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Listen! (RH1 5778)

Wow, as we look outward into this world of ours, so many things have gone on this last year that it is challenging to know where to begin or what to focus on. I'm troubled by the many hot spots around the globe where wars are taking place and where violence is perpetrated against specific groups that are ethnically, religiously or socially different from the majority. I'm upset by the increase of biased and hateful rhetoric in general and the rise in anti-Semitism in particular here in America as well as abroad. Conceptually, I view politics as the system that leads to governing, but lately it has become yet another format for hostile conflicts. Suddenly, someone with different political views is bad or evil. I have no interest in talking about partisan politics on the High Holy Days, we have bigger fish to fry on these most sacred of days. And while conflict has been the rule of the day from Washington DC to Jerusalem, many of the headlines have been coming from Mother Nature who has made her presence known – wildfires out west, Hurricanes Harvey and Irma in Texas and Florida; more Hurricanes devastating the Caribbean islands, earthquake in Mexico, a cyclone in Zimbabwe, an avalanche in Afghanistan, a monsoon in Sri Lanka, mudslide in Sierra Leone; flooding and landslides throughout South Asia affecting an estimated 41 million people, specifically in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. How anyone can think that climate change isn't a scientific fact is beyond me, but I digress.

Rosh Hashanah to the classical rabbis was Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, in their writings we are judged by God for the year that has transpired. For those who no longer ascribe to that theology, today rabbis also talk about our judging ourselves. Either way, the question we need to ask ourselves today is how can I be a better person? And is there something I can do to make the world better a better place? As I discussed the holidays with my colleagues, it became clear to me that one area of concern where most of us can improve is in listening. If I can be a better listener, then I can be a better friend, colleague, family member; I can improve myself. And if I listen to those with whom I disagree, then I can help make the world a better place too by reducing the tension; and the level of rhetoric by listening rather than just stating my position louder in opposition. Listening is not easy, it takes effort, but it is worth doing.

A story is told of a little girl who comes home from Hebrew school, eager to show her mother a drawing.

Her mother is washing dishes.

"Mommy, guess what?" she squeals, waving the drawing.

Without looking up, her mother responds, "What?"

"Guess what?" repeats the little girl.

Again the mother asks, "What?"

"Mommy, you're not listening."

Still not shifting her focus from the dishes, she says, "Sweetie, yes, I am,"

"But Mommy, you're not listening with your eyes."

To truly listen, you need to focus, to pay attention. That anecdote reminded me of a line from "The Rainbow" song I used to sing at camp when I was kid, "Listen with your eyes! Listen with your eyes and sing everything you see! You can sing a rainbow, sing a rainbow, sing along with me..."

Listening is also an important part of Rosh Hashanah! The most unique mitzvah of this holiday is hearing the blowing of the shofar. It isn't a mitzvah to blow the shofar; the mitzvah is in hearing the sound of the shofar. The bracha that we will hear recited by the Shofar blower is *Lishmo'ah kol shofar*, "to hear the sound of the shofar." The shofar blast should call to us; I once read a beautiful analogy that the sound of the shofar is like the whistle of the lifeguard at the ocean. When you get too far out, the lifeguard blows on the whistle to get your attention and bring you back in to safety. So too during the year we stray from God, from Torah and mitzvot, from the Jewish people; and when we hear the sound of the shofar it can pierce our souls and call us back to where we belong.

There is also special meaning that can be attached to each of the sounds we will sound on the shofar. The Tekiah, the basic blast, is the sound that wakes us up from our spiritual slumber; Shevarim means broken and it is the sound of a broken heart, it is the wail of overwhelming issues in our lives; the Teruah is a short staccato sound; I have read that it can be the sound of uncontrolled weeping or a reminder that progress is made one small step at a time. And finally there is the Tekiah Gedolah, the long sustained blast, which can represent stability and hope.

A shofar can be made from the horn of any kosher animal. It was the Ashkenazic rabbis who liked using a ram's horn to remind God that we are the descendents of Abraham who was

willing to sacrifice his son, but instead offered up a ram on the alter that was stuck in the thicket by its horns. Conversely, they tell us not to use the horn of a bull; lest it remind God of the Golden Calf episode, since the goal is to have God judge us mercifully we want God to be in a forgiving mood while judging. The shofar Howie sounds today is a ram's horn, the synagogue shofar that Rick will use tomorrow is a Yemenite Kudu horn.

Let's for a moment consider the central role listening plays in our liturgy. Twice daily we are to recite the words of the Shema – Hear, O Israel; Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. This verse from the Torah comes closer to being a core statement of faith than anything else in Judaism. It is amongst the first prayers we teach to children, many people say it nightly before going to sleep and traditionally, it is the last prayer we recite before we die. You can't get much more basic in terms of significance.

On Rosh Hashanah when we come to the end of the service, we open the Ark, our *Aron HaKodesh*, one more time for the Piyut *Hayom* – which means Today! We ask God to strengthen us, to bless us and inscribe us for a good year and then it asks, *tishma shavatateinu*, hear our plea! We want to be heard, so shouldn't it be incumbent upon us to listen as well?

When I was in graduate school for Counseling they talked to us about developing the skill of active listening. Most of the time we listen passively, someone talks, we sit back and listen. Sometimes we are focused on what they are saying, but other times we are thinking about what we want to say in reply or worse something else entirely. When one engages in active listening, your entire focus is on listening and then you reflect back what you've heard so that the speaker knows that their message has gotten across and if it turns out to be off target, then they can try again to communicate what it is that they want to convey. It can take more time and effort, but it can also be worth it; it pays to listen well.

Active listening is about being present in the moment. A story is told about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel when he learned that the sister of a friend had died. He was with a student and Heschel announced that they had to drive to Boston to see the friend. So they got in the car and drove the hour to Boston. Rabbi Heschel walked in and hugged his friend; he sat next to him for the next hour listening to him talk. Rabbi Heschel did not utter one word. He didn't ask how old was she? How did she die? He sat in silence and listened for an hour and when his friend finished; he got up, hugged him again and left.

On the ride back the student asked, “Did you know her well?” Rabbi Heschel replied, “I’d never met her.” The student asked why they had driving an hour just so he could sit on the couch with him without asking or saying anything? Heschel replied, “because that is what he needed.” Listening is about being present for the other person, often it isn’t about what you say, but about the gift of sharing your essence.

It can be even more challenging to listen to someone with whom we disagree. Moses is praised as being very humble. Being humble means accepting that we may not be right all the time, that someone else might just have a point. So when we argue with someone or debate with them, we have to be willing to admit that they might be right. Only then can we truly hear them. When we know, we have the answer; we close ourselves off to other possibilities.

This year we started a joint Hebrew High with Temple Beth Tikvah, Rabbi Meeka Simerly and I teach the 10th grade Confirmation class. At our first session together, I said to them that there is nothing wrong with our disagreeing with each other, but that it has to be done respectfully and we have to be open to the perspective of the other. And then I taught them a text from the Talmud. Rabbi Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The law is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘The law is in agreement with our views’. Then a *Bat Kol*, a heavenly voice, announced, “Both these and these are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of School of Hillel’.

The Talmud then asks, ‘Since both are the words of the living God’ what was it that entitled School of Hillel to have the law fixed in agreement with their rulings? And the answer given is, ‘Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of School of Shammai and were even so humble as to mention the words of School of Shammai before their own words.’ (BT Eruvin 13b)

It is easy to surround yourself with views with which you agree. I found it so troubling when it was reported that Facebook’s algorithm to show you what they think you want to see on your page feed that you never see opposing points of view, to conservatives they only show conservative propaganda and to progressives they only show progressive propaganda. How can we learn and grow if we are never challenged? I’m often unhappy with the news coverage in the NY Times, but I was impressed when they started to have a section, at least online, called “Partisan writing you shouldn’t miss” with

important articles from across the political spectrum, the idea being that you could expose yourself to differing points of view.

There are some opposing viewpoints that I'm prepared to entertain, but others that I have no interest in. We have heard some rather unsavory things this year. I was mortified and appalled by things that were said in Charlottesville. I find hate speech to be hurtful and harmful and as far as I'm concerned it has no place in civil discourse. However, I recognize that we live in a country that values freedom of expression, even when vile and disgusting things are being said. I respect your right to disagree with everything I say, but to truly do so; you have to listen to what it is that I have to say.

It is important to remember that words can hurt or heal; it is up to us to use them wisely. On Yom Kippur we will recite the *Al Chet*, the long confessional over and over again. Most of the things on the list are verbal offenses, words make a difference. If we want people to listen to us, then we have to be mindful regarding what we chose to say.

As Jews we believe that it is our God given right to argue about anything and everything. Walk into a traditional yeshiva and you will find pairs of students arguing with one another over the meaning of a sacred text, it is our way of learning together. We are a people who love to argue, who have elevated it to an art form. But in the give and take of traditional Jewish study, respect is given to one another and to the text under consideration. What we need today in America, perhaps even here in this room, is civil discourse. We do not need to agree with one another, but we do need to respect each other and we do need to listen to one another.

In a text taken from rabbinic literature of the 9th Century which is a comment on a verse in the Torah, Exodus 23:5, which says, "When you see the donkey of your enemy's ox lying under its burden and would refrain from helping it up, you must nevertheless help him get it up." We find:

Rabbi Alexandroni said: Two donkey drivers who hated each other were traveling along the same road. The donkey of one of them fell down. The other saw it as he passed by and said the verse from the Torah to himself. What did he do? He returned and helped him load his donkey. He began to speak with him: 'put a little bit here; 'lift it from there. By the time he (finally) loaded it with him, they made peace with one another. The other began to say to (himself) "I thought he was my enemy. See how he had compassion on me and my donkey in distress?" From this they went to a road side inn; they ate and drank together and became friends with one another.

Often we can find common ground with someone we think of as an enemy if we can find something to do together, some project that unites us. When we talk with someone and listen to them, we begin to understand them and suddenly we discover compassion. Often we hate what we fear and often we fear what we don't understand. It is so important to try and take the time to listen to others, to try and understand them and what they are saying.

It is my hope that in the New Year that now begins we can try harder to listen to one another. That when it comes to interacting with another human being that we can stop our multitasking long enough to give them our complete and undivided attention; that we can focus upon their words and their meaning. If we can manage to do that, then we can make our relationships stronger and perhaps turn an opponent into a friend. I'd like to finish with a prayer that I've seen various ascribed to Rabbi Jack Reimer and to Rabbi Harold Kushner, perhaps they wrote it together.

Judaism begins with the commandment: Hear, O Israel!

But what does it really mean to hear?

The person who attends a concert with a mind on business,

Hears-but does not really hear.

The person who walks amid the songs of the birds

And thinks only of what will be served for dinner, hears - but does not really hear.

The one who listens to the words of a friend, or spouse, or child, and does not catch the note of urgency: "Notice me, help me, care about me," hears - but does not really hear.

The person who listens to the news and thinks only of how it will affect business, Hears - but does not really hear.

The person who stifles the sound of conscience and thinks "I have done enough already,"

Hears - but does not really hear.

The person who hears the hazzan pray and does not feel the call to join in prayer, Hears - but does not really hear.

The person who listens to the rabbi's sermon and thinks that someone else is being addressed, Hears - but does not really hear

On this Rosh Hashanah, 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 God.

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 God, and may we hear them too.

Wishing you a Shanah Tovah – a Good Year!

Listen, may it be a very good year for us all – ALUASA!!

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