

Hope and a Good Heart

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Coming from Beer Sheva, as we drove closer to Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, my wife Adinah, and I talked less and less. What to say to Ezaldeen Abu el-Aish? How to talk to someone whom you have known for many years who lost three daughters to an artillery shell in a split second? I thought about how I would feel afterward. Depressed. Guilty. Weighted down by the least desirable side effect of war – the death of innocent children. I called him to find out exactly where in the hospital he was. "Ophthalmology," he said, in a hoarse, low voice I did not recognize. We braced ourselves to face the worst.

As we entered the Ophthalmology building, we saw him immediately. He was sitting at the far end of the lobby. A newsman sat close opposite him holding a large microphone between them. One of the video cameras trained on him from behind the interviewer was labeled, "BBC"; the other had pasted on it the Canadian red maple logo. He recognized me immediately. I walked up to him and we embraced. The cameras kept rolling. "How can you speak about listening after they killed your three daughters?" asked the interviewer. I held on to him tightly for another few seconds, then stepped back out of camera range. I was not used to having my intimate moments recorded publicly. Should I say anything?

"We have to listen to each other," Ezaldeen was saying in a hoarse, insistent voice. "We have to listen and talk to each other. I do not agree with the Hamas way. They know that. I lost my daughters, but for some reason my son and I walked out of the room a few seconds before and were saved. I still have my other five children. And I have my hope."

I left to go to the bathroom. When I returned, Adinah told me that a man had verbally attacked Ezaldeen, saying that he knew there were Hamas snipers on his roof and that was why the Israeli army had shelled his home. Ezaldeen denied this with great emotion. "If there was a sniper there, I would have told him to leave!"

The interviewing went on and on. As soon as one team finished another went at him without a pause. Israeli TV,

newspapers, the British *Independent*. He seemed exhausted but also energized by grief and constant talking. He continued talking, insistently.

The word "listen" echoed back to a conversation I had had a few days before with a good friend, John, an Israeli civil rights attorney who is frequently more liberal on civil rights issues than I. He reads Arabic and had many misgivings about our going into Gaza. He said, "For a week now, I keep telling everyone at the office that to talk is not enough. You have to also listen!" At first I assumed he meant that communication requires listening and we do not listen to the Palestinian point of view, a point he has made many times in the past. But then he explained, "If you listen to the Hamas, they are saying that they want to eliminate you, push you into the sea. How can you talk to them if that is what you are hearing?" "So," I commented, "this time we agree!" As a physician, I know that you can't explain something to a patient who is not listening.

Later that same day, we had dinner with our niece, Orli, a dear, sensitive young woman who grew up in the territories and worked side by side with an Arab woman in a store in Tel Aviv. "Oh, yes," she said, "she was very nice and very honest at her work, and I liked her, but I could never trust her. Who knows what she really feels? They just want to kill us!" "Did you ever ask her how she feels about the situation?" I asked. "About politics?" she replied. "No, of course not. We never spoke about politics!" I tried, unsuccessfully, to get her to see that unless she asks and listens to the answer, she cannot assume she knows a person's attitudes or feelings. "They hate us," she repeated. "We'll never come to any agreement with Arabs!"

I could hardly control my anger. I have worked for 33 years at Soroka University Medical Center in Beer Sheva with Bedouin children, their families, with Arab colleagues, both nurses and physicians. Some of them have become good friends. But Orli was demonizing that Arab woman. Who taught Orli to hate so well? Did we do that?

Yesterday, Moshe Nir, an old friend and a devoted, creative teacher of Jewish studies in both religious and secular high schools, came to Beer Sheva to explain his new project. He believes that *Pirke Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, an unusual tractate of the Mishnah that presents views of generations of rabbis on desirable behavior, should be taught to all children, irrespective of whether they are in a religious or secular

school. What they can learn from it, he says, is how to be fine human beings. He became convinced of this when he accidentally came upon Arab teenagers from Sachnin who were able to recite from memory excerpts from *Pirke Avot*. Moshe says that most secular Jewish high school students do not know that *Pirke Avot* exists. He called the principal of the Comprehensive High School in Sachnin, Kamal Tarbiye, who told Moshe that he felt *Pirke Avot* should be a required part of the curriculum because it has great value as a source of general humanitarian values.

So Moshe set about putting together a new curriculum that links sayings from *Pirke Avot* with real stories told by a wide variety of Israelis. Kamal Tarbiye chose to comment on the saying, "How can one choose a straight path in life? By choosing a path that will bring honor to oneself and honor to anyone else who chooses it." (*Pirke Avot*, Chapter 2, Mishna 1). He relates this axiom to his strong feeling that our Israeli leadership must guide and educate towards equality, especially equal rights and personal equality for all Israeli citizens, whatever their religion, color or opinions. After meeting these children and visiting their principal, Moshe was himself reminded of his father's emphasizing the saying, "In a place where there are no (moral) people, try to be one" (*Pirke Avot* Chapter 4, Mishna 20). Moshe felt that for him this meant that since there is too little emphasis on humanistic Jewish values in high school education, he should devote himself to introducing *Pirke Avot* as a general humanistic curriculum.

Now, after a ceasefire was declared, the outpouring of aid to Gaza surprises me. I feel it reflects both guilt at having caused so much destruction and suffering and true compassion and willingness to help neighbors in distress. Is this outpouring of compassion the "straight path" the sages tell us to search for? Was the war the "straight path?"

I imagine Ezaldeen in his terrible distress, hoarsely insisting again and again that we must talk and listen to one another. I have become convinced of three things. First,

one must make extreme efforts to communicate with Arabs generally and Palestinians specifically. This must include educating people, especially children, to attempt to understand and communicate with people from all cultures. Second, you cannot communicate with someone who is bent on killing you. As we know from the democratic election to power of the Nazi party in 1933, a major weakness of democracy is that popularity may take precedence over right. Palestinians in Gaza are beginning to realize that they voted in a totalitarian party that may help the poor while mercilessly crushing dissidents. The only way to stop terrorists, as we learned from World War II (called "The Good War" by Studs Terkel in his brilliant oral history), is by overcoming their violence with our power, despite all the risks that involves. Third, politics is only a strategic method to peace, not a goal. Our goal must be to follow the "straight path." "What is the straight path that people should stick to? (*Pirke Avot*, Chapter 2, Mishna 9) A good eye? A good friend? A good neighbor? To try to predict the future? Rabbi Elazar said, 'A good heart'. To which his teacher, Raban Shimon ben Gamliel, responded, 'I feel that Elazar ben Arach's answer is best because it includes all the others.'"

When we came away from our few hours with Ezaldeen, we did not feel depressed, even after hearing from him the details of this horrific disaster. To our surprise, Adinah and I felt uplifted by his hope and good heart. If we try to understand each other, if we talk and listen and do not give in to extremists, we will follow the straight path to peace.

Today, some months later, a news item in the daily *Ha'aretz* newspaper reads: "Dr. Ezaldeen Abu el-Aish participated in the unveiling yesterday of a memorial plaque to his three daughters – who were killed in January by Israel Defense Forces fire in the Gaza Strip – at Sheba Hospital, Tel Hashomer, where he is employed as a researcher."