

## ACTIVISM

# No Enemies, No Demands

*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.

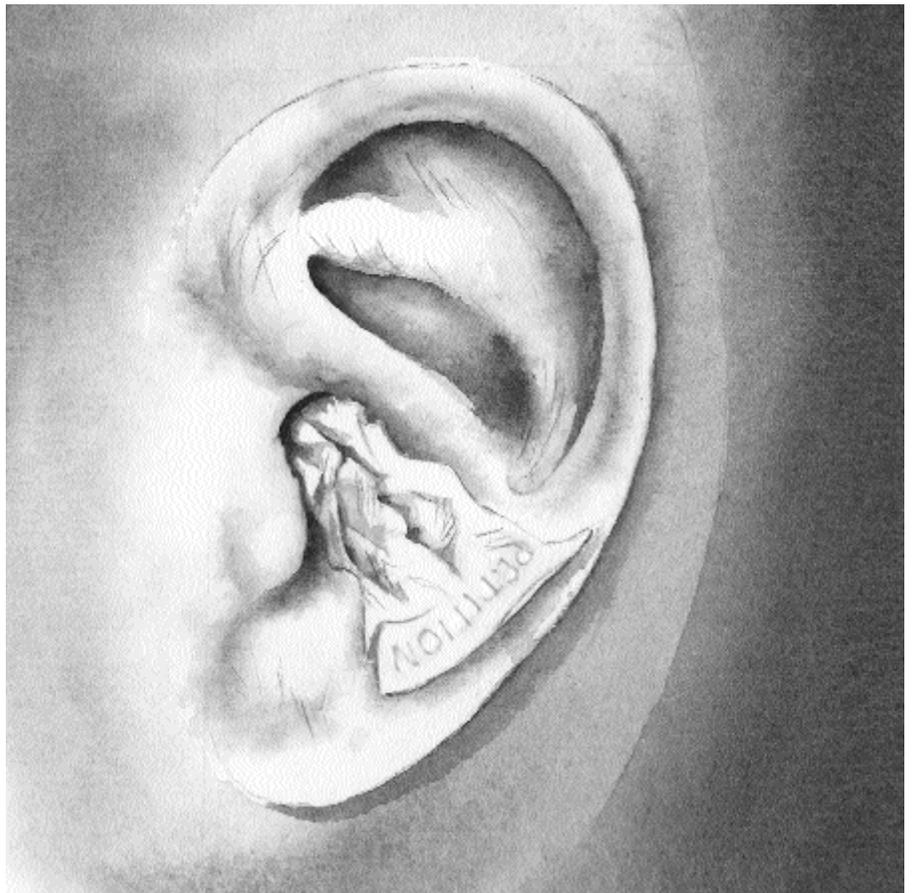
In this heated climate, in the mid-1990s, a different conversation took place between Judy and Arnina, a Non-violent Communication trainer in Israel. Instead of arguing with Judy, instead of trying to take apart her position, insisting on the moral bankruptcy of her views, or trying to convince her to 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.

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*Social change requires changing ourselves within while working on changing external structures.*

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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?

The conversation between Judy and Arnina continued, with Arnina reflecting back to Judy Judy’s own pain, anger and fear. 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 with her the deep wish to see Israelis living in unity, 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

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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. This is true for all peace work—whether we are trying to prevent the building of a chain store or a nuclear power plant, trying to create peace in Israel-Palestine, or working to transform global capitalism. Success that comes from intimidation rather than dialogue, or arguing rather than listening, will 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 will be left bitter and defeated. This cycle is a major cause of “burn-out” among activists.

Being able to listen with understanding is not easy. It is a spiritual practice, requiring us to draw on and act upon the fundamental values of compassion and nonviolence. In order to put aside our thoughts of right and wrong—if only for the space of one conversation—we must be able to find in ourselves 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 opposed to human 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.

Even when we want to embrace compassion, structures of domination are deeply ingrained 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 looking 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.

As a result, if we want to engage in social activism based

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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. I see a time when structures and institutions are 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. □

### Resources

1. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, by Marshall Rosenberg
2. The Center for Nonviolent Communication, which offers trainings and materials worldwide. Please visit our website: [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org) for trainer contact information and other suggestions for what you can do to apply these principles in your life. There are currently over 100 trainers teaching Nonviolent Communication in 35 countries.
3. Trainings by Miki Kashtan and her colleagues can be found at [www.baynvc.org](http://www.baynvc.org)