It is no question that in the past few months, events that have occurred in our society have asked us to reexamine our place in the world. From the climate change protests last week to the litany of human rights injustices we have seen right in our own country, it is nearly impossible to stand by and think “this has nothing to do with me.”

In philosophical terms, the twentieth century theologian Martin Buber would assert that we are all individuals waiting for a relational event. Each person, thing, idea, phenomenon, plant, animal, or experience we encounter helps shape who we are and how we respond to this massively complicated world around us. Alone we are merely an “it,” a non-personal, inactive entity. It is once we come in contact with another that we have the capacity to flourish into our full potential.

But once we connect with something else, something greater than ourselves, we become more than just an inert lump of flesh and blood, we become an actor engaging with others. The “other” we counter could be another human being, but it could also be a social justice cause, a phenomenon that takes us by surprise, something or someone that draws us into a relationship.

In this morning’s Torah portion we see a biblical character who wishes to stay an “it,” one not in relation with another. Our matriarch Sarah demonstrates the less than admirable quality of treating another human being as an “it” rather than a “you.” When Sarah gives birth to her son Isaac, she immediately goes into “steamroller parent” mode - she looks for any possible obstacle her son may face and tries to head it off at the pass. Being a family of means, her thoughts turn to inheritance. She sees Abraham’s son by her handmaid Hagar, Ishmael, as a threat to her son’s control of the family fortune.

Torah tells us that Sarah turns to her husband and says,
Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.

Listen to that language “that slave woman”...the son of that slave.” It is clear that beyond not wanting anything to do with Hagar, Sarah sees Hagar as an “it,” not as another human being.

There is an additional nuance lost in our English rendering. That is that of Hagar’s role - a few chapters earlier Sarah refers to Hagar as a שפחה, more like a woman’s right-hand lady or personal maidservant. When we reach today’s portion, however, Sarah refers to Hagar as an אמה, a servant woman of lower status. Please remember this - words matter.

So Sarah has decided that, now that she has a biological son in the picture, Hagar and her child no longer have a role in her household. Sarah’s words reflect a change from an “I-you” relationship with Hagar to an “I-it” understanding. On one hand, is that so difficult to understand? Sarah now has her own child in the world and knows that her son will need to compete with Ishmael for what she believes is rightfully his. In a family where the resources are finite, she wants to ensure her son receives everything he is entitled to. In that process, though, she needs to vilify her enemy to get what she wants.

Our theologian would say that Sarah, in order to improve the capacity for her own experience (and that of her son), she needs to decrease her own power to relate to others. Her change in language, from שפחה to אמה and referring to Hagar as “that woman” helps Sarah build a proverbial wall between herself and her former handmaid. This dehumanization of another individual helps Sarah achieve her goal.

From a midrashic standpoint, who can blame her? Our ancient rabbis created all sorts of stories to justify Sarah’s harsh treatment of Hagar. They assert that Ishmael was getting into all sorts of teenagerly trouble and Sarah did not want that bad influence around her young son. Ishmael, accustomed to hunting, would aim arrows at the young Isaac but then say
“haha just kidding!” Or Abraham smiled when he saw Ishmael playing. The midrashic tradition tells us that not only Sarah told Abraham to expel Hagar and her child, but God came to Abraham and said, “what Sarah said to you was harsh, but she’s right - don’t let your emotions get the better of you.”

In order to justify Isaac’s right to Abraham’s wealth, Ishmael needed to be out of the picture. It’s clear that there should be no question in the line of inheritance and, on a more meta scale, the legitimacy of the Jewish people. So we know where the ancients’ attitude falls - but what about our own assessment of the situation? Was Ishmael truly a threat to Isaac’s inheritance? While we are not scholars of biblical property rights and transfers, it would seem that Sarah was going above and beyond to protect her child. But at what cost? She advocated sending another mother and child out into the wilderness to fend for themselves, leaving the safety and comfort of their home because of her insecurity. She changes how she speaks about Hagar in order to promote her agenda. Words matter. We have seen just in the last three years how words can make a difference. The rhetoric surrounding immigrants and refugees has morphed to “illegals” and “bad hombres.” Buber tells us that as we begin to replace our lived experience with that gained by knowledge (that is, at least secondhand experience), we are more liable to fall into this I-it relationship with the world around us. I am a firm believer that the strongest combatant against racism and xenophobia is exposure - when we meet the “other,” they cease to stay an “it” and become a “you.” Imagine your social media feed - you see both the highlights of people’s lives as well as the mundane. That exposure to the mundane - the first day of school pictures, a funny meme that says EXACTLY what you were thinking, or even what’s on the dinner plate that evening, help you see a fuller view of this person’s life. Not having those personal connections (whether it’s facebook, instagram, or, better, yet, in real life) can lead us to desensitize ourselves to the humanity of others. Pictures on the news just don’t cut it anymore- we need that personal connection.

That connection, even if we make it ourselves, isn’t just good enough for now. Buber asserts that we need to reestablish, nay, improve, that
connection in each generation. Hearing stories of your parents’ or grandparents’ friends is nice, but doesn’t give you the visceral connection you gain by experiencing those relationships for yourself. The inherited memory of our people as strangers in the land of Egypt is a good start, but we must go further.

The moment we stop recognizing other human beings as those made in the divine image, we fall into the same pattern as Sarah - sacrificing the humanity of others for our own personal interests. She sees Isaac’s inheritance as a zero sum game -either her son “wins” or Ishmael “wins.” Buber asserts that when “What has become an It is then taken as an It, experienced and used as an It, employed along with other things for the project of finding one’s way in the world, and eventually for the project of ‘conquering’ the world.” When we use other people as tools in our quest, we not only strip them of their humanity but desensitize ourselves to the experiences of others. How we use our words matters.

This will truly be our downfall as a society; as we dehumanize others for our own real, or perceived gain. I charge you today to examine your own role in this phenomenon - how do you connect with others around you? How can you facilitate positive connections across religious and cultural lines with others in our community? Can you teach your children and grandchildren that “thoughts and prayers” are not enough but action with compassion must follow? Do not walk in this way of Sarah our matriarch, do not make your success dependant on the failure and demonization of another.

I urge us, in this coming new year to open ourselves up to new friendships, new experiences, new connections. Cast aside your preconceived notions about another and instead greet each person with a pleasant countenance. As we encounter those who were once strangers, we may find commonalities that surprise us - shared concerns and drives that help us together build a better future. These mutual understandings may not only be the key to developing new personal relationships, but making change on a greater scale. Shanah Tovah.