

Teshuvah After a Year of Conflict and Pain

By Rachie Lewis

5784 has been an incredibly tough year. So much has happened in our world, in our communities, in our movements, in our families: horror, heartbreak, isolation, rupture, conflict. This season calls on us to do teshuvah — to repent, to forgive, to right wrongs. In this moment, in this year, it is the unresolved conflicts, both personal and communal, that feel particularly salient: the months-long silences with friends and family whose politics and loyalties are so different and seem irreconcilable; the pain of people we care about, and who we think care about us, not reaching out when we have felt alone.

Our Jewish tradition gives us many tools to engage in teshuvah.

We carve out an entire month prior to the High Holidays to take stock of our own actions and lives. We are given step-by-step instructions for how to come to terms with our own shortcomings and reach out to others who we may have harmed. **But what do we do about situations of active, on-going, or unhealed conflict — of feeling unseen, insulted, or othered? What do we do about the blurriness beyond the binary of being wronged or doing wrong?**

Teshuvah is not only focused on who is responsible, but also on the process of repair more generally. Teshuvah strives for closeness amid what is broken — and so much is broken. This season can also be an invitation to address these tensions and conflicts so we can set ourselves up for a 5785 where we are still reaching for our people rather than closing ourselves off, knowing, of course, that nothing is simple.

We have a model of this process in our patriarch, Jacob.

In the book of Bereishit (Genesis), when Jacob struggles with the angel all night (it's a pretty queer story!) after leaving his family behind during a major relocation and uprooting, we see him engaged head on with conflict. It is in this moment that Jacob receives, from the mouth of his foe, a new name: Yisrael, one who struggles with God. Rashi, a medieval commentator, explains why the new name is given: "It shall no longer be said that blessings came to [Jacob] through supplanting but through noble conduct and in an open manner." It is in the engagement with conflict and remaining in relationship with it that Jacob becomes the namesake of our people.

Queer people (perhaps, like Jacob?) have always navigated tension and conflict — in this season, in this year, in perpetuity. We are often expected to hold the tension between the people we are in relationship with and the beliefs and identities that we ourselves might hold. We are often expected to reach toward others when they are closing themselves off. We know the importance of staying in relationship and communicating our truths. We also know, of course, that binaries need to be queered. So, perhaps we already have what we need to queer the process of teshuvah, to carve out space for understanding in the vast distance between right and wrong, to tend to the hurt and anger of all parties.

We are sharing tools of nonviolent communication, tools we have used in different areas of Keshet's belonging work, to help do just that. Nonviolent communication allows people to build empathy for one another and better understand the other's fundamental needs. These tools can serve our own process of (queer) teshuvah.

When in conversations addressing conflict, it is important to give voice to the following:*

Observations: Description of what is seen or heard without added interpretations.

Feelings: Our emotions rather than our story or thoughts about what others are doing.

Needs: Feelings are caused by needs, which are universal and ongoing and not dependent on the actions of particular individuals. State your need rather than the other person's actions as the cause.

Requests: Asking concretely and clearly for what we want (instead of what we don't want).

Empathy: In nonviolent communication, we empathize with others by guessing their feelings and needs. Instead of trying to "get it right," we aim to understand. The observation and request are sometimes dropped. When words are not wanted or are hard to offer, empathy can be offered silently.

**From Nonviolent Communication Quick reference Guide by Inbal Kashtan and Miki Kashtan, BayNVC

Here are suggestions for statements and responsive questions to use in these conversations.

Statement	Empathetic Response
Observation When I hear...	Observation When you see/hear...
Feeling I feel...	Feeling Are you feeling...?
Need Because I need...	Need Because you need...
Request Would you be willing...?	Request Would you be willing...?

We invite you to use these tools as you engage in conversations around conflict this season. It is a tough time. But we have the capacity to address the tensions weighing on us, interpersonally, intercommunally, with openness and an intention to connect and to understand. That is after all, as a people, as Yisrael, who we are.

