

The Art of Listening in an Age of Tin Ears

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The Jewish Center

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A colleague of mine was once serving as the rabbi of a community in Canada. Being the rabbi of the largest Orthodox shul in the city made him the de facto spokesman for Jewish affairs. A few months after assuming his position, he received a call from an official in the mayor's office who said he had an important question to ask. He wanted to know: In the event of an emergency or natural disaster, how many people could sleep in the synagogue? "I really have no idea," the rabbi said. "But during my sermon on the Jewish high holidays, my congregation sleeps twelve hundred."

We know on some level that the sound of the shofar is supposed to serve as a kind of wake up call. And surely we're at the beginning of – or in the midst of – the Teshuvah season. But repentance is conspicuously absent from our Rosh Hashana liturgy. So just what is it that the sound of the shofar is supposed to impel us to do today?

A couple of weeks ago, Jay Michaelson wrote a provocative albeit inflammatory editorial in the Forward called: Why You Shouldn't Go To Synagogue On Rosh Hashanah This Year. I guess if you're here today... that ship has already sailed. But one of his gripes is Rosh Hashana's lack of clarity. Yom Kippur is all about atonement and forgiveness. Its messages are easy to identify. But the themes of Rosh Hashana are admittedly much harder to pin down: Is it about kingship, creation, judgment, remembrance? What *is* the call of the shofar? What *is* the theme of the day?

On reflection, there are four great narratives that predominate our liturgy on Rosh Hashana. And if we can identify what binds them together, we'll be well on our way toward teasing out at least one of the messages we should be thinking about today.

The four narratives I have in mind are the Torah portions and Haftarahs that we read over the course of these two days. And of course they're not limited to those contexts. Excerpts and motifs from these narratives appear throughout our davening.

- The first is the story of Yitzchak's birth and the subsequent banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.
- The second is the Akeidah – the binding of Isaac.
- Third is the story of Chanah and her prayerful response to childlessness.
- And finally we have the 31st chapter of Jeremiah in which we read about Rachel weeping for her children.

And if our hand is forced and we have to explain the relevance of each one independently, surely we can do it. We know that three barren women were remembered on Rosh Hahsna and ultimately went on to have children. The epilogue to the Akeidah is the story of the ram – from whence the shofar comes. And Rachel's story is the story of the repentant lost tribes.

But, seen through a wide-angle lens, is there a common thread?

What I'd like to suggest is that each of these narratives extols on its own terms the virtue of listening.

Overcome by dehydration in the desert, Hagar is resigned to the fate that her son will surely die. But he calls out. וישמע אלוקים את קול הנער. His mother couldn't bear to absorb the sound of a sick child, but Hashem was listening.

Avraham passes the test of the Akeidah. Yitzchak is spared and Avraham is rewarded. Why: עקב – because he listened. And of course the story turns on a voice that Avraham hears from a being he cannot see.

Chanah does everything she can to get Elkana's attention, but he remains oblivious. She utters words that are inaudible to people – וקולה – but Hashem is listening.

And finally, the whole narrative of Rachel crying is framed by hearing:

קול ברמה נשמע
שמוע שמעתי

Four great narratives all of which speak the language of listening.

Sadly, it seems these days that our collective capacity to listen is on the decline. If ever there were a year characterized by the tin ear, it was this past one.

- We saw a field of presidential candidates who just couldn't connect with the people.
- We had pundits in the media who weren't able to gauge the electorate.
- And in one sector of public discourse after another it seems we had and continue to have parties talking past each other rather than actually listening:
 - Think of the national debates over refugees or gun control or health care or the tension between the police and minorities.

There's so much partisanship, that there's virtually no room for dialogue.

It's one thing to talk about polarization. It's another to talk about people so ideologically opposed to one another that they've lost the capacity to hear the other side.

Perhaps the Torah mandates a day Shofar blowing because so doing compels us to spend a day practicing the art of listening.

ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו לשמוע קול שופר.

The singular command of the day is to listen. So allow me to humbly suggest three ways that we can transform this abstraction into concrete actions in the year ahead.

Notice what the מלאך says to Hagar even before she discovers the oasis that will save her son: קומי שאי את הנער והחזיקי את ידך בו – lift up the boy and hold him by the hand. In his moment of distress, don't leave him all alone. First and foremost – be with him. And then the rest will follow.

It's in this spirit that I want to propose something revolutionary, if utterly banal. Parents are always telling their kids these days to spend less time on their phones. I want to suggest we spend more time on our phones.

A colleague of mine told me that he was making some holiday calls last week and one of his older members started crying. He was a little taken aback. He had barely gotten past wishing her a shana tova. "Is everything OK," he asked. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that your voice reminded me of being in shul back when I used to be able to go."

As the Mishna in Avos reminds us, one of our great ethics is to be נושא בעול חבירו – to help carry the burden of others. Loneliness is one of the heaviest burdens of all. And each of us can make an enormous difference.

There are so many people in this community who feel alone. And there's nothing that goes further toward alleviating that loneliness than a friendly voice.

We still call them cell phones, but we actually use the phone feature only a fraction as often as we did 15 years ago. There's no empathy in an email. There's no compassion in a text message.

Listening is a gift. And there's no better way to combat social isolation than with a phone call. If we want to do something great this year, let's give people who are alone an opportunity to be heard.

Second: It's worth recognizing that Judaism writ large privileges listening. Our creed is שמע ישראל. And what we call revelation – the moment of מתן תורה that transformed us into a kingdom of priests – wasn't a visual revelation, but an auditory one. Moshe goes out of his way to remind us: On that fateful day at Sinai קול דברים אתם שומעים ותמונה אינכם רואים זולתי קול – you heard the sound of God's voice, but perceived no image.

To paraphrase Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, while other cultures care more about appearances, Judaism cares about the voice of God in the human heart. When we place listening before seeing, it means we place conscience before conformity. What matters most is not how we might be seen by others – but the hushed inner voice whispering in our ear – urging us to do right.

On September 9, 1943 the Governor of the Nazi occupation in Greece approached Loukas Karrer the Mayor of a Greek island called Zakynthos and demanded a list of all the Jews on the island. Thousands of Jews from Corfu and Cephalonia had already been rounded up. Karrer was anything but eager to accede and consulted his local clergyman, Bishop Chrysostomos. The two decided they would deny the Nazi's request and relayed as much to the governor.

When the governor persisted, the bishop explained that the Jews had lived peacefully on the island for hundreds of years and he wasn't about to turn them over.

The governor insisted that if the two failed to provide a full list, there would be consequences.

The bishop handed the governor a piece of paper. On it was a list containing two names: Loukas Karrer and Bishop Chrysostomos. In the meantime, they secreted the town's 275 Jews to safety in various rural villages until the threat had passed. The entire Jewish population of Zakynthos survived the war.

Statues of the bishop and the mayor commemorate their heroism on the site of the town's historic synagogue and both were given pride of place amidst the Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem.

How many other political and religious leaders were asked to hand over their Jews? And how many others complied? History remembers two men who chose to listen to a higher authority – a higher morality – rather than kowtow to convention or convenience.

Thinking about Avraham today reminds us that we have a higher calling.

On this *יום הזכרון* we remember that the voice of moral conscience should always supersede our instinctive need to fit in. Maybe it's the elasticity of our Kashrut standards when among non-Jewish or non-observant friends; maybe it's our reticence about defending Israel when we find ourselves in the company of her detractors; or maybe it's our hesitance to stand up for principles over politics. This year, let's re-commit to the Jewish ethic of listening first to the voice of conscience.

Finally, while it's true that each of the narratives we've discussed turns on the axis of listening, there's also an epilogue. In each case, Hashem answers the call of a character in distress.

וישמע אלוקים את קול הנער – Hashem heard the cry of Yishmael.

מי שענה לאברהם אבינו בהר המוריה

מי שענה ליצחק בנו שנעקד על גבי המזבח

Avraham and Yitzchak were busy pouring their hearts out to Hashem.

Of course Chana prays.

And it's to Rachel's prayer that Hashem turns in the book of Yirmiahu.

We have to remember that God is always listening. And that there's always room for Tefillah.

A number of years ago I met a woman who had been coming to the daily minyan to say Kaddish for her mother. She was a very successful Wall Street executive. She wasn't observant, but she told me how much she loved coming to our shul. "There's no other time in the day," she said, "when I can just be with my mother. I'm not sure God needs our prayers, but I know I do."

We have something very special here. Whenever I travel and daven at a shul in another city, I'm reminded just how extraordinary is our shul.

Amidst all the outstanding things that go on in our building, it's worth remembering every once in a while that at the core of it all is Tefillah – the project of coming together as a community and sharing our hopes and aspirations with the Almighty.

We all have lots of goals in the coming year. Let's make Tefillah one of them. Maybe it means coming to shul a little earlier. Maybe it means coming to shul a little more regularly. Maybe it means coming to a weekday minyan every so often. Or maybe it means deepening our connection to the Tefillot themselves.

If our first message was to give the gift of listening to someone who's alone and our second was to be more attentive to the voice of a higher authority, then our third is to remember that the gates of prayer are always open.

If we demonstrate to Hashem that we're capable of listening, perhaps He'll respond in kind.

Let's not allow the message of Rosh Hashana to fall on deaf ears.

אשרי העם יודעי תרועה

Fortunate are those who know how to sound the shofar.

Fortunate are those who know how to listen.