



Dec 26, 2023

TARA BRACH

Blog ~ What is Love Asking from Us: Reflections on Gaza, the West Bank and Israel

Dear Reader and Friend,

For many of us, there are few degrees of separation from the unfolding tragedy in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. While I was not brought up Jewish, my extended family—cousins, aunts and uncles were. I lost relatives in the holocaust and have been the target of antisemitism. I have friends and students who are Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, live in the Middle East and/or have family, friends or relatives in the Middle East. In these last months, many have shared their pain about the scale and intensity of human suffering.

Over the last decade, like many others, the ongoing conflict and violence in the Middle East was in the background of my awareness. I had little understanding of the history, the traumatic causes and conditions that have driven current violence. Like so many around the globe, the barbaric terrorism by Hamas on Oct. 7th and the horrific and continuing reprisal by the Israeli government has broken my heart and riveted my attention.

Since Oct. 7th, I've sought how to best hold and respond to the immensity of this suffering. The decades have taught me that our wisest action arises from full presence with all that is moving through us. We need to be aware of and intimate with our inner life so that rather than being hooked by fear or anger, we can touch the loss, grief and caring underneath. My process of opening in this way has unfolded both in solitary practice and, importantly, with others.

In early November, my husband Jonathan and I attended a candlelight vigil held at dusk across from the White House. There were several hundred participants from different faiths, and a number shared their loss and grief as others served as compassionate witnesses. Between each sharing there was a beautiful silence, a pause for blessings. One person told about her family in Gaza going to bed alive, and being found dead the next morning in the rubble that had been their building. A man spoke about the brutal murder of his friend, a woman in her seventies, by Hamas on Oct. 7th. She had been a dedicated peace activist, regularly driving people in need of medical aid from Gaza to the better hospitals in Israel. Each sharing brought tears, and it was good and necessary to grieve together—to grieve for all who were suffering.

If we are to contribute to a pathway toward peace, we need to feel, to truly let in the pain of others, and to grieve. I led a meditation gathering for Israeli therapists who had been

tending 24/7 to those most traumatized, and for a group of 2400 Israelis who practice mindfulness. Each group had time to share their losses and grief. One person's three-year-old son was taken hostage, another recalled watching a parent killed, and another, whose brother lost his whole family. Many talked about how a gripping existential fear is now a constant part of their daily lives. Since being with these groups, I've talked with Jewish friends in the US who are afraid for themselves and their children, so strong and toxic is the spike of antisemitism. Many shared a crushing sense of betrayal by friends for not recognizing the horror of Oct. 7th and the threat to Israel's existence as a state...for not caring, for abandoning them.

In recent weeks I've also heard from and connected with many students and friends who are anguished by the genocide in Gaza. We've shared our heartbreak at images of mothers carrying the bundle that was once a living child from wreckage, the children without parents, the cruelty of being entrapped, without food and water, and the terrifying helplessness against indiscriminate bombing. My Arab and Muslim-American friends talk about their desperation and despair at the racism that dehumanizes the Palestinian people—the devaluing of Palestinian lives that lets the occupation, the injustice, and now, the carnage, go on.

Our society is so polarized into a sense of “us against them” that, for many and especially for those who are themselves traumatized, it's not possible to empathize and grieve the losses of those considered on the other side. Rather, they are objectified and perceived as bad others. This bad othering locks us in limbic reactivity, and our views and actions become shaped by fear and hatred. Othering also brings indifference to the unspeakable torment that so many humans—mothers, fathers, siblings, children—are living with right now.

Friends, the only hope for a more peaceful, loving world is for us to open our hearts to all who are suffering, to value and cherish all life. From that inclusive and compassionate presence, we will naturally seek to relieve suffering. It is our caring, not fear or anger, that can guide us in expressing our inner spirit with wise action. And act we must. We belong to this world, and we impact others with our silence or words, our passivity or activity.

In contemplating how best to serve, it helps to pose a deep inquiry to our own heart: What is love asking from me here? Let me share what has emerged for me from this question.

- My heart knows that I need to keep connecting inwardly, so I'm aware of habitual fears and biases, and intimate with loss and grief. When there's an awake tender presence with my inner life, there's a natural compassion and feeling of belonging with other beings.

- My heart asks that I continue to deepen my understanding of the historic trauma, causes and conditions leading up to conflict, violence and suffering. And that I remember that humans are not the enemy; it is the universal forces of greed, hatred and delusion that take over and lead to violence and suffering.

- My heart asks that I recognize and name as harmful, any actions that violate others and create suffering. This would include, in recent days, the terrorist violence by Hamas against Jews and Israelis on Oct. 7th and the current and ongoing indiscriminate killing of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank perpetrated by the Israeli government.

- My heart asks that I recognize and name as harmful, antisemitism, islamophobia, racism and any dominance hierarchy that leads to hatred and/or violation of other beings.

- My heart does not conflate Jewish and Israeli people with the actions of a right-wing Israeli government. My heart does not conflate the Palestinian people with Hamas.

- My heart honors the rights of Israeli and Jewish people to exist and seek safety; and honors the rights of Palestinians to seek liberation from oppression; to pursue justice, equality and dignity.

- My heart realizes that how we seek what we long for determines what unfolds in the future. Martin Luther King and so many spiritual leaders have expressed what is also found in the Buddhist texts: Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. If Israel, in the process of trying to destroy an enemy that has

committed atrocities, kills and displaces a huge portion of the population in Gaza, it is creating a whole new generation of traumatized terrorists and undermining its efforts toward safety.

From these understandings and from deep caring, I feel called to use my words and actions in support of an immediate and complete ceasefire in Gaza and the West Bank, a return of all hostages, and expedited and meaningful humanitarian aid for Gaza—as a pathway toward more true eventual safety for the Jews and Israelis, and liberation for the Palestinians.

At this time, this is what seems wise to me, and in all humility, I realize I have my own conditioning, biases and places of not seeing. As I continue to pay attention, my understandings and views will evolve.

My hope for each of you is that you will pause and keep connecting inwardly to presence, to your awake and tender heart—that you will consciously include the suffering of all in your heart, and then inquire deeply as to what love wants from you.

We belong to this world; may we be blessed to speak and act from love, may we plant seeds of peace.

I am deeply grateful to each for your company on the path of awakening.

With love, blessings, and prayers for our world,

Tara

P.S. If the above perspective resonates and you are seeking ways to be more active, two organizations I trust are:

Jewish Voices for Peace: <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>

Palestinian Children's Relief Fund: <https://www.pcrf.net>

I also highly recommend the following:

Ezra Klein Podcasts: 11-17-23 and 12-8-23

Gabor Mate – YouTube talk: Collective & Individual Trauma in Palestine/Israel – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFmJpzBYCvI> Biography

Biography

Tara Brach (born May 17, 1953) is an American psychologist, author, and proponent of Buddhist meditation. She is a guiding teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C. (IMCW). Brach also teaches about Buddhist meditation at centers for meditation and yoga in the United States and Europe, including Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California; the Kripalu Center; and the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies.

Brach is an Engaged Buddhist, specializing in the application of Buddhist teachings and mindfulness meditation to emotional healing. She has authored several books on these subjects, including *Radical Acceptance*, *True Refuge*, and *Radical Compassion*.

Education

Brach holds bachelor's degrees in psychology and political science from Clark University. She was awarded a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Fielding Graduate University based on her dissertation analyzing the effectiveness of meditation in the healing of eating disorders.

Personal life

Brach resides in Virginia with her husband, Jonathan Foust, a yoga and meditation teacher. She was raised Christian Unitarian.