

Parashat Vaera

As I was preparing for my drash today I was struck by just how many times the subject of listening comes up in this week's parashah. The word is found ten times in the space of just three or so chapters. In Shemot 6:9, for example, we are told that the people of Israel wouldn't "listen" to Moshe when he went to tell them about God's plan to rescue them because "they were so discouraged, and their slavery was so cruel." Just a couple of verses on, moreover, we read about how Moshe was afraid that the Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him when he went to demand the release of the Jewish people, "Adonai said to Moshe, 'Go in; and tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the people of Israel leave his land' Moshe said to Adonai, 'Look the people of Israel haven't listened to me; so how will Pharaoh listen to me, poor speaker that I am?'" Indeed, Moshe's fears are substantiated through our parashah as time and again, in spite of the increasingly dramatic plagues against Egypt, the Pharaoh was so hardhearted toward our people that he refused listen to their pain and set them free. As in fact Hashem said to Moshe, "I will make him hardhearted. Even though I will increase my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." And so it was time after time, plague after plague. As we read, "When Pharaoh saw that he had been given some relief, he made himself hardhearted and would not listen to them, just as Adonai had said would happen." Similarly, when the plague of lice came upon Egypt, we read that "Pharaoh was made hardhearted, so that he didn't listen to them, just as Adonai had said would happen." So there we have it, the overriding theme of our portion in this respect that is none of the human beings are listening to each other. The Jews are not listening to Moshe or to Hashem, and Pharaoh isn't listening to Moshe, the Jews or Hashem. Thus all parties, their ears deaf to each others' voices, stumble on from plague to plague and from oppression to oppression - and the level of pain, the death and the destruction just keeps getting ratcheted up as the narrative proceeds.

Indeed, doesn't that accurately reflect the ordinary state of affairs as far as we human beings are concerned? We live in a world that is abounding with conflict, with pain and suffering, and where it seems that few people invest in the time and the emotional energy so as to really listen to the experience of the other, even that of their friends and families. This is certainly so with those whom we consider to be our enemies. In fact doesn't this failure to listen simply exacerbate and perpetuate our human suffering? Misunderstanding, leading to more conflict and yet more suffering is what usually results from a failure to listen to the narrative of those we find ourselves in conflict with. The world is riven by decade, nay centuries long conflicts, in which sides have become so entrenched in their own narrative of suffering and of the justness of their cause that they cannot acknowledge that this may be mirrored on the other side. It was perhaps this failure to listen that perpetuated the conflict in Northern Ireland and which multiplied the degree of human suffering on both sides. Ultimately while the end of the conflict was signed off by leaders of the warring parties, what actually brought them to sit down in the same room together and thrash out the Good Friday Agreement, was a grass roots movement of Catholics and Protestants which been listening to and acknowledging each others' stories of suffering. Peace People was a movement which

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was spawned by the tragic deaths of three children in Belfast in 1976. On 10 August 1976, Anne Maguire was walking along Finaghy Road North with her three children when an out-of-control car plunged into them. The car's driver, IRA man Danny Lennon, had been fatally wounded by a British army patrol which was chasing him. The car plunged into the Maguires, instantly killing six-week-old baby, Andrew, who was in his pram and his eight-year-old sister, Joanne, who was on her bicycle. Their brother John, just two-and-a-half, died the following day in hospital. Their mother, Anne, was maimed physically and mentally - and would take her own life some years later. Anne's sister, Mairead Corrigan, made a grief-stricken appeal on television for peace. Her impassioned appeal struck a chord with a community traumatised by the Troubles. Over the next couple of days, chapels were packed for prayers, groups of people prayed spontaneously at the death site, and local women went from door to door with a petition for a end to the violence. Within three days of the awful tragedy, the Peace People was born, a movement led by Mairead Corrigan and her friend Betty Williams, and which won attention at home and abroad and whose recognition of suffering on all sides of the conflict ultimately paved the way for peace. For them the deaths of 10 August 1976 epitomised the useless waste of life, for to blame either the republicans who initiated the chain of incidents resulting in the deaths, or the soldiers who had shot Danny Lennon as he drove through a heavily populated area in broad daylight, seemed almost profane: the core reaction of the community to these events was one of pure anguish at the needless deaths.

Ultimately pretty much all human suffering, at least that which is perpetrated by human upon human, is needless, and recognising our common humanity and the universality of pain as human experience is key to conflict resolution. This is certainly the case with the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. We are of course very familiar with the suffering of our own people and are naturally sympathetic to their cause. But that does not mean that we have been right in every instance, nor does it mean that we cannot acknowledge that there has been suffering on the other side. If, as in Northern Ireland, ordinary Israelis and Palestinians can sit down together, listen to each others' narratives and acknowledge, as human beings, that both have suffered and are in pain, then it might go some way to creating a culture in which a peace, which must be brokered by the respective leaders of their communities, is possible. As in Northern Ireland so in Israel it might be that this culture first develops among the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost their children to the conflict. Women Wage Peace are a movement of exactly such women, formed after the last Gaza War in 2014, who have organised events for this purpose. Just recently, for example, thousands of Israeli and Palestinian Women Waging Peace, dressed in white and joined together in a march through the desert. They not only demanded a political solution to the conflict but that women have an equal say in any peace negotiations. "We are women from the right, the left, Jews and Arabs, from the cities and the periphery and we have decided that we will stop the next war," said Marilyn Smadja, one of the founders of the organising group, Women Wage Peace. Their march lasted for two weeks and culminated in a meeting in a "tent of reconciliation", where women and children crafted signs reading "peace be upon you" in Arabic and Hebrew. The tent was named for Hagar and Sarah, scriptural mothers of Ishmael

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and Isaac, the half-brother patriarchs of Muslims and Jews. I pray that they will succeed. As Winston Churchill once said, "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war." Moreover, as Yeshua also remarked, "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God."

Alas there wasn't much listening going on between the human beings back in Egypt so that the pain and suffering just kept on coming. In fact our people's pain was heightened by the fact that when the old Pharaoh died, contrary to custom, the new Pharaoh not only continued to oppress our people but doubled it up. As the JPS Torah Commentary notes, "It was established practice in Egypt for a new king to celebrate his accession to the throne by granting amnesty to those guilty of crimes, by releasing prisoners, and by freeing slaves. An extant hymn composed in honor of the accession of Ramses IV illustrates the custom. It records "a happy day" for Egypt when "fugitives returned to their towns" and when "those in hiding emerged" and "those in prison were freed." This being so, the Israelites had good reason to expect that the change in regime would bring with it some amelioration of their condition. But this was not to be. Hence the stress on the intensified misery of the enslaved Israelites." Actually what must have made the Israelites' pain worse was not merely their frustrated hopes at not being released, and the increased oppression, but what each of these signified, i.e. that the new Pharaoh had not acknowledged their (Jewish) pain. Isn't that how it is for us too? For most of us when we suffer our pain is compounded by a feeling of isolation. As Dr David Biro, a medical practitioner and author of the book "Listening to Pain," has written: "David Foster Wallace, the acclaimed writer, suffered from depression. The first line of a short story he wrote captures one of the most under appreciated but devastating insights about the experience of pain: 'The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.' Part of what makes pain "painful" is its privacy and unsharability, the feeling of aloneness. That goes for physical pain as well as psychological pain. "Nothing is quite so isolating," writes Robert Murphy in a memoir about his struggle with cancer, "as the knowledge that when one hurts, nobody else feels the pain; that when one sickens, the malaise is a private affair; and that when one dies, the world continues with barely a ripple." This under appreciated feature (to that outsider, that is) is especially true for pain that persists, chronic versus acute pain. When you break a bone, the pain can be excruciating and isolating for hours or days, but once it lets up, you can return to the intrinsically social being that defines our species. When the pain goes on for months or years, as it does for people with back pain or fibromyalgia, it becomes more and more difficult to reintegrate oneself into a world that has no idea what you are experiencing. Pain causes this rupture because it inverts our normal perspective. Instead of reaching out to other people in work or play, we turn inward and self protective. This is an instinctive, understandable response. Something is wrong inside of me and so I must attend and focus on the threat and make sure it doesn't get any worse. But while the pain inside looms so large for the person experiencing it, it is often invisible to the person viewing it from the outside, a doctor, a spouse, or a friend. Even when they see something wrong on the surface

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of the body, a bleeding wound for example, they don't "see" the pain, which may or may not be as severe as the person claims. And when there is nothing to see on the surface, in the case of migraine or neuropathic pain, the doubt only increases: How can one be sure? And even if the outsider believes the sufferer, it is difficult for him or her to imagine what it's like or how severe it is (how easily the pain-free forget past pains); or at times, the outsider simply doesn't want to hear about the pain over and over again: Enough already, what's so important to you is not so important to me. When you combine a sufferer who sees only his pain with an outsider who can't see it at all, the result is a widening of the normal barrier that exists between people. A great wall has suddenly sprung up. I remember feeling just this way in the hospital during my bone marrow transplant when the pain was at its worst. Though I was surrounded by the people I loved most in the world, my wife, my family my friends, I might as well have been on another planet. They couldn't hear my screams. They had no idea what was happening on my side of the wall. When we appreciate this essential feature of pain - that the loneliness can hurt as much as the "burning" or "stabbing" quality, and that the longer it persists, the worse the entire pain experience becomes -- we must recognize that there is more to do than surgery or analgesics. Of course, fix the disc problem if it can be fixed, and prescribe enough pain medication, but also try to breach the wall between patient and world that contributes to the suffering."

Dr Biro concludes by recommending that, "Simply listening can help by showing that there is someone who hears you, that you are not alone. Better yet, figure out ways to make pain more communicable and sharable -- through words or pictures or whatever other kinds of language can be summoned for the task (the subject of a future posting) - so that person on the other side of the wall is not only present but actually begins to understand what you are feeling. In this sense language can be as soothing as our most powerful medicines."

Isn't that true? Suffering, any suffering, has the tendency to isolate us and compound our pain. What helps to alleviate that pain is when someone takes the trouble to reach out, and by empathetic listening, bridge the gap. Indeed, a feeling of being listened to, of being heard, is all that's needed to help us to carry on. So it was with our Jewish people. As the Torah tells us, "'Sometime during those many years the king of Egypt died, but the people of Israel still groaned under the yoke of slavery, and they cried out, and their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.'" As is apparent, when no human being was listening to their pain, our people cried out and God listened. Prayer as a human response to pain is as old as the Bible. From our people in the time of the Judges, who cried out to Hashem when they were suffering under foreign oppression, and God heard them and delivered them, to the prophets in their many times of desperate trouble, and then of course to the Psalmists, we see that crying out to God in pain has been and still is the natural response of our people. As David says in Tehillim 61: "Hear my cry O Lord, give heed to my prayer." Prayer thus helps to break our sense of isolation. Even if no human being is listening, at least God still hears, and it is this that may help us to continue even in the midst of tremendous pain. One of the problems for us however, as modern believers, is that we have increasingly bought into a 'masculine', goal-

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orientated model of prayer in which the purpose of our prayer is primarily to solicit a solution to our problem or an end to the crisis which is causing our pain. Thus we dutifully pour out our hearts before God, describing the problem in great detail and expecting Him to take away whatever the cause of our pain is. Indeed, we might even back our up prayers with a bit of proof texting, quoting back to God all the Scriptures we think require Him to deliver the required result! But God is *not* a Mr Fixit and the fundamental purpose of prayer is not about getting Him to do *stuff* for us, to make our lives easier or better. In fact many people can feel even more isolated and abandoned by God, their pain compounded, when God doesn't do what they has been demanded - when the prayed for job doesn't transpire, or when the school bully doesn't let up on us, or when our sickness isn't cured.... But prayer isn't essentially about getting God to deliver solutions to our problems; it's more plainly about having someone to talk to and of being listened to, and it is this knowledge that we are being listened to that most helps us in our pain. This is a much more 'feminine' model of engagement with God in which relief comes from simply being heard and empathised with rather than a solution being diagnosed. It is a model of prayer in which God is rather less a Mr than a Mrs. For as Julia T Wood has written in her paper "Gendered Interaction: Masculine and Feminine Styles of Verbal Communication": "men tend to use communication to do things and solve problems, while women generally regard the process of communicating as a primary way to create and sustain relationships with others. For many women, conversation is a way to be with another person to affirm and enhance closeness. Men's different rules stipulate that communication is to achieve some goal or fix some problem." Given that this is so I have to ask, what model of prayer do you follow? Is your God primarily a listener or a fixer? And if in fact God is the former then shouldn't we also seek to employ this model of engagement in our interactions with others? Don't get me wrong, solutions are great, but often, as we have learnt from Northern Ireland, the solution only comes as a result of empathetic listening to each others pain. Blessed are the peacemakers? Yeshua might as well have said 'blessed are the listeners!'