

Rosh Hashanah
2011/5772
The Most Difficult Mitzvah
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You came here today to hear the shofar. Good for you. That is why you should be here. Sukkot has the Sukkan and the lulav, Hanukkah has the menorah, Passover has matzah – but when it comes to Rosh Hashanah it is all about the shofar.

If you think about it – shofar is a strange mitzvah. Most mitzvot are active, they require some kind of active participation on your part: you *light* the menorah, you *shake* the lulav, you *build* a sukkah, you *eat* the matzah – what are you expected to do with a shofar? Sound it? No, you don't have to be able to sound the shofar to fulfill its mitzvah – we can and do sound it for you – all you have to do is listen.

All you have to do is *hear* the sound of the shofar and you have fulfilled your shofar mitzvah. In fact the *bracha* we recite says as much: “*Baruch Ata Adonai*, who has made us holy through mitzvot and instructed us to *hear* the sound of the shofar.” Has there ever been an easier mitzvah? Fasting on Yom Kippur – that's hard. Eating Matzah for a week – that's really hard. Building a sukkah – is certainly a challenge – but could anything be simpler than just standing there and listening?

Careful. That is what we, in the business, call a trick question.

Listening is not as easy as it sounds. And it appears to me – that the ability to listen, the art of listening has fallen on hard times. Does anyone listen anymore?

There are two sides to the communication equation: one party talks – one party listens. We got the talking part down – we talk, argue, debate, we shout, protest, demonstrate – but is anybody listening? Take the recent spectacle at the United Nations. This is supposed to be a forum where the world comes together to work out its differences; where talking and listening go on in equal measure. But the UN is not a place of dialogue; it is merely a platform for demagoguery. There is a lot of talking, but very little listening. Could anything be more demonstrative of what the UN has become than image after image of world leaders taking to the podium while everyone else either removes their headphones or literally walks out on them? With the notable exception of countries like the United States and Israel who really use this platform to try and communicate with those whom they disagree – most leaders –like Ahmedinijad, use the podium as an opportunity not to engage but to enrage and to insult their enemies.

And we find this inability to listen, no matter where we look.

There was the Arab Spring, the Israeli summer, there are political debates here in America, world economies are crashing – I turn on my TV, read my newspapers and there is no end of people talking at me – but is anyone listening?

Remember that movie title song from 40 years ago (I know I am showing my age) – but if you saw the Jon Voight, Dustin Hoffman Midnight Cowboy movie you'll remember exactly what I am thinking of – written by Fred Neil, sung by Harry Nilson – “Everybody's talking at me – I can't hear a word they're saying...” When everybody is talking at us – it is hard to hear a word they are saying.

Want to “reach out and touch someone?” Communication devices have never been as sophisticated as they are today. When I was a kid – we had one telephone for the whole family – it sat in the front hallway of our house – and I was lucky because the receiver part had a really long cord – so I could stretch it into the hall closet or a nearby bathroom for a little privacy. Today we each carry our phones in our pockets – but they are not just phones they are “smart phones” – they are Internet devices that

enable us to text, surf the web, check our email, leave a voice mail. Want to know the weather – I have an app for that. What to know when a *yahrtzeit* falls or which way is east – I have an app for that too! I love my Iphone. But, rather than being able to reach out and touch someone – I find myself too often crying out: “Can you hear me now?”

Enter any lecture hall of any university and tell me what percentage of the students are actually listening to the professor – and what percentage are, in the guise of taking notes, – are actually surfing the web, texting their friends or updating Facebook? Come to shul, on any Shabbat, and what percentage of young people are actually listening? They are too busy playing games on their smart phones and texting their friends. (Now might be a real good time to unobtrusively put your phone *back* in your pocket) We’ve been trying to make shul a phone free zone – a place to escape the reach of these omnipresent devices – good luck with that!

When I came home from school my mom would say, “Stanley called!” Primitive? Yes, but effective. Today I over hear the following exchange between two teens, “Why didn’t you call me back, I left you a voice mail?” “Oh, the other says – I don’t do voicemail – I only text.” A third, standing there, pipes in, “I don’t do text or voice mail, I use Twitter.” And on and on it goes.

As Frank Bruni wrote in a recent NY Times editorial – “You hear so much about how instantly reachable we all are, how hyper-connected...but the maddening truth is that we’ve become so accessible we’re often inaccessible, and the process of getting to any of us is more tortured and tortuous than ever.”

(Blow shofar)

Can you hear me now?

On this Rosh Hashanah day – I am using this most ancient of symbols – the shofar – to remind us that what at first appeared to be such an easy mitzvah – may in fact be the most challenging of all. 2500 years ago – we were a people who stood in silence – together in the wilderness – we just stood there, and listened to the sound of the shofar, the medium may have been primitive, but everyone understood the message. Today 2500 years later, we can reach each other in ways our parents could not have imagined but if we no longer know how to listen what good is all our communication sophistication?

Every time we lift the torah – we sing a little song, the words are actually a quote from the torah itself: *v’zot hatorah asher sam moshe, lifnei b’nei yisrael – al pi adonai b’yad moshe* – Every single time we read the torah (which is a lot) we affirm these words: “This is the torah that Moses placed before the people of Israel – it is the word of God, written by the hand of Moses.” And it does not take long to ask – why was it done *b’yad moshe*, by the agency of Moses? Why couldn’t God speak directly to the Israelites? Why did God need a middleman, Moses, to merely repeat His words to our ancestors? And Rashi in his famous commentary on the Torah, attempts to address this problem by stating: God tried the other way, and it didn’t work, *Hakol holekh u’magee’a l’oznov, v’khol Yisrael lo shomin*, -- According to Rashi, God tried speaking directly to the children of Israel – but they did not listen – so God spoke to Moses because Moses gave God his undivided attention. It seems that the Israelites were more interested in talking. Once we had God’s attention – we were more interested in speaking about *our* needs than listening to God’s – we wanted to share our own wants and desires – and poor God couldn’t get a word in edgewise. We were more interested in being heard by God than in hearing what God had to say. So Rashi, suggests, God was forced to conclude: “I’ll talk to Moses – and hopefully he will be able to convey My message to the Jews, because *he* listens!” It seems that the ability to listen is what made Moses, Moses. When everybody’s talking at you, knowing how to listen is a very special talent.

Poor God. He often appears in the Bible like a patient teacher standing before a nation of ADD Jews. A fair portion of the Bible is dedicated to God's attempt merely to get us to pay attention. Time and time again, God has to begin his speeches with the words: *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 -- for 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 Eloheyenu Adonai Ehad!* Sometimes called the watchwords of our faith, these are the first words our children learn in Hebrew School, for a Jew we recite 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 Eloheyenu Adonai Ehad!* Six words – and the first two, are intended as an attention grabber! *Shma Yisrael* – "Listen Israel!" "Hey, listen up, pay attention, I have something I want to tell you, *Haksivu, Hakshivu!*" 545 times the words "hear" or "listen" appear in the Bible. Yep, it is not easy being the God of an inattentive people. And here we sit thousands of years later – and God is still waiting for us to learn how to listen.

Blow shofar. *Shma yisrael!*

The shofar on Rosh Hashanah places this issue front and center. The prayers we recite, the scripture we read – they are filled on this holy day with stories of people reaching out to one another. And the matter of who hears whom... and who does not, is a fascinating subplot of this entire Rosh Hashanah holiday.

God calls out to Abraham in today's torah reading, and he responds: "*Hineini*. Here I am – Count me in!" God calls and Abraham listens – good for him, he gets an A+. But the same Abraham doesn't do so well in another incident that is also a part of the Torah Reading for Rosh Hashanah. When Isaac is born, Sarah is jealous and asks that her maid Hagar and the child she had bore Abraham, Ishmael, be sent away. Abraham reluctantly agrees and the reading contains the poignant description of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment into the wilderness. They wandered around, and soon run out of water and Hagar cries out - and here it is interesting to note who hears her cries and who does not. Abraham does not respond. D- (I gave him a passing grade because I had to allow for the possibility that he did not hear her cries - maybe) But God does hear, and God does respond - A+.

The God of Rosh Hashanah is depicted over and over as a God who listens, a God who responds, a God who cares. If only we could learn to listen, to respond and to care.

We thought everything would change after 9/11. That when confronted with such a profound crisis there would emerge a solidarity of spirit. Certainly after 9/11 we would become a nation that listened, responded – a nation that cared about each other. But alas – as we marked the 10th anniversary of 9/11 in many very moving and touching ways – we have to admit the transformation of American culture never materialized – not in the real and meaningful ways that we thought it would.

God called and Abraham responded. Hagar cried out and God listened. The angel demanded from Abraham to stop and Abraham heard the voice and did not offer his son as a sacrifice. But 4000 years later, we are part of a people and a culture that does not listen - enough, that does not respond - enough, that does not care - enough.

Do you think I am exaggerating this problem?

Turn on your television and although they are called “talk shows” they are more about political theater than any meaningful exchange or dialogue. Everything is reduced to left versus right, Wall Street vs. Main Street, Republican vs. Democrat, Government vs. the people. There are two teams, each with its own politicians, think tanks, special interest groups, media outfits and TV personalities. If one side proposes an idea - the other side attacks it. The coming presidential election, I fear, will reveal how truly sorry is the state we are in. Once upon a time there was such a thing as presidential debates - now it is all theater - there is no conversation - no dialogue across the divide. Once upon a time the other candidate was referred to as, “my worthy opponent” - today political campaigns are no longer for the weak of heart.

Am I the only one who finds it strange that they are called “Congressional *hearings*” but nobody seems to be listening?

And the tragedy in all this is that progress on all these major challenges on the national and international level: the deficit, unemployment, Social Security, health care – they will require compromise, from both sides, Republicans *and* Democrats, Wall Street *and* Main Street, Government *and* the people. Difficult foreign policy issues await our attention - crafting solutions to Iran, the Palestinians, the Arab Spring and the world economic crisis - all require long term strategies that demand support from all sides - but such bi-partisanship and compromise is highly unlikely in a world where no one listens.

And it is not that our leaders don’t care. They do, they care deeply, but only about themselves, their own party, their own cause, their own people. It wasn’t that Abraham didn’t care. He did. He was determined to show God how much he cared – “Look God, I’ll do whatever you say!” Until the angel said, “Stop!” “Don’t *kill* the boy!” “Avraham, Avraham!” The angel had to shout his name twice – Abraham wasn’t listening – he was too caught up in the passion of his mission.

When your ears are filled only with the passion of your own cause you can no longer hear the cries of the other and innocent children get sacrificed. Immigration is a complex challenge to the welfare of our country – but is there no room in our debate to at least listen to the cries of the immigrant? Capital Punishment is a challenging issue. But when we cheer political leaders based on the number of executions they have approved – something is wrong in the way we are passionate.

There *are* Palestinians who care about the right of Jews to live securely and peacefully on our land. One such Palestinian Gaith Al Omari spoke from this bema as part of the outstanding panel on Israel we held recently– but voices like his are rare and hard to hear these days. When Abbas spoke at the UN – he spoke only about the rights and needs of his own people. While recognizing the roots of Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land – Abbas refused to even acknowledge legitimate Jewish roots in the land. When Netanyahu spoke, he too spoke of the needs of his people – but at least he acknowledged the rights of the other to live in a land of their own. I don’t care how far left you are on the political spectrum – I don’t care how skeptical you are about the current state of Israeli politics – until you acknowledge this fundamental asymmetry – that Netanyahu, who is part of the right wing in Israel, can speak of a Palestinian State, yet Abbas, who is part of the left wing of the Palestinians finds it harder and harder to reciprocate – and yet Israel is held to be the sole obstacle to peace? Progress towards peace in the Middle East will come not when the right formula is discovered – the solutions are actually quite apparent. Peace will come when both sides are willing to listen and hear the cries of the other. And sadly, we are still a long way from that day.

“...to listen and hear the cries of the other.” “Avraham, Avraham!” the angel cried out. “Can’t you hear the cries of your son?”

We are all so busy proclaiming the righteousness of our own cause that we no longer can hear the voice of the other? Our inability to listen is wrecking havoc on our world – and on our families as well.

We turn off our TV's and put down our newspapers and shake our heads over the sad state of the outside world. But there is not a lot of listening going on inside our homes either. We shout, we scream, we protest - we demand our say - but no one seems to be listening, no one seems to care. Now couples by pass the rabbis study altogether and head straight for the attorney's office as soon as things get tough. One couple did come to my office seeking my help and guidance regarding a significant marital problem, they were contemplating divorce. I listened patiently as each shared their complaints and gripes regarding the other. I then said that what the two of you need to do is go home and argue. "Argue?! The husband protested - Rabbi have you not heard a word we have said? All we have been doing is arguing!" "No," I tried to point out, "You have not been arguing - you have been shouting at each other. And while one shouts the other one is not listening but taking a breather and preparing for his or her turn to start shouting again. To argue means to *listen* and then to respond, to *care* about what the other is saying - you haven't gotten close to an argument."

A high school class in music appreciation was asked the difference between listening and hearing. Finally a hand went up, and a youngster offered this wise definition: "Listening is wanting to hear." Listening is wanting to hear. If a marriage is going to work we have to be willing to listen. If a family is going to work we have to be willing to listen. If our world is going to work – we have to learn to listen.

Now it is difficult to have a conversation with 1500 people – and there is more than a bit of irony that I have chosen to speak about the need to listen in a sermon where I get to do all the talking. This is not the most interactive of modalities and the irony is not lost on me – but I hope my point is not lost on you. We really do have to find some time to talk – and listen to each other.

Let's use these last few minutes – and get started – I'll tell you what I think we need to talk about – you are welcome to add what ever you want to my list and then let's see if we can find the time this year to make a start – to start listening to each other, *especially* with those whom we disagree. You see, it is not enough to listen, if the only ones we are listening to are the ones we already agree with. It is easy to listen to those we agree with.

If the newspaper expresses opinions different from ours – we stop buying that newspaper. If the TV station expresses opinions we don't like –we stop listening to that TV station – our RSS feeds send us only the news we want, and even Google seems to know the kind of stuff I prefer – but if we only read and we only listen to those who reinforce what we already believe – how will we grow? How will we change? How will we learn? Where will the challenge come from?

Americans are self-segregating," said Bill Bishop author of the "The Big Sort" – a book that examines, in the words of its subtitle, "why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart." Mr. Bishop said Americans now choose "in their neighborhoods and their churches, to be around others who live like they do and think like they do – and every four years, vote like they do." Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University, reported the same thing in his book, "The Disappearing Center" – In the 1960's and 1970's, he said, big states like New York, California, Illinois and Texas were evenly split in presidential elections, making them battleground states. Now, most big states are lopsided." We have Red States and Blue States – but sadly few Purple ones.

The center used to be where the action was, because the center was where the listening took place, where ideas were exchanged, where values clashed, the center was where compromise happened and progress was made. But there is no center any more – life is lived in the extremes. Is it any wonder that Conservative Judaism is experiencing challenges? We are the center of Judaism where ideas are exchanged, where compromises happen and where progress is made. But today those on the right want to be only with others like them and those on the left only want to be with others like them – they want their shuls, like their politics – to be an echo chamber that plays back what they already believe and what they already know – and woe be the politician or the rabbi who tries to

challenge his base.

All this adds up to political and religious echo chambers, in which like-minded thinkers reinforce one another. Someone recently commented to our shul president (who dutifully passed it along to me) that they didn't like it when the rabbi talked about politics. As I inquired a little more – it became clear that it wasn't politics per se that was being challenged it was that he held different views from the rabbi – the sermons people like the best are the ones they agree with, the ones that reinforce their pre-existing notions of right and wrong. “I loved your sermon today rabbi” – why? “Well I have been saying the same thing for years now!” But the sermons that you should love most are the ones that aggravate you the most. The ones that challenge the way you think and get you to question the values you hold so dearly. But I understand that is asking a lot of you – to love me when I aggravate you. But is it too much to ask us to listen to each other?

We should vote for politicians we agree with – but we should be able to listen to those we don't agree with – we might learn something – and may even come to agree with them sometimes. Hire a rabbi you like – you would be foolish to do otherwise – but listen to him or her – even when you disagree with him or her – maybe you will learn something, maybe you will even come to agree with him. And if you are lucky – in the rabbi you have – maybe he will be listening to you – even when he disagrees with you – because he wants to learn from you. Yes, it is all so much easier when you're surrounded by like-minded others – but so much less interesting – and so much less opportunity to learn and to grow that way.

My son Ari attended a conference on “Religion in the Public Square- Judaism and the American Ethos” that was sponsored by the Tikveh Foundation. It was attended by rabbinical students from all the major denominations – there were Conservative Rabbinical Students from JTS and from the American Jewish University our West Coast Branch. There were Orthodox Students from YU and Hovavei Torah, Reform Students from HUC and Reconstructionist Students from Philadelphia. In the midst of their conversations, one of the students, whose denomination will remain nameless, began a conversation on the wisdom of allowing Muslim immigrants into America by saying, “I know you will call what I am about to say racist – but I don't care what you say and I don't care what you think of me –but I don't think America should permit Muslim immigrants. Look what is happening in Europe. Why should we welcome immigrants whose commitment to Sharia Law undermines our democratic way of life?” What ensued, my son tells me, was a fascinating debate on the nature of democracy. But then Ari challenged this student: “Why did you begin by saying, ‘I don't care what you say and I don't care what you think of me?’ Isn't the whole point of this conference that we are supposed to care what others say and think – that we have come to share ideas and learn different ways of looking at the world?” But the truth is too many of us are no longer interested in sharing and caring and learning and growing.

Speaking our minds is easy. Opening our minds is hard – but that is exactly what the shofar calls on each and every one of us to do today.

“*Avraham, Avraham*” And finally at that moment, knife raised, son bound, finally, he learned to listen. And that is when he became *Avraham Avinu* – Abraham our father. And Rashi was right. *Moshe* became *Moshe Rabeinu*, Moses our teacher, not because he knew how to talk, but because he knew how to listen. One of the few things we know about Moshe the person was that he could barely speak. He was, *kaved peh*, usually translated as a stutterer. So awkward was he that we know he took his brother Aaron along to do the talking for him when he presented himself before Pharaoh. So 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 comes in the listening. And so does the true gift of friendship and the true gift of love -- it comes in the listening,

in the ability to listen, in the willingness to listen. And so it is with the gift of prayer.

Look down in your lap. There is a *Mahzor* – a High Holy Day Prayer Book. Look at it – it is filled with 459 pages of prayers. We will recite all of those 459 pages of prayer over the two days of Rosh Hashanah and the one night and one day of Yom Kippur. That, my friends, is a lot of praying. And the truth is these pages don't represent a fraction of the prayers that will be offered here during that time. For the magnificence of these prayers is measured in the way they inspire us to add our own heartfelt pleas – the ones that come from the depths of our hearts. Like Isaac so long ago—we feel the blade raised over our head, and we cry out in pain and in desperation and we hope there is someone listening.

A man is diagnosed with cancer and he comes here today to pray for life – he does not want to die, not yet – will his prayer be heard?

A woman has been told she is in the early stages of Alzheimer's and she comes here today with fear in her heart – as one woman wrote – “I can fight cancer, but how do I fight Alzheimer's when I know there will be no me left to do battle?” Will her prayer be heard?

A woman writes to me and says, “I would like to enroll my child in your religious school but I am gay and live with a gay partner – will our family be welcome in your shul? We would like to belong – is there a place for us with you?”

A child prays for her mother's recovery; a woman sits here today for the first time in 60 years alone, mourning the death of her husband and prays for the strength to live without him; a young person agonizes over his inability to find someone to love and worries he will live life alone; a young couple so desperately want to have a child, but are having difficulty conceiving – they pray today for help—will their prayers be heard?

This book says yes. This book is based on a very simple faith proposition that for 4000 years has guided our people. We believe in a God who is *shomaya tefilah* – a God who listens and hears our cries.

So come, let us pray. Let us cry with pain and shout for joy, let us use these days to sing and dance argue and wrestle contemplate and complain – and most importantly, to listen

For we can only expect God to listen to us – if we are willing to open our hearts to God

We can only expect others to listen to us – if we are willing to open our hearts and listen to them.

Shma Yisrael – Listen! O' Israel! Now more than ever, we must learn to listen.

(Blow shofar.)