



A TIME TO LISTEN

Written by Rabbi Shulamit Ambalu

Jewish custom teaches us that when visiting a mourner, we should not begin the conversation. We should simply sit alongside, in silence, until the mourner opens up. The visitor is offering comfort by simply being present and willing to listen.

Today, this powerful custom is easily forgotten. The rush to offer comfort is difficult to resist; mainly because it comes from a need to comfort oneself. There is a powerful human drive to make sense of suffering. To explain it away. To be reassured that the dreadful act will not, or cannot, happen to us.

On the other hand, so many people do find it difficult to speak to a mourner, going to the extent of crossing the road or even changing their route to avoid them. But what we are really trying to escape is the dreadful difficulty of not knowing what to say. Some individuals know that they struggle to express their compassion, and this awareness can make for a clumsy conversation. But anyone who has ever experienced grief will know the value of an awkward gesture of comfort.

We need to understand when to sit in silence and when to find those ordinary words, words that enable others to go on with the burden of living.

Why are *simple* words so very difficult? Why is it so very difficult for people to reach out to each other, as colleagues, friends, the parents we see daily at the school, gates, and to say, "how are you doing? You must be so worried. How is your family coping?" These are everyday conversations, but they are difficult to begin.

In the public sphere, we are fighting for language. The use of a word like *terrorist* has become front-page news. Will the struggle for the correct language to define this conflict deflect our comprehension of so much human suffering?

Today, tomorrow, next week, for who knows how long, we are entering a time of untold grief. The cradle, if not the birthplace, of the three world monotheistic faiths, is still ablaze. Too many, far too many, people are using their power and their voice to add fuel to the flames. How easy it is to signal support, with violent demonstrations, graffiti, online threats; to engage in blame, and minimization of these terrible events. To feel soothed by activism, and safe from any possible political or moral contamination. The difficult truth is that there are multiple facts, and this existential battle will only cease when we are all more in touch with reality.

Members of my own synagogue who have spoken to me in the past week have expressed empathy and concern for the situation of the Palestinians. Even in the time of their own anxiety and their grief, of fear for members of their own families and friends; for those who are still missing, and who may be missing for weeks, months or even years. These ordinary people express a depth of feeling for those residents of Gaza who are also afraid, or who are waiting to bury their own dead.

If ordinary Jewish people can do this, why is the simple act of human empathy so difficult for politicians, leaders, trade unionists, academics, student groups, and the rest? For how long will it be more profitable to nail your political colours to the mast of your own beliefs, than to work a bit harder to become part of the solution?

It is always difficult to know what to do or say in the presence of a mourner. Jewish tradition teaches us to withhold the natural human impulse to judge, describe, or explain. To resist the desire to comfort ourselves with our own well-meant words, and instead, to listen.