

THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY - REACHING OUT TO THE HOSTILE OTHER

Many of us carry the fantasy that, in our next disagreement with someone from "the other side," we will drive home our truth, we'll be so sharp and will raise such powerful points, that the other will drop to his knees, tears in his eyes, and declare, "You're so right, I am so wrong, how could I not see the validity of your points?" In reality, this never happens. So should we give up the justice of our cause, stop trying to convince people that we are right? Too late....the justice of our cause gives us no escape...if we are true to ourselves, we cannot just fold up our values and disappear. What, then, *can* we do?

First, we can take a good look at the myth of the "powerful convincer." The word "convince" is rooted in the Latin word for "vanquish." Indeed, the Mafia hit-man's pistol is referred to as "a convincer." No one wants to be vanquished. We need to be humble enough to give up the convincing fantasy and shift to something do-able, something like *influence*. When I have influenced someone in any way, perhaps I don't get to stand over the crumpled remains of my enemy, pounding my chest like Tarzan, but the satisfaction can be far more profound.

Here in Israel/Palestine, and over there in the U.S., people are worried about polarization. In both places, increasing numbers of people can no longer talk to each other. Peaceniks and rightists, Trumpists and liberals. Movement activists here report that there are people in their families, and neighbors, and colleagues at work with whom they can no longer approach political issues. The attempts end in bitter fights and accusations, with both sides shouting things they will regret when they get home. People have learned to avoid sensitive issues. But when you're walking on eggshells, home no longer feels so homey. The problem is not that "there are issues we cannot go near," but rather a lack of tools for handling the situations.

During Israel's Gaza incursion in 2014, gangs of rightist hooligans roamed the streets of Jerusalem, finding Palestinians heading home from work and beating them. The atmosphere in general was explosive. We in the anti-Netanyahu forces found ourselves besieged by furious defenders of Israel's policy and the prime minister who led us. In Zion Square, in the

center of town, an extreme racist organization would gather its followers and distribute hateful brochures to passers-by, often ending their vigil with an Arab-hunt. A group of us began to gather in the Square to confront the "Lehava" (flame) rightists. Armed with our own brochure, we invited people to speak with us. Through "Talking in the Square," we sought to reach out to the Jerusalemites who still cared about our city becoming a place of tolerance and brotherhood. We encountered stiff resistance in these conversations, and we recognized that we needed to develop a set of tools for doing our work.

A team of activists began meeting to work on the toolbox. Psychologists, consultants, Buddhist peace-workers, we put our heads together and came up with some useful tools and principles for contextualizing the dialogue work in such a way as to enable people to engage around politics without destroying relationships. We began to offer workshops to activists, and they were well received. Here are some of the central elements:

- Give up "being right." Choose to be effective. Find the crack in the armor of your adversary and go there.
- You are the "stage director," in these encounters. Respond, instead of reacting. You are not your feelings, you don't "just *have* to react to what he just said." You choose when to be quiet, when to say something. And not everything you *can* say you *should* say.
- Dignify your adversary. Treat him decently, especially when he is treating you horribly. Do everything to make him feel safe enough to be able to listen to what you have to say. Move yourself so that the sun is not in his eyes.
- Listen more than you talk. God gave us a hint.....two ears and only one mouth. Make that the ratio of listening to talking.
- Create an imaginary "umbrella," so as to protect yourself from the hurtful things your adversary may say. This is a conscious choice to stay centered and not to be activated by things that would normally drive you crazy. "You should have died in Auschwitz together with the rest of your family," shouted one red-faced furious man. Without my umbrella, I would not have found the strength to respond, "You must be really angry to be able to say a thing like that."

- Draw him out. Ask great open questions. Not the ones that you already have the answer to.
- Choose your battlefield. You don't have to remain in every confrontation. When it is clear that the other's abuse is overcoming any possibility of moving forward, you can walk away.
- When your listening has created enough safety for the other, engage in "friendly undermining" of his salient arguing points. Find the way to invite him to observe the contradictions in what he says, without harming the bond you have built by behaving in a dignified way.
- Use your own vulnerability.

This last piece is perhaps the most powerful of all. Any stance or position you articulate can be attacked with counter-force. It is much harder to attack you when you deliberately expose your soft underbelly. If you speak of your fears, your heart's concerns, your sadness, this can bolster his sense of safety, and it will be much tougher to attack you. I sometimes pull out my phone and show my adversary pictures of my kids and my grandchildren. I then ask about his children, present or in the future. A different space opens.

Speaking of vulnerability, I have recently begun working with the Parents' Circle Families Forum, a venue for 600 Israeli and Palestinian families who have in common that they all mourn a loved one who has died due to the conflict here. They also have in common that they reject revenge as a response to their loss. They are active in both societies, visiting schools in pairs, a Palestinian bereaved parent and an Israeli one, to engage teenagers in considering the conflict from a perspective different from what they have been taught for years. As I observe these encounters, I see people arrive expecting to confront two "peaceniks" who have come to convince them. But nastiness melts in the face of the parents' telling the story of their loss, and listening opens.

When working as a consultant on issues of human dignity, workshop participants sometimes justify their lashing out when attacked by a colleague, declaring, "Hey, I'm a human being, you know." And when the atmosphere is safe enough, I reply, "No, in those moments you are not a human being, you are an animal, doing fight-flight-freeze, as animals do. To refuse to counter-attack, this is what can make you human again."

This is not "turning the other cheek," because we *will* come back with something of our own, a response and not a reaction, bringing forth dignity and inspiring hope for a friendlier world.

Yoav Peck, a Jerusalem organizational psychologist, is director of community relations for the Israeli-Palestinian Parents Circle Families Forum.