

How (not) to Open a Flower
Yom Kippur 5769
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A teacher once shared with me an important lesson: “A flower cannot be opened with a hammer.”

We spend great amounts of time and energy, indeed, attempting to open flowers with hammers. In approaching the most personal and interpersonal aspects of our lives, as well as global issues affecting entire nations, we often use inappropriate tools for the job. When confronted with challenges that are delicate and complex, we react as if we’re up against something crude and simple.

This applies directly to the work of these days. When we engage with the task of *teshuvah*, growth and renewal, we need to do so with care. We often go at ourselves with a hammer, wishing we were smarter, quicker, more successful, more patient, more able to love and be loved. Yet we need to approach this work with patience and understanding.

The tradition emphasizes compassion at this season: “Show me an opening of repentance no larger than the eye of a needle,” the rabbis portray God as saying, “and I will widen it into openings through which wagons and carriages can pass.” Our sages recognized that directing ourselves toward *teshuvah* with an appreciation and honoring of our limitations is more effective in bringing about transformation. Yes, we must exercise discipline. But if it is motored by blame, judgment, and stringency, as opposed to love and understanding, it serves neither us nor God.

Well, if not a hammer, with what can we open a flower? The answer, of course, is nothing. We do not open a flower at all. A flower opens on its own.

This teaching points to fundamental ways in which we are not in control of our lives and our world. Control is not our task. Tomorrow morning, as we did on Rosh Hashanah, we'll *davven* the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer: "All who have entered the world pass before You like a flock of sheep." At first hearing, this is perhaps a disempowering and uninspiring image, each of us mere sheep passing under the Shepherd's staff. Yet, the underlying message here is one that we are wise to heed: we do not possess unbridled reign over our lives. Thus the recurring image during these days of awe is the Book of Life, inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and sealed tomorrow evening. Within the book, *Unetaneh Tokef* offers, are considered the questions: "How many shall pass away, and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die; who in the fullness of years, and who before his time." These are questions to which we have no answers and over which, ultimately, we do not have control. This is one of the central messages of these days, and perhaps of the spiritual life in general. Our mortality is simply the most dramatic expression of the prevalence of factors in our lives—down to the intimate, every day level—that extend beyond our capability to control them.

In saying that we lack control, I am *not* saying that we are powerless. On the contrary, we possess tremendous power to affect change, in our lives and in the lives of others...in significant *yet limited* ways. In Mother Teresa's famous words, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Therein lies the difference between control and power. Our domain is not the "great"—the total, the absolute, the ultimate. However, in that small and humble realm within which we operate, there lies amazing potential. By recognizing where our power extends to, and devoting our energy where it can be helpful and effective, we are more able to manifest the power inherent within us.

Although we cannot actually open a flower ourselves, *we can help create the conditions within which a flower can bloom.* We can add water. We can insure that the flower is exposed to sunlight. We can nurture the soil in which the flower rests. While we cannot reach our hand into our lives and force change, we can do many small things—with great love—that contribute to sustained growth and blossoming.

If we lack a certain element of control over our own lives, all the more so concerning the lives of others. This lack of control intensifies as we widen the scope to include entire communities, nations, and the world as a whole. No one, regardless of his or her position within this global village, can control what is going on here. Yet our leaders often present an image of seamless control. They, and we as citizens by expecting it of them, contribute to an assumption that claims control to be their task and responsibility. We are often assured that we are the greatest nation in the world; that we have nothing to fear; that we need not make any sacrifices for the greater good.

Our president and others have been known to speak about “not blinking.” The expression is used as a mark of fearless leadership. When the enemy confronts us, goes the conventional logic, we mustn’t blink. We react quickly to any act of aggression, quelling the threat to our security.

I agree that having the presence of mind and courage to act swiftly in the face of danger, or challenge in general, is a vital component of leadership. A leader mustn’t be intimidated or baffled to the point of immobilization. Yet I pause at the insistence that a leader “mustn’t blink.” Blinking is, after all, a healthy and necessary function. If we could somehow keep our eyes open without blinking, we would lose our sight. So while I

think it is fair that we ask our leaders to keep their eye focused on the crises at hand, I question the thought that they should do this without blinking.

I am reminded of a phrase that I heard years ago from a wilderness EMT instructor: “Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.” Or another wilderness instructor, who said that upon encountering an injured person in the field, the first thing he always did, was smoke a cigarette. In other words, step back; take a breath; blink.

This slowness, this methodical and considered approach, is a vessel for power. It makes way for power in the most wholesome sense of the word: real, lived, creative power, the kind of power that produces personal and social change and makes for renewal and redemption. When we orient ourselves in this way, we can thoughtfully and skillfully respond to what life is handing us. But the quick reaction, before we even have time to blink, reflects not control but the illusion of control. When we operate from within this illusion, we are actually quite powerless. We are like the one who comes at the flower directly to pry it open without pausing to consider the soil from which the flower emerges; seeing only what is in view, and ignoring the fact that there is an entire root system alive beneath the surface. When we’re talking about *taking human life*, or relinquishing control of hundreds of billions of dollars in taxpayers’ money, I’d like our leaders to step back for a moment and blink.

In regard to global political realities, the challenges against which we are up in the 21st century are amazingly delicate. We cannot afford to go at them with hammers. And I do not mean simply the hammer of military action. There are many ways in which the hammer is employed, through any approach that lacks patience, care, and reflection upon

an entire system surrounding a problem, including our own role in that problem. As well, we are seeing that in order to approach solutions to these conflicts and challenges, we must collaborate. Ultimately, a flower's opening, if we are to have anything to do with it at all, is a collaborative enterprise. We cannot make it happen alone.

This question of cooperation is one of the great challenges of our day. As a species, we are being forced to work together on an unprecedented scale. Only with genuine and dignified collaboration, which means sacrificing certain narrow and ethnocentric perspectives, will we endure the crises we face. This was a tragically missed opportunity following September 11th and since: our administration's unwillingness, or at least failure, to look toward the rest of the world in partnership. Token gestures were made, but we have done exponentially more to alienate the moderate Arab and Muslim world than we have to build bridges that are vital to our security and the security of the world as a whole. We have gone down a misguided road of attempting to control, foregoing the opportunity to harness the power that comes only with collaboration.

If this time forces us in the United States to stretch our boundaries of collaboration, all the more so for Israel. Simply put, as I see it, Israel will not survive without genuine and sustained cooperation with the Palestinian people.

I once received an email from a fellow Jew, bemoaning the fact that so many people where he lived were "Pro-Palestinian." He offered this in a gesture of camaraderie and commiseration, wondering what could be done to dampen this sentiment. I stared at the screen, fixed on that phrase, "Pro-Palestinian," used as if it were a nasty word. I eventually responded by saying that, in my mind, being pro-Palestinian was not the

problem. I shared that I am, in fact, pro-Palestinian. I am pro-Israel and I am also pro-Palestinian.

I cannot discern a way to be pro-Israel today without being pro-Palestinian. In fact, I do not know how to be pro-Israel without being pro-Palestine. From a strategic standpoint, Israel—that is, a Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital—cannot survive unless a Palestinian state emerges by its side. When the dust settles, and the people—Jews and Arabs—living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean are still living side by side, there are two main options for a political reality if a two-state solution is not reached. One would be democratic but not Jewish: one person, one vote—a bi-national or multi-national democracy. The end of what we know as the State of Israel. The other would be Jewish but not democratic: a Jewish state with millions of non-Jews living within its borders, before long a majority without basic rights such as voting, because that would dismantle the control necessary to preserve the Jewish status of the country. There is a word used to describe such a political entity, a word that even now is being applied to the situation in the West Bank. For obvious reasons, we cringe when we hear it—apartheid. I trust you will agree that this would represent the end of Israel as we know it or would ever want it to be. Every day that does not move us closer to the establishment of an independent Palestine endangers the future of a Jewish state.

At this point in time, Israel has—at least officially—huge amounts of control. The government possesses military control over much of the West Bank, as well as monitoring movement pretty much throughout that territory. And in both the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli government maintains control over borders and airspace, as well as the capability to dictate the flow of various resources. However, as we witness this status

quo of control continue and become increasingly entrenched, we are simultaneously witnessing a decrease in Israel's power.

Again, I am not speaking about the power to dominate. I am referring to the power to actualize the kind of world, or society, or nation that one envisions. Israel is an amazing country. Rabbi Maurice Harris of Eugene sums up Israel's central achievements this way: "Israelis have revived the Hebrew language, shared new agricultural technologies with poor countries, created the freest press in the Middle East, and maintained a parliamentary democracy that includes Arab representatives. Israel protects the holy sites of minority religions and hosts an energetic high-tech economy. There is nowhere safer in the Middle East to be openly gay, to demonstrate against the government, or to criticize the opinions of religious leaders." This is not even to mention the renewal of Jewish life and Torah learning that has occurred through our return there. These aspects, and others, reflect the visionary quality of what is known as spiritual Zionism. This movement, founded by Aḥad Ha'am, insisted that the political entity could not be an end of itself. Rather, it can only serve as a vehicle for the revitalization of the Jewish people through our presence in the Land of Israel. I am moved by that vision, as I have tasted the fruits of revitalization that have been born from our presence in the land.

Its future flourishing, however, is threatened. Yes, it is threatened from without, as it always has been, by Arab extremists. It is also increasingly threatened from within, by the maintenance of this control, by the existence of what is referred to as the occupation. If I've walked away with anything from the time I've spent traveling in the West Bank, it is a glimpse into what day to day life under occupation entails. It was not an easy pill to swallow. Each year, the territory of the West Bank gets broken up more

and more, with roads reserved for Israeli citizens that allow them to travel to settlements, and which cut off an increasing number of Palestinians from one another and from vital resources: farm land, hospitals, jobs, and schools. The area has been progressively broken up into cantons, separated from one another by checkpoints. Therefore, movement is greatly restricted, so that the Palestinians not only lack sovereignty over their borders and air space, but are actually severely limited in where they can go at all beyond their own towns or villages, which means an increasing handicap in the ability to sustain themselves and establish a functioning economy.

Renowned Israeli author Amos Oz writes, "Two Palestinian-Israeli wars have erupted in this region. One is the Palestinian nation's war for its freedom from occupation and for its right to independent statehood. Any decent person ought to support this cause. The second war is waged by fanatical Islam, from Iran to Gaza and from Lebanon to Ramallah, to destroy Israel and drive the Jews out of their land. Any decent person ought to abhor this cause." We cannot stop the latter, hateful cause without supporting the former, the aspiration for freedom and security for millions of innocent individuals, created in the image of God like you and me.

Professor Ze'ev Sternhell, recipient of the Israel Prize this year for his work in Political Science, states: "Occupation is rotting our society. The terrible violence in the territories is spilling over the Green Line. This is inevitable - different standards and laws for different people cannot exist without affecting all of society." I would say, following the lead of Sternhell and many other Israelis, that the occupation is choking, not only Palestinian society, but Israeli society as well. I cannot see how else Israel can reclaim the power inherent within its vision, unless it relinquishes this control. Yes, there are

great risks involved. But the alternative to risking represents certain end to the State of Israel. In my mind, Israel, for its own survival, has no choice but to bend over backwards, to risk—in wise and appropriate fashion, but to risk—vulnerability for the sake of security and survival.

I know that some of you in this room will not agree with what I am saying. I am not proposing to speak as *the* authority on Israel. I do not speak as an Israeli, or as a historian or political scientist. I speak as a rabbi, and primarily as a devoted Jew, an *ohav Yisrael*—a lover of Israel, who has encountered realities that have shaken me. True to our name, *Yisrael*—“God Wrestler,” I have wrestled with what I have read and seen first hand. I continue to wrestle, to struggle with how I integrate what has disturbed me with the deep love and connection I feel with Israel and that land as a home for the Jewish people. I share what I do in the name of opening, or continuing, dialogue.

I share what I do not simply to focus on Israel, but because the challenges that Israel, and the Palestinians, face are reflective of what we face globally in these times. To achieve genuine security amidst this instability, we need to collaborate in ways we never have before. Israel has the opportunity to serve as a light to the world, demonstrating the power we indeed have to transform the ways in which we interact with the ones we call other.

Regarding Israel, it is often said that there is no partner for peace. Again, fear and skepticism is warranted. And in the spirit of the self-reflection called for during these days, I have to point out that there has been settlement growth, as well as expansion of existing settlements, during every Israeli administration, including those of the Labor party. Even in the years between the Oslo accords and the second Intifada, times of hope

when we were presumably moving closer to peace, settlements continued to expand significantly each year. So when we question whether there is a Palestinian partner for peace, it should not be a shock to us that Palestinians raise the same questions about the Israeli side. How are they expected to trust, many ask, when the land upon which they are presumably going to build a state grows smaller and less viable each year?

Israelis have reason to fear. They know, as Jews have known throughout the generations, about suffering. The conversation regarding the conflict often devolves into who has been wounded worse, who has more right to fear, and who is more to blame. At this point, I do not believe that it is helpful to try to answer those questions. What does matter is that both people's fear and suffering is real. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict asks us all to consider the question of whether we can honor another's narrative, even as it conflicts in places with our own. Can we relinquish the control of telling the story our way all the time, for the sake of harnessing the power of what can occur in partnership? More than ever in the 21st century I believe this to be true, that in order to be pro-self, we must also be pro-other. This is the radical collaboration to which these times call us.

Amos Oz writes, "In the lives of individuals and of peoples, too, the worst conflicts are often those that break out between those who are persecuted...Often each sees in the other not a partner in misfortune but in fact the image of their own common oppressor...[Arabs see Israeli Jews as] a new offshoot of Europe, with its colonialism, technical sophistication and exploitation, that has cleverly returned to the Middle East...[while Israelis see Arabs as] pogrom-making Cossacks, bloodthirsty anti-Semites, Nazis in disguise..."

Similarly, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish called the conflict, “a struggle between two memories. The Palestinian historical memory clashes with the Jewish historical memory. Peace can come about only when each side understands the memories of the other - their myths, their secret longings, their hopes and fears....”

On Rosh Hashanah, the two Torah portions we read concerned Ishmael and Isaac. In the first, Ishmael is sent off into the wilderness with his mother Hagar, saved at the point of death by an angel. In the second, Isaac’s life is spared when an angel calls out to stop Abraham from bringing the knife to his son’s throat. The two brothers meet again only one time in the Torah: when they come together to bury their father. And this is the only point at which the two brothers are referred to jointly as “[Abraham’s] sons.” It is in their grief, and in their shared pain we can imagine, caused by the man they are burying, that they are able to come together. Perhaps it will be for these descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, when their suffering ceases to be a barrier between them and becomes instead a gateway to reconciliation. (Above paragraph inspired by Arthur Waskow)

A flower, after all, *can* be opened with a hammer. It just can’t be opened and survive. May we this year preserve and cultivate the flowers of stability and security, both within ourselves and in the world. Let us come together to know the power of small acts performed with great love. May we move one step closer to our vision for a better world—for us and our loved ones, for the Jewish people, and for all who dwell on Earth.

Gamar Hatimah Tovah. May we be bound within the Book of Life.