

*Parshat Vayikra*  
 “*Shma Yisrael* - Listen O’ Israel”  
 by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas  
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Sometimes poetry can capture in a few words things that the rest of us struggle to express even when given unlimited words to do so. I’ve had this song in my head the last few days, because the words seem to capture so much of the frustration I have been feeling recently. I first heard this song 40 years ago! It was the title song in the movie *Midnight Cowboy*. *Midnight Cowboy* came out in 1969, starring Jon Voight as Joe Buck the naïve male prostitute from Texas and his sickly friend Ratso played by a young Dustin Hoffman as the two of them struggled to survive on the streets of New York City. But, it is the title song that has been rattling around my brain these past few days, and I bet there are others here who remember that famous song that was written by Fred Neil and sung in the movie by Harry Nilson. Who remembers the song? Yep, “Everybody’s talking at me” – and the opening line that has so stuck with me these last few days go: “Everybody’s talking at me; I can’t hear a word they’re saying...”

I don’t know about you – but that pretty much sums up the way I’ve been feeling. The economy, Wall Street, AIG, Congress, Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Rush Limbaugh, Joe Scarborough, Jim Cramer – yes, everybody’s talkin’ at me and I can’t seem to hear a word their saying...

This morning we began reading from the third of the five books of the Torah, *Vayikra*, the Book of Leviticus. And no sooner do we read the opening two sentences of this new book, than the rabbis had a problem. They just did not make sense to them. (Lev. 1:1-2). "*Vayikra el Moshe . . . daber el b'nai Yisrael, v'amarta alayhem . . .* God called unto Moses and said to him, 'Moses, I want you to speak to the Israelites and tell them what I want them to do.'

The Rabbis who studied every nuance of every word of our sacred Torah - read these words and did not have to ponder long to ask an obvious question, "Why couldn't God speak directly to the Israelites? Why did God need a middle man, Moses, to merely repeat His words to the Children of Israel?"

And *Rashi* in his famous commentary on the Torah, attempts to address this problem by stating, "*Ha-kol holekh u'magee'a l' oznov, v'khol Yisrael lo shomin,*" God spoke to Moses -- because Moses gave God his undivided attention. His ear was directed toward God. Moses listened to everything God said. However, the Israelites, by nature, did not listen. They were more interested in talking, in verbalizing their own desires and wants. They were more interested in being heard by God than in hearing what God had to say to them. Thus, *Rashi* suggests, that God said, "I'll talk to Moses -- and he will convey My message to the Jews, because *he* listens!"

When everybody’s talking at you, knowing how to listen is a very special talent. And in this remarkable comment, *Rashi* seems to be saying that it is so special – that the ability to listen is what made Moses, Moses.

In fact, this also explains why time and time again, when God did speak directly to the people,

God felt obliged to begin these addresses by saying: *Shma Yisrael*, "Listen to Me." It reminds me of Dr. Newman z"l, the principal of my Hebrew School when I was growing up. Every time he wanted to begin an announcement over the PA system in our Religious School, he always began with the same words: "*Hakshivu, Hakshivu*, Your Attention please...!" – then he would say whatever he wanted to say – but Dr. Newman, like God understood – that before he could say anything – he had to first, get our attention: *Hakshivu, Hakshivu*, Your Attention please...!"

It is rather remarkable, if you stop to think about it – that the most famous words in all of Judaism begin with an attention grabber. *Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Ehad!* Sometimes called the watchwords of our faith, these are the first words our children learn in Hebrew School, for a Jew we recited them the last thing before we go to sleep every night and the first thing when we awake every morning – they were the words that Jews uttered as they marched to their deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz -- *Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Ehad!* Six words – and the first two, are intended as an attention grabber! Think about it – the real point of that statement is: *Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Ehad!* Some have argued that the real point of this declaration are the second two words which affirm that *Adonai Eloheynu – Adonai* is our God. Others have argued that it is the last two words that are deserving of the emphasis: *Adonai Ehad* - which emphasize that God alone is worthy of our worship. But no one gives much thought to the fact that this critical passage, arguably the most important in the entire torah, opens with an attention grabber: *Shma Yisrael* – "Listen Israel!" "Hey, listen up, pay attention, I have something I want to tell you, *Haksivu, Hakshivu!*" Yep, it is not easy to be a Jew, it is not easy to learn to listen – especially when everybody is talkin' at you.

545 times the words "hear" or "listen" appear in the Bible. God, it seems, is constantly trying to get us to pay attention: when the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River to enter the Holy Land, once again, God began His conversation with the Israelites by saying (Deut. 9:1), "*Shema Yisrael, atah ovair ha-yom et ha-Yarden,*" "Listen to me, oh My Jews. I know that you think that you know all the answers, but you are going to be confronted by powerful nations. I do not want you to go down to defeat. Therefore, pay attention – because I have some important advice to give you!" Or in Deuteronomy 6, "Hear O' Israel and take care that it may go well for you." And on and on it goes, 545 times. And here we sit, thousands of years later and too many of us are still not paying attention: *shma yisrael!*

But when everybody is talkin' at you, it is hard to listen.

Am I the only one who finds it strange that they are called "congressional *hearings*" but no body seems to be listening? The idea behind them, as I understand, is for our political leaders in congress to have the power to subpoena people to come before them to testify so they can listen and gather the information they need to make informed decisions. But the only one's I hear talking are the politicians themselves. The people they call before them seem to spend most of their time sitting quietly desperately trying to say as little as possible and when cornered they frequently invoke the 5<sup>th</sup> amendment while the politicians seem to do all the talking as they step over each other trying to find something clever and pithy enough to make it on the evening news. *Shma Congressional Leaders* – Listen, just stop and listen and maybe we can all learn something important.

Philip Tetlock, a professor at the University of California, Berkley published a book called, "Expert Political Judgment" based on two decades of tracking some 82,000 predictions by 284 experts.

The result? The predictions of experts were, on average only a tiny bit better than random guesses – “the equivalent,” says Nicholas Kristoff, “of a chimpanzee throwing darts at a board. It made no difference whether participants had doctorates, whether they were economists, political scientists, journalists or historians, whether they had policy experience or access to classified information, or whether they had logged many or few years of experience,” Prof. Tetlock wrote. Indeed, the only consistent predictor was fame --- and it was an inverse relationship. The more famous the experts did worse than the unknown ones. It seems that what gets you booked on these news shows and talk radio interviews, what gets you quoted in newspapers and magazines is if you can say things forcefully, authoritatively and clearly – the more black and white you can make it – the more likely you are to be featured – and – according to Professor Tetlock – the more likely you are to be wrong. And the more you shout – well – then you might get your own show – like Rush or Hannity or yes, Jim Cramer.

Mr. Tetlock called experts such as these the “hedgehogs,” after a famous distinction by the late Sir Isaiah Berlin between hedgehogs and foxes. Hedgehogs tend to have a focused worldview, an ideological leaning, strong convictions; foxes are more cautious, more centrist, more likely to adjust their views, more pragmatic, more prone to self doubt, more inclined to see complexity and nuance. And it turns out that while foxes don’t give great sound bites, they are far more likely to get things right.

Newspaper reporters don’t like me. I am a fox – not a hedgehog. When they call to get my opinion on an issue, almost any issue I will reply: “well the answer to your question is actually quite complicated...” Reporters don’t like complicated. ABC’s Good Morning America did a report on Jews and tattoos. Since I wrote the paper on tattooing and body piercing for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement the reporter found her way to my office. She began by saying that she had read my rather extensive paper on the subject, would I be able to summarize it on camera in 10-15 seconds? So in 3 seconds I replied, “No, I cannot.” She smiled and said, well then why don’t you do the best you can, and we’ll edit it back at the station.”

One of the reasons I like our new president is that I have this feeling that he, like me, is more of a fox than a hedgehog. That he likes to gather smart people around him and listen. That he is a fan of complexity, nuance and self-doubt. He may yet prove me wrong – but, so far that is the sense I get.

Now some of you might find my message more than a little ironic - especially since it comes in a sermon - not the most “interactive” of modalities. After all what is a sermon - I talk and you listen. Or at least I hope that those of you who are still awake are listening. So it is more than a little strange that I stand before you this morning, *lecturing* you on the importance of listening. But the truth is that sermons are a very small part of what I do, and I have come to believe that the most important things that I do have to do with listening much more than sermonizing.

Frequently I will get a call from someone who is frantically seeking my advice, as they are about to visit a friend or loved one in crisis. Maybe it is a friend who has received bad medical news or a relative who tragically lost a loved one. And these calls usually amount to the same question, “Rabbi, you do this all the time, what do I say? What do I say when they will ask me “why?” or

“why me?” And my response is always the same, though from the pause on the other end I sense that the questioner was expecting something more, but I always respond that there is no need to say anything - just go be with them, your presence and your love is what they need most -listen, don't speak!

I can't tell you how many times I have been thanked for saying nothing. I will sit with a family in a hospital waiting room, or in my office or in their living room and listen to their pain and their sorrow and say little - I hold their hand, I give a hug and I am always amazed when it comes time for me to leave that inevitably I feel that I have done so little and they will say, “Thank you rabbi, you have been such a great help, I feel much better.” Are they just being polite? Sometimes I suspect they are - but we also underestimate the power of being a sympathetic listener. *Shma Yisrael*

The Rabbis suggest that this is why God gave us two ears -- but only one mouth. God wanted us to listen more and to speak less.

As you know I recently got up from *shiva* for my mother. I have to be honest, so many people came to comfort me – it was really quite incredible and I am sorry to say, I don't remember very much of what you said to me – it was such a difficult time, but I do remember that you were there – your presence meant so much to me, it was such a source of comfort. I remember this one friend, her husband had died at a tragically young age and she was going through the process of death and grieving at much too young an age. She shared with me what she called her, “top ten *shiva* moments.” I'll quote just a few. One of her favorites was the woman who asked her, “Are you Susan, (not her real name), the widow?” - to which she wanted to reply- “No, I sit on *shiva* chairs for fun...” Or the person who said, “May you know no more sorrow...” to which she couldn't help but think – “nice thought, but since I am only thirty not likely!” Then there was the person who, no doubt was trying to be helpful, when he said: “Don't worry, God did this for a purpose...” or the woman who tried to comfort her with the words, “at least you are young and will be able to remarry soon...” And I am not sure I will ever understand the purpose of the comment by the woman who offered, “let me tell you, my husband's death was worse than yours!”

So that is why I advise people that there are times when it is not necessary to say anything. Even when someone turns to you and asks a direct question such as, “why is this happening to me?” you need to realize that these are not so much theological inquiries as they are cries of pain. And as a cry of pain they demand from us not a long excursus on God's ultimate justice but a hug and a hand and a sympathetic heart. *Shema Yisrael*, sometimes we just have to learn how to listen.

*Moshe*, became *Moshe Rabeinu*, Moses our teacher, not because he knew how to talk, but because he knew how to listen. In fact one of the few things we know about *Moshe* is that he had difficulty talking, he was, *kaved peh*, usually translated as a stutterer. So awkward was he in such moments that we know he took his brother Aaron along to do the talking to Pharaoh for him. So if Aaron was so good at public speaking and *Moshe* was so bad at it, why didn't God make Aaron his main man? Because God wanted us to understand that the true gift of leadership is not in the talking - any demagogue can do that, no the true gift of leadership and the true gift of friendship comes in the listening, in the ability to listen, in the willingness to listen.

“Everybody's talking at me – I can't hear a word they're saying....

*Shema Yisrael* – Listen! O' Israel, now, more than ever, we need to learn to listen!