

# No Enemies, No Demands

by miki kashtan

"If there were more people like you in the Left, if I ever felt such true compassion and understanding, I would, despite all the pain involved, (.pause .) consider moving to another place in Israel."

After only thirty minutes of receiving empathic listening, Judy (not her real name), a Jewish settler in the West Bank, could imagine moving from the West Bank into internationally recognized Israeli territory.

Secular, left-leaning Jews in Israel often believe that only force will get Jewish settlers to leave the settlements and find their homes within the pre-1967 borders of Israel. Many still remember the traumatic evacuation of the settlement of Yamit when Sinai was returned to Egypt, and anticipate, with horror, similar struggles in the West Bank. Left-leaning Jews tend to see Jewish settlers in the West Bank as fanatics who are oblivious to the plight of others.

In this heated climate, in the mid-1990s, a different conversation took place between Judy and Arnina, a Nonviolent Communication trainer in Israel. Instead of arguing with Judy, instead of trying to take apart her position, insisting on the moral bankruptcy of her views, or trying to convince her to change her mind, Arnina simply reflected back to Judy her understanding of Judy's deeper feelings and needs. Here are some excerpts from their dialogue:

Judy: People forget who we are, and our history. [The Jewish people] go back thousands of years. We were chosen by God and given this land. How can they forget this?

**Arnina:** So you are feeling devastated, because you would really like to know that the deep meaning of 'settle in this land' is understood and preserved?

Judy: The secular leftists think we are blind and obstinate, while we are holding on to the most precious symbol of our existence.

**Arnina:** Are you in pain because you so much want to find a way to dissolve the separation between you and leftists, because for you we are all one people?

Judy: Yes, yes, yes... Thank you for saying this. This is what's most crucial here for me. This terrible wall between us and ... you. Yes, you said it, we are all one. And I am desperate when I think, again and again, how deep the gap between all of us is, how we only see the external, and judge it, while the important things lie deep inside, for all of us. Don't we all want to keep living, and here? And how do they think this is going to happen, if we give up on this historical land?

**Arnina:** Are you really scared, because your hope for the continued existence of the Jewish people is threatened by the mere idea of losing this land?

Finally, when Arnina was confident that Judy was fully heard, she stopped, looked at Judy for a long while, then asked gently: "Would you be willing to hear what's going on for me now, and how I see all this?" Judy nodded silently.

Arnina then told Judy how much she shared the deep wish of seeing Israelis living and thriving, and bringing gifts to the world. Then she added: "I want you also to hear just how frightened I am when I see the price we are paying for this. I am wondering if you could conceive of the thought that, if we all really united in our wish, and not against each other, we might find other means of keeping this legacy, while at the same time saving so many lives?" It was in response to this question that Judy expressed her tentative willingness to consider leaving the land she had so tenaciously held on to for so long. It was the experience of being fully heard which made the transformation possible.

The practice of applying empathy in the service of social activism is based on a combination of practical considerations and deep spiritual values. On the practical level, listening with empathy to those with whose positions we disagree increases the chances that they will want to listen to us. Until Judy's needs were acknowledged, she would not have been able to hear and consider Arnina's request. Once Judy's experiences were heard fully, magic happened, her heart opened, and a profound shift took place in her.

When we use force, blame and self-righteousness instead, even if we manage to create the outcome we want in the short run, we distance ourselves from those whose actions we want to change. Success in the short run does not lead to the transformation we so wish for, neither in ourselves nor in those we are trying to change. Sooner or later, those with more power will prevail, and we are left bitter and defeated. This cycle is a major cause of "burn-out" among activists.

Moreover, on the spiritual plane, listening with empathy to others is one way of putting into practice the fundamental values of compassion and nonviolence. In order to hear Judy with true empathy, Arnina had to transcend thoughts of right and wrong. Indeed, before Arnina was able to listen to Judy, she received a significant amount of empathy from others for her own pain and despair. In cultivating empathy for Judy, Arnina was able to discover behind Judy's statements a human being like herself, with the same basic set of needs. At the end of the dialogue both Judy and Arnina discovered and connected with needs they had not been aware of in themselves or in each other: a deep desire to keep alive the legacy of Judaism, and a longing for unity.

Even when we want to embrace compassion, structures of domination are deeply engrained in us. According to theologian Walter Wink, we are all indoctrinated in the myth of redemptive violence: the basic belief that violence can create peace. We are trained to enjoy watching the "bad guy" get "what he deserves." Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, believes that our use of language reinforces "enemy images" of others. When we refer to corporate executives as "profiteers," our use of language implies greed; when we refer to lower-level managers as "bureaucrats," we imply uncaring. Learning to practice empathy requires being able to recognize in others' actions fears and longings similar to our own, and to look for strategies of meeting our own needs that would allow others' needs to be met as well. The alternative to punishing the "bad guys" is NOT passivity, but a subtle dance between genuine empathy for the other's needs and uncompromising expression of our own needs.

We all pay a price in the long run when our needs are met at others' expense. Accordingly, the goal of the dance of empathy is to establish enough connection and understanding so that everyone can unite in looking for strategies to meet everyone's needs. When we transcend our own enemy images so that we really experience the humanness of the other, we can truly show people that we care about their needs. When that happens, they are then usually more open to consider ways of meeting their needs which are not at the expense of other human beings' lives, the planet, and other values of theirs.

Let's look at another example. Suppose the mayor of your town decides to invite Walmart to open a new store in town. Suppose you belong to an organization which seeks to protect local businesses, create sustainable development, and ensure the long term survival of the planet, and thus opposes the building of the store. When you think about your mayor signing an agreement with Walmart to build the new store, what images arise in you? Do you see the mayor as selling out, as breaking her promises, as being cowardly, or as compromising on her values in order to aggrandize herself?

Now imagine that you manage to gain access to the mayor's office, and you are given an audience with her. What would you say? How would you try to approach her? If any of the above thoughts are racing in your mind, how could you possibly create trust in the mayor's mind that her needs and concerns matter to you? Without a willingness to imagine the mayor as a human being like yourself, who might be open to your concerns, you are likely to see her as an enemy, and speak with anger and mistrust. You might, for example, present her with a petition and a set of demands.

The mayor, for her part, is probably frustrated and exhausted, barely listening to you, and annoyed at the interruption in her schedule. She is focused on just how much work she has to do before the end of the day, and wants, more than anything else, a break. She is probably thinking to herself that you are very naïve, and just don't see the realities of life she is so painfully aware of. Perhaps she has her own dreams of what she can create in town, but desperately needs the support of business to be able to get the funds required for some of those innovative projects. She may be completely resigned to the idea of being seen as power-hungry, and unable to imagine that anyone but her closest assistants will be able to understand what she is trying to do. At the same time, she is probably habituated to hiding what is really on her mind and in her heart, for fear of being even more misunderstood.

How is such a conversation likely to end? Short of a miracle, the predictable ending is that each of you will have your enemy image of the other reinforced and confirmed. In your mind: "She's out there to aggrandize herself, she doesn't care about anything except money and power." In the mayor's mind: "He's a fanatic idealist, a danger to the functioning of town." Nothing learned, nothing explored, no connection made.

"Dialogue," says philosopher Martin Buber, "is a conversation between adults the outcome of which is unknown." True dialogue requires valuing the other's needs equally with our own, not less and not more. This entails a few steps. First, internally, dialogue requires translating our judgments into our own feelings and needs—which give rise to our judgments. Then, when speaking, dialogue requires expressing those feelings and needs openly. After expression, sometimes even before, dialogue requires a willingness to listen with empathy. Such listening makes it possible to absorb the difficult messages we hear in a way that maintains the humanness of the other, does not challenge without threat to the needs we identify in us. This is what Buber refers to more than any aspect of the dialogue; it is this willingness which enables us to go beyond predictable outcomes and encounter the unknown-ness of the other person.

If you can do this when you talk with the mayor, she is less likely to have to protect herself against your judgments. With empathy, posturing will gradually diminish, and the mayor may allow you and herself access into her feelings and needs. She might respond to the invitation, implicit in your empathic guesses, to share more of the truth.

Underlying the willingness to persist in identifying and attending to everyone's needs, is a deep well of trust in the abundance of the universe, and in the fundamentally benign nature of human needs. The spiritual premise which gives rise to this trust is that human needs, as different from strategies, are universal and shared by all: tenderness, closeness, understanding, safety, the need to be understood, to contribute, to matter to

others, to be valued. Our conflicts arise from having different strategies to try to meet the same basic set of needs, not from the needs themselves.

For the past several thousand years, in most of the world, we have not been encouraged to have this trust in each other. We grow up in social structures based on domination, and are educated into believing in their necessity. Our deep-seated internal beliefs, the “story” we have internalized, and the social structures we live in, tend to reinforce each other. As a result, if we want to engage in social activism based on mutuality, trust, compassion and nonviolence, we are likely to find that social change requires **changing ourselves within** while working on changing external structures. As the world around us remains captive to right/wrong thinking, we also need to allow for time for organizing a supportive community for our social change efforts. We cannot wait until we are “ready” before embarking on social action, and we cannot wait until we have life-serving institutions before we let ourselves take time to attend to our personal struggles and relationships. Combining the two allows us to embody the values we are seeking to manifest in every action we take, even while structures of domination still continue to exist.

Part of what makes it possible for me to keep striving towards the grounding of my actions in faith and a sense of possibility is the cultivation and nurturing of my vision of a different world. In my vision, I see structures and institutions organized around the principle of **need satisfaction** (remember that needs are different from strategies!); I see leaders acting as servants, and dialogue and power-with approaches replacing power-over tactics; I see people raised to nurture their needs and support each other in fulfilling dreams; and I see autonomy and interdependence as the grounding values for all human relationships. It is my ultimate faith that under those conditions human beings can grow up to be people who are able to balance their well-being with that of others and of the planet spontaneously and gracefully.

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