Learning to find the words when “There are no words/*Ein Milim/* *אין מילים”*

Miriam Heller Stern

בארץ הלוהטת הזאת המילים צריכות להיות צל

*In this fiery-hot land, words are supposed to provide shade.*

 *Yehuda Amichai, Shir Ahava*

My daughter is in fourth grade at a Jewish day school in Los Angeles. The other day she had a vocabulary test of 100 Hebrew words. Memorizing them accurately was an impressive feat.

I am American, and a graduate of such a school, which was the foundation for a lifetime of Jewish learning. I have a wide and deep Hebrew and Jewish vocabulary that I began accumulating from the time I was a child. And yet, when I spent time visiting with colleagues and family in Israel in January 2024, I found myself unable to find the right words – in any language – to process the profound depth and complexity of what I encountered. What’s the word for when you feel shattered, yet somehow whole at the same time? Full of resolve and yet nauseatingly empty in the pit of your stomach? How do you describe the experience of a visceral despair buoyed by unyielding hope? Exhausted and determined to persist? We kept trying to make sense and create order but found ourselves just needing to be present: listening, absorbing, processing.

There are those who will argue forcefully for the urgency of teaching more history and more facts as a bulwark against anti-Semitism and Israel’s opponents and enemies. Certainly, having a Jewish knowledge base and the discernment to navigate today’s media terrain is essential.

But when it feels like our world has been upended, we also need to teach how to courageously navigate through the parts that schools don’t always know how to teach: how to hold the trauma, the loss, the paradoxes, the confusion, the other. How do we create the containers for these very human and raw experiences?

A phrase I hear frequently from my North American colleagues and friends as they return from Israel and are asked to describe the experience is, “there are no words.” After offering that initial caveat, they spill over with a deluge of words: conflicting words, colorful, textured, emotional words. Their words are punctuated not by passive periods – only question marks, exclamation points, and ellipses that trail off, unfinished, paused without conclusion.

We need to learn “languages” for expressing what is happening to us, what we hope to achieve, and who we know we are as a people. I traveled to Israel with a delegation of academic colleagues and lay leaders from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, to spend quality time with our Israeli colleagues, students, and alumni. We are accustomed to academic political discourses, historical lectures and expert briefings. In contrast, I was struck by how prayer, stories, poetry, photography and art emerged as the best tools to communicate the emotional valence of the lived experiences and yearnings we needed to understand. Images, metaphors, and personal narratives helped us access realities that were new and sometimes mind-bending and heart-wrenching. Look around Israel and you will see a proliferation of art installations, music, symbols, and personal truth-telling that insist on being seen and provide a pathway to resilience.

What is educationally essential in this moment in history? We need to give learners of all ages opportunities to weave creative expression into the process of sense-making. We need practice curating our word lists into tools for healing, strength, understanding, and advocacy. We can learn to write piyuttim (poetic prayers), document the stories of October 7th, sing nigunim (melodies that unite and center us), interpret the various messages of visual art, engage in art therapy and creative writing, just to name a few examples. Memory and creativity are essential skills of Jewish history. Let us not retreat into a curriculum of only fear and defense, lest we forget the strategies that empowered us to persist throughout the generations beyond all expectations.