

Listen With Your Eyes - Erev Yom Kippur 5779

Rabbi Susie Heneson Moskowitz

Listening to what people are really saying -

There is a story told about the 19th century Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.

A man approached the rabbi and asked, "Can I fulfill the mitzvah of drinking four cups of wine on Passover with four cups of milk instead?"

The rabbi asked. "Are you thinking about doing this because you are ill?"

"No," the man told him, "my health is not the issue. Wine is just too expensive for me. I can't afford it."

The rabbi thought and said, "Here are 25 rubles. Chag Sameach"

After the man left, the rabbi's wife asked, "Why did you give him so much money? Two or three rubles would have been enough to buy wine for the seder."

The rabbi answered, "If that man was thinking of drinking milk at the seder, not only did he not have enough money for wine, he didn't have enough money for meat or matzah or other necessities of the seder, either."

What is the question the man asked? Could milk be used instead of wine for the ritual? What did R' Yosef Dov hear? So much more, because of careful listening he is able to hear so much more. (With Heart in Mind. Alan Morinis p.23-4)

When people share something with us, even if they do in the form of asking for advice, we have the challenge of listening beneath the surface and trying to figure out what it is they are really saying and what they need from us in that moment.

In the NYT Mag advice column a question is raised: "If someone comes out to you as gay, how should you respond?" Telaina Eriksen, a creative writing professor who wrote a book about her daughter coming out as a lesbian, says, "Don't turn it around and make it all about you. Don't say - How could you do this to me? or Hah! I knew it all along. or "Are you sure?" At that moment the person wants to be seen and heard - understood and accepted. They are letting you know who they are, listen beyond the words and respond with the love and acceptance they need.

Say, "Thank you for trusting me. How can I support you? Would you like me to share this knowledge or you will you be doing that?" (NYT Mag p. 23)

It is a time to listen full of care, not to ask questions and layer on our concerns and doubts. We are used to talking and problem solving.

The challenge of listening carefully is that, that is all you have to do- listen.

My friend, Mat, is a geriatric cardiologist. And he is a great doctor. How do I know that? I haven't ever gone him professionally and I'm not quite geriatric, yet. But because when he talks about his work he says, "many of my patients are physically ok, but they are lonely. They just need someone to talk with. Someone who will listen to them. That is what I spend most of my day doing. Of course they come in with a presenting issue, heart pain, shortness of breath, or even a sore toe, because everyone goes to their heart doctor for that." Mat is able to listen from a place of care and hear what they are saying and answer with what they need.

Mitch Albom shares one of his childhood rabbi's, Albert Lewis's stories from a 1958 sermon.

A little girl came home from school with a drawing she made in class. She danced into the kitchen where her mother was preparing dinner.

"Mom, guess what?" she squealed, waving the drawing. Her mother never looked up.

"What?" she said, tending to the pots.

"Guess what" the child repeated, waving the drawing.

"What?" the mother said, tending to the plates.

"Mom, you're not listening."

"Sweetie, yes I am."

"Mom," the child said, "You're not listening with your EYES."

[//www.bonbonbreak.com/mom-youre-not-listening-with-your-eyes/](http://www.bonbonbreak.com/mom-youre-not-listening-with-your-eyes/)

In our busy world, it is hard to focus intently, to listen with care and be able to deeply comprehend. On these High Holidays we have the only mitzvah that involves listening. We are commanded to hear the sound of the shofar, not to blow the shofar- that is designated for a few. But all of us are commanded to hear the sound of the shofar. But hearing is not quite enough. The mishneh goes on to explain,

"if one passes behind the synagogue or the person's house is next to the synagogue and he hears the the shofar being sounded, if he focuses his heart to fulfill the obligation, then he has therefore indeed fulfilled it, but if he does not focus his heart, he has not fulfilled the obligation. Meaning the mitzvah of hearing the shofar can only be fulfilled if you are completely present and intending to hear it. Listening full of care.

Today, we might be on the phone or texting or posting to our Insta-story and not doing the dishes, but we are still guilty of not listening with our eyes, with our full attention. When we say our Al Cheyts- our confessions, I am adding this is one to the top of my list. "I'm sorry if I didn't listen to you with a full heart, and real attention. If I jumped in with advice too soon. If I didn't listen beneath your words, to your heart." Al cheyt shechantnu l'fanecha.

Listening to people to think differently than you

It is important to listen to the people we live with and work with. To really pay attention. But this can be more challenging when we confront a foreigner or a stranger. Even those words create distance. Think about it, the roots are foreign and strange. Those aren't words that make us feel close and accepting. We tend to distance ourselves from strang-ness, from strang-ers.

In today's world politics and party affiliation has become particularly divisive. Millennials find political lines to be more divisive when picking a life partner than race or religion.

But what happens when two very different people fall in love? What about Margaret Hoover and John Avlon?

Margaret Hoover is the great-granddaughter of Herbert Hoover and a long time Republican. Her husband John Avlon, is a centrist, independent who believes hyper-partisanship is damaging the country. They are both News commentators, she was with Fox News and is now on PSB's Firing Line and he is with CNN. They have both written books supporting their opposing world views.

Margaret says: "In the Hoover House, Democrat was a bad word. When something broke my mom would say, 'It went Democrat on us.' So at first, when ever John said anything that wasn't pro-Republican Party, I took it as an attack on me and what the Hoovers stood for. If we weren't in total sync on every point, then how could we be united in life?..."

John says: "I'd always believed politics wasn't personal. Then I started dating Margaret, for whom it was intensely personal. Also, I love a good discussion and wanted to 'win' every time. Understandably, that didn't feel loving to Margaret."

When John was not going to vote Republican in 2008 election they fought non-stop. She says: "by then I knew John well enough to appreciate that our core values - love of family and country-were the same, even if our political leanings weren't....When we got married I designated our bedroom a demilitarized zone."

They are able to look past their differences and focus on the human being. Being in love certainly helped. But we need to work/live/function/co-exist with people who we don't "love".

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who died in 2008, was quoted in the New York Times as saying: "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts." (The Week)

So how can we connect to that humanness? It comes back to listening, real, deep listening. Not the kind where you bide your time just so you can parry with your winning zinger. The kind listening that you do with your soul, not just your ears.

A year or so ago I heard 2 speakers from a group called Roots-Shorashim-Judur- The name is the word Roots in English, Hebrew and Arabic. One was a Orthodox Zionist Settler, Rabbi Chanan Schlesinger and the other was his Palestinian neighbor Shadi Abu Awad. They start by presenting the hard line positions you would expect. They talk about mistrust and their ancestral right to the land of Israel and specifically the West bank. They both have upbringings that taught them one point of view and it frames their entire outlook on life, and they are taught to believe that this is dead right. But then their talk shifts and they describe how they have created a mutual coalition working to create understanding and peace. A way to co-exist in the West Bank. Their message- "Israel can't win. Palestine can't win. If we think about winning, there's no way out. We need to bring nuance into the conversation." Their efforts include dialogue, summer

campus, community projects and more. They shared a fence and started talking and then they started listening- and literally a new world opened up for all sides.

None of the initial arguments disappear, they are just replaced with a deeper desire to work together, a realization that all human beings have the same needs and desires. They still had different opinions and points of view, but seeing them in person, their mutual admiration of each other and their friendship was obvious. It was stronger than the need to be right. (They will be in Huntington on Nov 4. I'm going to hear them go again.)

I had several opportunities to listen to others and to be heard this past year. I travelled to Salt Lake City with a Rabbinic delegation as a guest of the Mormon Church. I met with local Muslims in Amityville. And Cantor Appelbaum, Rabbi Wiesenberg and I and some of you went down to the Pentecostal Church in East Rockaway, when Pastor Jonathan Mack, from our MLK service, was being honored. These experiences were wonderful. In all three cases they asked good questions and were really interested in the answers. And we, I hope did the same. I know so little about the Mormon community so I had a million questions and they patiently answered each one. These are all new relationships so I didn't ask really hard questions that I suspect we will disagree on, but the groundwork has been laid.

One moment about listening and understanding stood out. The Rabbinic exchange with the Mormons started about 10 years ago. The program is the brainchild of Bob Abrams, who was Attorney General of NYS from 1979-93. The Mormon church has a doctrine that when people join the church they can offer all of their deceased relatives the option of accepting baptism for their sins. They explained that it is not a conversion. While I'm not crazy about this practice, and I decided my dead soul will just say, "No, thank you!" if asked it is part of their doctrine. Ten years ago the issue arose that Mormons were tracking down victims of the Holocaust and offering their names up for baptism. It seems this was being done by a few members of the Church, it was not a wide-spread practice. Bob, and the Rabbis with him, explained how painful and troubling this is to the Jewish people. The Church leaders heard them and understood the pain these baptisms were causing. Flash forward 10 years -On our visit we saw the million dollar computer system that they have put in to prevent any Mormon from baptizing a Holocaust victim. And they have staff people who just deal with preventing these baptisms. They are very proud of this program.

They actually heard our pain. It is extraordinary the lengths they went to, to understand the problem and create a solution. That impressed me so deeply. What started out as a cultural exchange led to profound understanding and real change.

Listening might not solve all the world's problems. But it is a huge step that needs to be taken and it will solve many of them. Whether between countries or in families. If we listen to those who feel disenfranchised, those we are trying to help- we will be better able to help them. If we listen to people we disagree with in a way that allows us to

learn, we can all grow. If we listen to our kids, our friends, our family-from that deep heart place- we will hear differently.

**This is why we are going to have a Listening Campaign at Temple Beth Torah.
I want to listen to you-**

To hear what you are really saying and thinking

To know whose cries for help are piercing your souls and then together create a plan of action.

- I've heard from some of you and we are working on making TBT and Long Island more green, more eco-friendly.
- I've heard from some you and we organizing around Bail Bond Reform.
- I've heard from some you that parenting is hard and we are offering classes to give you support.

So, What is breaking your heart? - the opioid epidemic, the prevalence of suicide, the divide in our Country, gun violence, immigration. These are all timely, pressing issues. We probably can't fix all of them and some will be too divisive to our community, so they are better handled by individuals. But if we listen to each other we can decide where we can most effectively push forward and where together we can make a difference.

This will bring our community closer together as we endeavor to really hear each other's hopes and dreams.

I hope you will get involved to share and to listen. Let's work together make Temple Beth Torah a place where Experiences take root and grow.

I'll end, with this prayer by Rabbi Harold Kushner that cries out for us to hear and be heard, by one another and by G!d.

On this [Yom Kippur], O Lord, Sharpen our ability to hear.

May we hear the music of the world,

And the infant's cry,

and the lover's sigh.

May we hear the call for help of the lonely soul,

And the sound of the breaking heart.

May we hear the words of our friends,

And also their unspoken pleas and dreams.

May we hear within ourselves the yearnings

That are struggling for expression.

May we hear You, O G-d.

For only if we hear You
Do we have the right to hope That you will hear us.
Hear the prayers we offer to you this day, O G-d.
And may we hear them too. Amen.

Sources

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