

To Listen & To Love: *Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779*

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Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year.

I love this night, when our extended Community Synagogue family comes back together again after scattering for the summer. And what a milestone year 5779 promises to be for US—in just a few weeks, we'll return to our home at 200 Forest Avenue!

The sanctuary, social hall, and rest of the new building look stunning, thanks to the tireless efforts of all of you who gave so generously of your time and resources. Just yesterday, I took a peek in, and they had rolled out the sanctuary carpet. Any day now, the ark where our will be fitted with its giant wooden doors, and on 30th we'll march our Torah scrolls back home.

But to be in THIS space, tonight—that's not so shabby, either.

Being a mom and a rabbi means that you sometimes get a little behind on pop culture, so I only recently discovered the award-winning Amazon series *Mozart in the Jungle*. The show goes behind the curtains of a New York symphony, an eclectic cast of characters led by a maverick new maestro. After about thirty seconds of watching the pilot episode while exercising one night, I nearly fell off the treadmill at the realization that it was filmed *right here*, in the Performing Arts Center concert hall. I delighted in the secret knowledge of where each scene was filmed—backstage, in the organ room, or when the orchestra rehearses, right here where I'm standing. If you've never seen *Mozart in the Jungle* but have been *davening* here for years, I know you'll get a similar thrill seeing our spiritual “home away from home” on the big screen!

So here we are. And while the bright lights and microphones up here sometimes trick us into thinking of these High Holidays services as musical theater, tonight and tomorrow aren't

just performances. This is the authentic drama of a real moment in time, the birthday of the world on which we are invited to recreate ourselves, to begin a New Year with a clean slate.

However, as my teacher Rabbi Larry Hoffman writes, we still need a ritual script to help us transform ordinary hours in sacred time. For most other holidays, the Torah tells us exactly what to do. On Passover we eat matzah and recount the story of the Exodus. On Sukkot we eat in makeshift huts, shake the lulav and etrog. Chanukah, a post-biblical holiday, gets its stage directions from the Talmud: eight nights of candle-lighting to recall the Temple's rededication.

But what are we commanded to do on Rosh Hashanah? Dip apples in honey? Eat round challah? These are yummy customs, but neither are mentioned in the Bible or Talmud. Even the name *Rosh Hashanah* ("head of the year") was a late addition by the rabbis, for the Book of Numbers (29:1) proclaims this simply *Yom Teruah*, a day of "blasting" or "shouting."

The shout of course is the blast of the *shofar* or ram's horn, our people's first instrument and the original megaphone. Each year on this day, the shofar's clarion call simultaneously transports us back in time AND awakens us to the present moment of a New Year and all its opportunities.

Unlike most other holidays which demand that each of us perform individual rituals, the rabbis' expectation was *not* that every one of us physically blow the shofar. (Though, I will say, it's a LOT of fun, and I'm happy to let anyone who wants a go at it to try mine!) The central mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is actually not to *blow* the shofar, but rather to *hear* the shofar. In other words, the fundamental ritual of the High Holy Days is to stop and listen.

A quick pop quiz: What is the cornerstone of Jewish liturgy, the oldest fixed prayer in our *siddur*? Yes! The *Shema*, central creed of our people, the last words my husband and I sing to

our daughters each night at bedtime, those we are to recite each morning and also, traditionally the final words we are to say (or have said for us) when we are about to die.

“*Shema*- Listen!” Moses entreats the Israelites in his farewell speech. In fact, he says the word *shema* 92 times in Deuteronomy alone. As he prepares to send the Israelites into the Promised Land without him, Moses makes clear that listening will be the key to sustaining an ongoing relationship with God and the foundation for building a kind and just society there.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes how counter-cultural this emphasis on listening was in antiquity.¹ Ancient Greece was all about spectacle and performance—sculpture, architecture, the Olympics. Things to take in with your eyes, a “visual culture.” The other great influence of Western Civilization, ancient Israel, offered a radical alternative, rejecting the eye in favor of the ear. If you want to see the Greek God Hermes, there he is, in marble, with wings on his feet! But the God of Israel not only can’t be carved in stone but can’t be seen at all.

Who was closer to God than *Moshe Rabbeinu*? But even the closest Moses got to God was a shadow passing him in a cleft of stone.² At the foot of Mount Sinai, our ancestors first encountered God through a Revelation of sound. That sound is described as echoing thunder, or audible silence, or in one *midrash*, God’s voice translated simultaneously into 70 different languages, so that every person on earth might understand the words of the 10 Commandments.³

For the rabbis, too, who shaped the Judaism that we know today, to learn was to listen. In the Talmud, every new excerpt of Mishnah begins, “*Ta Shema*- come and hear!” Long before the printing press or even scribes, our sacred scriptures were passed down orally, in spoken word and soul-stirring music, each generation *hearing* them from the one before.

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Ekev* 5776.

² Exodus Chapter 33.

³ Midrash Exodus Rabbah, 5:9.

Listening, done well, leads to love. We recite the *Shema* followed immediately by *V'ahavta* (“And you shall love”). Rabbi Rami Shapiro offers a beautiful interpretation of these words: “Hear. Listen. Become so still that the chatter of my own mind no longer blocks out the Voice of God whispering in my own heart. [...] And then love. Love myself. Love others. Love those who love me and love those who do not. [...] Just love. [...] Love God. God above all. God within all. God as all.”⁴

Listen and love, that is the core of Jewish theology when you really drill down. So we begin our New Year with a spiritual hearing check—that shofar blast—because it is through listening that we strengthen connections with one another and with God. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wisely advises, “If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.” But here’s the rub: listening is actually one of the hardest things to do. And most of the time we are not very good at it.

How often are you in conversation with another person, a colleague or friend or spouse, and you’re only half-listening to them? “Sorry, I was thinking of something else. Sorry, an alert just popped up on my phone. Sorry, I was thinking of how *I* was going to respond to you and missed what you actually said in the first place.”

Just the other day I was driving home with my six-year-old in the backseat. Excited about the upcoming start of first grade, she was naming all the friends she couldn’t wait to see again, chattering about the lemurs we’d just visited at the Bronx Zoo, hatching a plan to dig for worms in the park. Somewhere between the lemurs and the worms, my mind wandered.

⁴ Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro, “To Listen and To Love: The Way of Jewish Wisdom.”

“Mommy. “MOMMY! You’re not LISTENING to me.” “Sorry, Miriam. What were you saying?” Long pause. Then: “Mommy, I love you and I’m proud of you.” Of course, I completely melted at these words, a mantra she learned from my super-dad husband, who says them to her all the time.

I had tuned out. When I tuned back in, there love was, waiting for me. I nearly missed that moment. How many precious moments are lost to us because we simply are not listening?

Dan Allendar, founder of the Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, explains some of what makes listening so hard: “Listening requires a heart that is humble enough to move slowly through the cadence of another’s speech. It requires the courage to risk asking and then the even greater risk of waiting [...] Listening is the *holy work* of attuning one’s soul to the accumulation of meaning that comes only to those who tend to speech like a midwife.”⁵

To be listened to is to know that someone else takes us seriously, cares about us, respects us. I first learned this in rabbinical school during a 10-week unit of CPE (short for *Clinical Pastoral Education*) at what was Beth Israel Medical Center. I remember vividly my very first afternoon at the chemo infusion unit in Union Square. I was so nervous to engage total strangers in such a vulnerable space. I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to talk with me.

That Friday I anxiously approached my very first patients, offering to sit and chat. An older gentleman politely declined: “No thanks, sweetie. Rather just close my eyes awhile.” The woman in the seat next to him waved me over, but only to say, “Would you mind untangling my IV?” Once I’d done it, she turned back to the TV. I was feeling discouraged.

Just then, another woman gestured wildly at me from across the room. I hurried over—she was waving so urgently I assumed she needed medical attention. “Sorry, I’m not one of the

⁵ Dan B. Allendar, in the foreword of Keith Anderson’s *A Spirituality of Listening: Living What We Hear*.

nurses,” I said. “I’ll go get you someone.” She shot me a funny look and said, “I know you’re not a nurse. You’re a chaplain, right?” I nodded sheepishly, still getting used to the title. “So *you’re* a someone. Would you sit with me?”

I pulled up a stool, armed only with the simplest question: “How are you feeling today?” Well, those were almost the only five words I spoke for the next half hour. She was so eager for an empathic ear. Chemo was the prescribed treatment for her physical ailments, but her spiritual healing came from having another person look her in the eyes and say with sincerity, “*Tell me more.*” Really listening, when we get it right, is one of the greatest gifts we can give to another person, and often to ourselves as well.

That long summer, I would marvel at how physically depleted I felt at the end of a day mostly spent sitting in cushy hospital chairs listening to other people’s stories. To their pain and hopes and fears and memories. But it makes sense. Listening attentively to another person is hard and holy work. That’s why like any other spiritual discipline—prayer, meditation, yoga—listening takes practice.

Rabbi Dov Ber, the second Rebbe of the Chabad Lubavitch Hasidic movement, was once asked why counseling his community so exhausted him. He explained that when a hassid speaks to him, he must first shed his own rabbinic garments and don the hassid’s clothes in order to LISTEN well. Then, when he considers the problem, he must remove the hassid’s clothes and put back on his own garments in order to UNDERSTAND well. Finally, when he shares his advice, he must once again strip off his own garments and wear the hassid’s clothes instead in order to RESPOND well. “It is no wonder I am exhausted,” said the rabbi, “since in a single exchange of words I have to change all my clothes three times!”⁶

⁶ As told by Rabbi Lazer Gurkow: <https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Judaism/Active-listening-351878>

When we listen to another, their story becomes a part of our own and we are inextricably linked. Listening attentively to another person also requires sacrifice, a relinquishing of our own agenda and desired outcomes. It demands compassion, self-restraint and *tzimtzum*, a contraction of the space that we take up in the world, to make more room for someone else.

Over the past year at our Shabbat morning *minyan*, a place where thoughtful listening is modeled weekly by so many of you, we've frequently lamented the state of public discourse in this country. Whether on the world stage or on our private Facebook pages, too many of us have stopped listening to one another, especially those with whom we disagree. It is so hard for us to hear an opposing view that we simply change the channel or unfriend the person who posted.

Last weekend, I was deeply moved by Senator John McCain's funeral. Having lost my own father to a brain tumor nearly three years ago, I wept with his daughter, Meghan, admiring her courage and poise in eulogizing her dad in front of the world. I was also especially struck by President Obama's remarks. He began with an admission of having been quite surprised when McCain called him a few weeks ago to ask, on his deathbed, "Would you speak at my funeral?"

These men of such different politics, backgrounds, and dispositions. These men who had seemingly been enemies for decades. Can you imagine inviting the very man who beat you out for the Presidency, who had frustrated such a burning ambition, to speak at your own funeral? But McCain and Obama hadn't merely been rivals. They had learned to listen to each other and they were both the better for it. McCain wanted to make a point to the nation about how we, the larger nation, must learn again to listen too.

There are so many men, women, and children in our world though, whom we either cannot or choose not to hear but who desperately cry out. We need to do a better job of listening to marginalized voices in our communities, those who have been long shouting but are not heard.

This has been the year, for instance, of a steady drumbeat of #MeToo revelations. So many women in particular, are finally speaking up about having been shut down, enduring years of humiliation in silence. Their painful confessions echo the shofar calling us: “Wake up! Open your ears. I am another human being, standing right in front of you, sharing my urgent truth.”

This is the brilliance of the *Shema*’s simple command: “You know how to listen. So do it!” the prayer reminds us daily. As the old adage goes, God created us with only one mouth, but two ears, so that we may listen twice as much as we speak. Listening is how every meaningful interaction in life begins, but it is hard. The courage to listen is also the first step that makes all growth, all change possible, for each of us individually and as a community.

I will be speaking more about this at Kol Nidre, but our challenge as a congregation this season is how to now turn our newly renovated house of worship into a true spiritual home. As Rabbi Shai Held recently reminded me, who we are “is not a fixed thing.” In fact, in Hebrew there is no present tense form of the verb “to be” at all—only past and future. Just as the New Year urges us all to reconsider who we want to be in the New Year, this homecoming to our new synagogue building invites us to reflect on who we might yet become together.

Over the course of the coming months, I hope to heed the call of the *shema* and the shofar by helping organize a congregational listening campaign. The goal is to bring together a series of small focus groups to hear about your hopes and dreams for this next stage of Community Synagogue of Rye. Rather than just assume we know what people truly want, it’s time again for our clergy, staff, and lay leadership to ask. And then to listen. I hope you’ll accept the invitation to join us in one of these conversations.

Just prior to beginning this sermon, we stood before the open ark and sang out, “*Avinu Malkeinu* — hear our prayers! Have mercy on us, answer us.” We will implore God with these

words several more times tomorrow and throughout Yom Kippur. But why should we expect God to listen to us, if we aren't listening to our spouse, our children, our colleagues?

Judaism teaches that each of us is created “in the image of God,” which means our human relationships are also ongoing preparation for a relationship with the Divine. In the Book of Kings,⁷ the prophet Elijah flees to the wilderness and winds up back at Mt. Sinai where Moses had heard God's voice generations earlier. Standing at an entrance to a cave, Elijah first sees a whirlwind shattering rocks around him, but he realizes that God is not in the whirlwind. Next the mountain begins to tremble in a violent earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. Then he sees a fire burst forth. Yet God is not in the fire. Finally, Elijah hears a *kol demama daka* – a “still small voice.” That is the voice of God, the prophet tells us.

Do we, as contemporary Jews, still listen for God in the world? If a friend comes to us and says, “God called me this morning,” we probably look at them askance. Maybe that's because we imagine God's voice to be as strong or severe as an earthquake. A whirlwind tearing through our life. But what if the voice we should be listening for is a merely a whisper?

This summer I had the fortune to spend one August evening at Tanglewood in the Berkshires. Staring up at the stars and listening to the crickets harmonize with a chamber quartet making their North American debut, I felt as in touch as I ever have with the oneness of the universe that the *Shema* speaks of. But the reality is that life is not all mountain-top moments. Our challenge is to hear God even within the clamor and clutter of our daily existence.

My favorite scene so far from *Mozart in the Jungle* opens with the kooky conductor, Rodrigo, walking down a crowded Manhattan street with Hailey, his assistant and an aspiring oboist. Suddenly Rodrigo stops, turns to her and says, “Listen!” Hailey leans in, scrunches up

⁷ See 1 Kings Chapter 19.

her face, trying to join him in what is clearly a moment of epiphany for him. “What are we listening to?” Hailey eventually asks. Because all she hears is traffic—honking taxis, idling buses, the subway rumbling underfoot. “The music!” Rodrigo exclaims with glee. The audience is slowly brought into the maestro’s head, and we too begin to hear the sounds of instruments emerge, the street racket blending into the same symphony I heard in the Berkshires.

The shofar’s call to us on Rosh Hashanah is not just to fill up another year with lots of noise, but to be quiet and still, open-eared and open-hearted. To listen past and through the cacophony of man-made sounds that usually surround us. When we do, we may hear God’s whispers even in unexpected places. We will also be able to better hear our own aspirations.

The shofar calls to us to hear our fellow human beings, to tune in to God, but also to listen deep inside ourselves. As Parker Palmer writes, “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.” It is that inner voice of our souls, often barely audible, that might hold the key to our next big decision or desired life change, that can guide us in our *Teshuvah*- our turning and returning this year. As Judith’s current Disney heroine, Moana, sings at the end of the film: “The call isn’t out there at all; it’s inside me.”

Palmer warns us, though: “The soul is like a wild animal—tough resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of the tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.” May these Days of Awe be for all of us such a walk in the woods. May we listen for the still small voice of God, of our neighbors, of our soul. And may our listening lead us to love and help us become the people we want to be in this New Year.