

From the Rabbi's Desk

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D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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What Does It Take to be a Listener?

With appreciation to my friend and colleague Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin for allowing me to use some of her beautiful conceptualizations.



"My wife said I don't listen to her.
At least I think that's what she said."

A concerned husband went to a doctor to talk about his wife. He says to the doctor, "Doctor, I think my wife is deaf because she never hears me the first time and always asks me to repeat things." "Well," the doctor replied, "go home and tonight stand about 15 feet from her and say something to her. If she doesn't reply move about 5 feet closer and say it again. Keep doing this so that we'll get an idea about the severity of her deafness". Sure enough, the husband goes home and does exactly as instructed. He starts off about 15 feet from his wife in the kitchen as she is chopping some vegetables and says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" He hears no response. He moves about 5 feet closer and asks again. No reply. He moves 5 feet closer. Still no reply. He gets fed up and moves right behind her, about an inch away, and asks again, "Honey, what's for dinner?" She replies, "For the fourth time, vegetable stew!"

While there are many jokes on hearing loss, I am not sure I find them funny anymore. As a 50th birthday gift, my doctor sent me to have my first colonoscopy, which came

out OK and thank God I don't remember too much about it. In addition, he sent me to the ENT, who determined that I have a slight hearing loss.

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Mommy, can you hear me?

Mamá, me escuchás? Me escuchás? Me escuchás?

My mother lost her hearing a few years ago and while hearing aids have helped her, and I suppose they still help somehow, I am afraid her deafness worsens every day. Hearing loss is hereditary in my mother's case, so I guess one day my children will be joking about their father's hearing loss.

To my mother's credit, she developed alternative skills, like lip-reading or basic computer skills, which allow her to look for what I type when I Skype with her every day.

While our ability to hear is something most of us are born with and we may lose it over time, or even recover it with the help of technology, our ability to listen is something we must all work on. Our hearing may be flawless, but our ability to listen critically is diminished. On the contrary, we may be totally deaf and be a compassionate listener.

What does it take to be a listener?

This morning we read in the Torah:

"And Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.' The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his" (Genesis 21:9-12).

In contrast to mythological stories, Biblical stories are mundane ones; and biblical heroes – Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael- not much different than us. If you remove the talking God from the Biblical stories, you end up with fathers, mothers, spouses and children who love as we love, are jealous and determined as we are, and feel anguish and pain as we do.

"Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

The Sages see in Sarah's words prophetic wisdom. I am far from being a Sage, but I see pain, jealousy and conceit. Sarah is the one who suggested the "Hagar deal" to

Abraham, but now, when she has a son of her own, she explodes, and decades of pain, suffering, loneliness and dejection burst out.

"The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his."

Sarah is distressed, Abraham too is distressed, and very soon Hagar and Ishmael will be distressed as well.

Abraham is distressed because although he loves Isaac, he loves Ishmael as well.

"But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice...' (Genesis 21: 12)

Modern translations read "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says" and so *"Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away" (Genesis 21:14).*

Abraham is an obedient man of action. God says and he obeys.

In his haste, however, he misses the point. Abraham's hearing might be flawless, but he is not a good listener. God tells him to listen to Sarah's voice and he translates God's words as most modern commentators do: "I must act, I must do what Sarah tells me, I must solve a problem, and I must do it now!" In his haste, Abraham jumps immediately to action, causing repercussions which reverberate until this very day.

During my tenure as the rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue, in Roanoke VA, I became very close to one of the presidents of the shul, who every time we met he said to me: "Rabbi Kogan, what problem can I solve for you today?" And indeed, he was great at solving problems. The issue, however, is that not always did I have a problem that needed to be solved. Sometimes, all I needed was a friend who could just listen to me.

Men, who are from Mars, as opposed to women, who are from Venus, are more prompt to action and problem solving, and Abraham, who besides being one of our Patriarchs was also a man; he was good at dealing with challenges, but not a great listener.

What would it take to actually listen to Sarah's voice?

First and foremost, it would take time. Listening takes time. To listen to Sarah's pain, her anguish, her frustration, it would take Abraham, the man of action, to stop acting, to stop doing, to do nothing but listen to her voice..

When we blow the shofar, the bracha, the blessing that is recited is

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר
קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְשִׁמּוֹעַ קוֹל שׁוֹפָר.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, who makes us holy with mitzvot and gives us the mitzvah of listening to the sound of the shofar.

"The piercing sound of the shofar forces us to stop and listen. It is hard to ignore a shofar blast.

We don't need to be able to see it in order to listen to the shofar. In fact, a shofar is nothing special to look at. Its sound is plain, raw. It is supposed to be clear, simple and sharp. We are not encouraged to adorn the shofar and make it beautiful, like we are with so many other commandments, such as our Sukkahs or our Shabbat tables. The shofar reaches our ears like an alarm clock following a long slumber. It is an alarm clock where we can't press snooze on and just turn over and go back to sleep.

Now, depending on our hearing loss, we may all hear the same sounds, the same blasts. The challenge however is to learn how to listen...¹

Some people spend their lives doing very little and therefore they may need a call that will move them to action. Some of us spend our time doing nonstop and therefore we need a call that will move us, at least for a little while, to inaction, that will help us to become better listeners.

How difficult and yet how vital is to learn how to listen...

We pray in the Unetaneh Tokef:



The great Shofar is sounded, and yet a still small voice is heard.

The noise of our own talking, of our own doing, of our own guessing what the other wishes to tell us, prevents us from listening to the small still voice.

¹ From Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin. Rosh Hashanah 1st Day. 5777.

"Yes, Sarah famously said 'cast out the slave woman and her son.' But Abraham and Sarah were a longtime married couple. They knew how to read each other by now. Was Sarah angry? Yes. Was Sarah jealous? Probably. Did Sarah want the spotlight on her son and was she concerned that something might happen to Isaac, thereby making Ishmael an heir? Possibly.

What if this had been the scenario? After God told Abraham to listen to his wife's voice, they went for an evening stroll under the stars, away from their cattle and tents, they sat down and shared a beverage and Sarah cried on her husband's shoulder about how unhappy she was. What if Abraham sat next to his distressed wife, actively listening, stroking her silver hair and then the two of them came to a compromise? Maybe Hagar and Ishmael moved to the other side of the camp? Or to a neighboring village, with livestock and a biweekly conjugal visit? "²

Abraham heard Sarah, but he did not take the time to listen and to process Sarah's words properly, and Abraham's story is our story as well; it is the story of my life. Paraphrasing Yoda: A good talker I can be, but a good listener...this is a different story as Silvia and my children will probably tell you. My hearing is many times selective, partial, unfinished. I hear what I wish to hear, and I am deaf to what I wish to ignore.



When we listen to another person's voice, when we take the time to listen with kindness and compassion, we can often hear the other person's excitement and enthusiasm, or their pain and suffering.

² Ibid.

"I don't have to tell you that our world and our country desperately need more listening. Our communities and families need to quiet down and find new ways to connect.

We need moments.

We need to slow down.

We need clear spaces to listen to each other and listen to ourselves.

We need to make room to hear another voice speak.

The message of the shofar is clear. During these coming days, the biggest gift we can give ourselves and to each other is to take time to listen.

When we conclude our services this morning, and tomorrow, the Ark will open one more time and our voices will join together as we sing Hayom. In this acrostic poem, there are eight requests that we ask from God. The penultimate request is Hayom Tishma Shavateinu! We ask God to listen to our plea.

If, after a morning of personal and communal conversation with God, we can conclude by asking God to listen to us and to our plea, then all the more so, shouldn't we be striving to listen to one another?

In the hubbub of 21st century life we seem to have lost our ability to listen. We can, however, rebalance our senses and recover this essential human faculty by listening to the sound of the shofar and by drawing wisdom from the sacred narratives of our people. "³

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.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Listen! by Jack Riemer and Harold Kushner

May all of us and our loved ones be blessed with a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year. Amen.