HARD HEARTS, SOFT WORDS
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I find it nearly impossible to read torah without looking out the window, I mean that literally and metaphorically. Very often when I study, I have to sit with a verse and look out into near nothingness to organize my thoughts as to its meaning and greater lesson. For some reason I don't fully understand staring at the words on the page doesn't help me understand them better, but, lifting my eyes from the page and starting into the sky does.

Of course, when we look out into the world in such a way our focus is very often inward. Starting into space, at least for me, allows me to focus on what's going on inside my soul.

It's in this process of what I am going to call "external introspection", a term I have totally made up but you are welcome to use, it's in this process that in some ways studying torah is like reading your horoscope, as we reflect on the ancient words they seems to always be relevant and prescient to our present circumstance.

So, it is with this week's Torah Portion – the lesson from our parasha Vaera is undoubtably always useful, but even more so, and more important than perhaps any other lesson I could think of needing to be reminded of at this particular moment of human discord, distrust and violent words and actions than ever before.

The lesson is necessary not just in light of what took place at the US capitol, or on the streets of Vancouver amongst the maskers and the anti-maskers. Not only between politicians and activists here and everywhere. But also, in our locked down homes, where tensions between parents and children, siblings and each other, partners couped up together for longer than many ever imagined can at times run as hot as anything we see on the news.

The Torah portion begins, like most, where last week's ended, but it starts from a different place.

If that sentence seems incoherent, it is in fact the very essence of the lesson.

We ended parashat Shemot last week with Moses speaking harshly and in an accusing tone to G-d when he says: (Exodus 5:22-6:1)

וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמַר אֲדֹנָי לָמָה הֲרֵעֹתָה לָעָם הַזֶּה לָמָּה זֶּה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי׃

Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me?

וּמֵאָז בָּאתִי אֶל־פַּרְעֹה לְדַבֵּר בִּשְׁמֶךָ הֵרַע לָעָם הַזֶּה וְהַצֵּל לֹא־הִצַּלְתָּ אֶת־עַמֶּךָ׃

Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people."

God responds as one might expect, as we might respond, God responds harshly, and rebukes Moses

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַתָּה תִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפַרְעֹה כִּי בְיָד חֲזָקָה יְשַׁלְּחֵם וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה יְגָרְשֵׁם מֵאַרְצוֹ׃

Then the LORD said to Moses, "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land."

Now think for a moment about how you respond when someone attacks you with accusations and a harsh tone; questions your competence? I know how I respond, and it is usually in the same tone that I am spoken to.

God is no different, the fact that we are created in the image of God works both ways of course, for better and for worse.

In this week's parasha God continues to rebuke Moses, but only for a second,

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

God spoke to Moses

A commentary on this verse (Itturei Torah vol 3, page 47, 4th teaching) teaches that when God begins to speak the word *vayidaber* (and He spoke) is used. *Vayidaber* is a tough word, it's the equivalent of saying to someone in the heat of an argument, "Shut up, I'm talking now" but then God changes his tone to something much softer and continues: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה "and he said to him". The rabbis explain that God uses this change in tone to teach Moses, and by extension of course all of us a lesson about the Jewish virtue of *Din* or justice.

Our rabbis teach, the phrase, *Vayomer elav*, "[God] says to him", is the tone that is used like a man who is angry at his beloved friend, and when he sees him astonished and frightened by his anger, he immediately coaxes him with gentle words, because all his anger was simply momentary, but when he had a moment to consider who was standing before him, the relationship they had built, the trust, friendship and love that they shared with each other, even if it was escaping them both in this moment of anger, one changes to a softer tone.

In our parsha in the space of four words God stopped and immediately switched his tone: "and said to him I am the Eternal {vayomer elav ani YHVH}" which is more gentle language, and there [God] teaches another Jewish virtue that must always go hand and hand with *din* or Justice, the virtue of *rachamim*, of mercy or compassion.

Din and Rachamim, Justice and Mercy

We encounter these two virtues frequently in Judaism and like some elements in nature they are most dangerous when one is without the other.

We might recall the terms from our Yom Kippur prayers. We begin that day with prayer and pleading before God as we acknowledge our sins and transgressions. Tradition teaches that God begins the day seated on 'kisay din' the Throne of Judgment, but as the day moves on, as the sun sets in the sky, as the *Neiliah* services comes and the gates of judgement begin to close God moves from 'kisay din, to kisay rachamim' to the Throne of Mercy, the gates of judgement become the gates of compassion.

Not simply out of exhaustion and having been worn down by our pleading and apologizing, but because God remembers that we are in a covenantal relationship, a brit. We are friends, we are beloved, we have a history and if we are to have a future, we need to speak kindly with each other, treat each other gently, even when, especially when we are in disagreement or frustrated.

When we see how our anger affects those whom we love, we might reconsider how we're expressing our anger. Words of course matter, but so does tone. How we say what we say can harden or soften a heart.

Which is of course the deeper lesson of this morning's Torah portion which details plague by plague how pharaoh hardened his heart toward the Jewish people as Moses beseeched him on God's behalf to, "Let my people go".

Pharaoh's heart was not hardened in an instant, it happens over time, it happens because of unaddressed fear and insecurity. It happens because the loving and trustful relationship that existed generations before between the previous Pharaoh and Joseph is not nurtured and renewed in subsequent generations. It happened for a myriad of foreseen and unforeseen reasons, but it is true to say that where once there was trust, admiration and mutual respect; distrust, fear and hostility was allowed to take root and grow.

It's hard to say if there was anything that the Israelites could have done to stop Pharaoh's growing suspicion of them and thus his quest for absolute power and domination over them; but what our Torah teaches in these first few words is that when you begin to speak unkindly toward each other, when you begin to withhold *rachamim*, mercy and compassion it is a road to ruin that can easily end in relationships destroyed and ultimately lives as well.

The great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924 - 2000) expresses it beautifully in his powerful poem, “The Place Where We Are Right”.

The Place Where We Are Right
by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

How might things change if we began our personal and political conversations not from our certainties, but from our “doubts and loves”? Not from *Din* but from *Rachamim*

“Many of us who differ politically love the same things — our children and grandchildren, our country, the natural world. Many of us who differ politically harbor the same doubts — that what’s being done (or not done) to care for the things we love is the best or the right thing to do.” (Parker Palmer)

Yes, we differ on what ought to be done. But what if instead of starting by arguing over solutions — over “the place where we are right” — we began by sharing our loves and doubts? What if we started not with Vayidaber, “Hey I am talking now”, and instead began with Yayomer eliv, “Hear me out because I care about US much more than I care about this particular issue we are disagreeing about.”

Don’t sit in judgement, sit with compassion. God moves from din to rachamim in the space of three words, all within one verse, it can be much harder for us, we are like God but we are not God – that too we should remember, “from the place where we are right.” But we can soften our tone, start from a place not where we are right but where we are kind.

We have of course heard all of this before, our Torah this morning and the events of this past week, not to mention months and years of discord at home and abroad plead with us to finally learn them.