is the largest Arabic speaking congregation in Philadelphia. Many members of the community are transplants from Arabic speaking countries. The visit was scheduled for a Friday morning so that we could attend their Sabbath service. Following the services, some of the community's elders came to the room in which we gathered to engage us in conversation.

I must admit that, at the outset, I was feeling quite guarded. This is a community with deep ties to Arab communities in and around Israel. We were told that members of that Mosque came from Lebanon, Gaza and a large contingent, from East Jerusalem. I had no illusions regarding the opinions and political positions of people from those areas. I had no illusion about what people from those areas would say about Israel. I was prepared to become defensive.

As the discussion proceeded, one of the elders spoke about the children in their community and how the elders sought to instill values of peace, pluralism and compassion. As each of the elders spoke, they used conciliatory language but made no mention of Israel. When one of the visiting rabbis in our group asked why they didn't teach about Israel, they said that their orientation was not political and that they were reluctant speak at all about the Middle East. They do not speak about foreign policy. Here, they said, we speak of peace.

It was this last comment which I felt that I needed to explore: When you teach your children about peace, Israel doesn't come up? If the value of peace is to have any meaning, should not peace be affected between enemies? Can you convey a message of peace there as well? The man thought for a moment and said:

Our children are taught peace, acceptance and respect for all people. But for many of us this lesson is difficult for us to teach. Like many here, we have come from backgrounds in which these ideas were not taught. Many of us grew up in pain. It is hard to teach our children about peace while we are still in pain.

He continued:

In 1986, I was a kid growing up in southern Lebanon. I remember that war. I remember running to our makeshift bomb shelter as the lethal, Israeli jets were flying low, strafing the tops of the buildings and dropping bombs in their wakes. I remember going home later to find a pile of rubble where my home once stood. Rabbi, he said, I want peace more than I can express, but I have too many memories, too many nightmares. That is why I place so much hope in the next generation, in our children.

I listened carefully and sat for a moment to internalize what he had said. And then I responded with all I could think of to say:

That I can understand.

I understand how it was hard for him to speak fondly of Israel. He had borne the brunt of Israel's wrath. He had borne the brunt of Israeli bombing sorties. Although he had welcomed us warmly and kissed me when we left, the conversation had been difficult for him and for me. Israel had no choice but to fight in 1986, but speaking to someone on the other side, face to face, someone who was soundly defeated in war, was humbling. It was hard for me to hear about the pain caused by Israel, even if it was justified. This man denounced terrorism but could not find within his heart to forgive Israel. Yet he wanted to move beyond that pain that he had carried for the past 30 years.

This was a difficult conversation. We had looked each other in the eye. We had shared our thoughts, understanding that we had very different views regarding an issue passionately important to each of us. We tried to understand each other. He heard my commitment for peace and my resolve for Israel's security. I heard that he still wants peace even though he still has nightmares.

And something else. I felt that, given a bit more time, we could come to a mutual understanding and even a friendship. He was dignified and honest, he was concerned but he had hope. He had spoken. I had listened and heard. I believe that he was moved by our exchange. I certainly was. *V'Ahavta lire'echa kamocha*: we are really not so different after all.

A final story:

Two young people meet at a party. They speak with each other for a while. Interest and enthusiasm increase as the evening goes by. Later in the week, they speak by phone. They exchange emails. They agree to go on a date together: they have dinner and watch a movie. After the movie, they walk through the park. The moon is high, the weather is clear and cool. They sit on a bench and there they kiss for the first time. It is there, sometime later that he proposes marriage. A few years later, at the same bench, she tells him that she is pregnant. And life goes on.

Many years later, with a special anniversary approaching, he plans a special night out. He makes dinner reservations at the same restaurant they went to on their first date. He purchased tickets at the same theatre where they had watched their first movie together. Following the movie, once again, he thought that they could stroll through the park, sit on **their** bench and talk as they did those many years ago.

Their anniversary arrived and the night-out commenced: They arrived at the restaurant, sat at the same table, ordered the same food they ordered all those years before. They walked to the theatre to watch a movie they had both wanted to see. Everything had been working according to his plan as they began to stroll into the park toward their favorite bench. But then, the unexpected occurred.

When they approached the bench... there were two others sitting there engaged in a deep conversation. Hmmm....The husband approaches the bench and, apologetically asks the couple seated there if they could move to a different bench. "You see this is **our** bench. There is history for us here." He proceeded to explain all of the history in their lives connected to this bench: First kiss. Let's get married. We're having kids.....

The seated couple listened politely and then respond: Gee. We're sorry, but this is, actually, **our** bench. When we were students, this is where we would come to talk. This is where we decided to get married". Let's freeze the story right here. What should these couples do? How should they resolve this conflict? Two couples. One bench. Each has a connection to the bench, but whose connection is stronger? Who is right?

If we can find an answer, a way to resolve this dilemma, that would be great, not just for the story but for the world. You see, it is in the resolution of this kind of situation that, I believe, we can find a better way to address some of the problems in friendships and marriages and even some of the many problems of the world. We must find a way to ameliorate some of the problems which plague Israel and *Clal Yisrael* / the Jewish Community at large. If there is a desire, there is a way. But is there a desire? Is there the will?

In 1923, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the militant "Irgun" in Palestine, believed that a negotiated peace with the indigenous Arab population (they had not yet started referring to themselves as Palestinians) would never happen. He said:

I feel at least the same instinctive love of Palestine [by Arabs] as the love of the Land among the Jews.

With all of the bloodshed, death and hatred since Jabotinsky in 1923, the resolve of neither Arab nor Jew in Israel has changed. There is as much determination on both sides as ever.

And to Jabotinsky I add that since 1923 and before, for that matter, there has never been present between these hostile factions, the one aspect of relationships that drives the rest: the desire to make peace.

I have lost faith in the possibility of a reconciliation, at least for the foreseeable future, between Palestinians and Israelis. Neither side feels that their voice is being heard, neither can fully accept the validity of the other's narrative. The same can be said of the possibility of reconciliation with the Rabbinate in Israel over the issue of the Kotel and over many other issues. Our voices are not heard. Our beliefs and our approach to Judaism is dismissed as wrong and dangerous to the future of the Jewish People. I have lost faith because we do not have two partners who want peace. When there are not two willing partners, we have no foundation on which to build. Only when both sides want peace, can reconciliation proceed.

Instead of trying to make peace between national entities, therefore, perhaps there are individuals, Israelis and Palestinians, who want to find a path to a smaller, more personal peace. Perhaps there are a few who can look each other in the eye and acknowledge that there may be legitimate claims on both sides. Perhaps, the best way to proceed, therefore, is person to person, listening to one another with an open heart, relying on our shared values, on our friendships and our shared sense of humanity. This year, in honor of the 70th anniversary of Israel's statehood, would be a very good time to do this.

I expect that some will respond to my comments this morning by saying, "the rabbi has gone soft". That may be true although my comments are not intended to signal a change in my belief that Israel must

defend and protect her citizens against any and all threats. But over time, one's perspective can change. I can say that being a grandfather of five grandchildren born and living in Israel, has altered my perspective. My grandchildren require of me to think more about the future than ever before. And the only path I see involves listening, building on that which we have in common and doing this with people who also want peace. We need more conversations, dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands, in order to assure that both sides feel cared for, that the needs of each have been safeguarded and that each feels that their voice has been heard. And if we have these conversations, maybe God will listen in as well.

Returning to our park bench, what shall we do with the two couples trying to convince each other which has the right to sit on that bench, which narrative is more compelling? I can think of a few scenarios:

1. The "Marx Brother" Scenario: After discussing the issues and each presenting all legitimate arguments, it starts to rain and both couples go home.
2. The couples reach a mature (but, ultimately, unsatisfying) compromise: How much longer will you be? If you can shorten your conversation a bit, we can wait for a while to sit on the bench after you have finished. (reasoning: In this way, we can re-claim what is rightfully ours).
3. But my favorite ending is this: Each couple shares their stories, their memories and their connections to that bench while the others listen. In the end, they realize, how much they have in common. They respect each other's connection to the bench. And now what? The wife of one of the couples says: "We seem to have so much in common. I know it's getting late. We should be going home. Just like you, we need to get our babysitter home in a little while. But, do you think that we have time for a quick cup of coffee together?"

The two couples leave the park together. They stop for coffee. They become the good friends and, in time, their children will also have their own history with that bench. But even better, those children will have wonderful stories about that bench to tell their children.

V'chen Yehi Ratzon/ May that be the ending we live to see.