

Rosh Hashana 5777: Shema Bekola
Rabbi Ari Hart, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - The Bayit

"The soul is contained in the human voice" Victor Borges

The Talmud Yerushalmi poses the following question:

If I stole a lulav and shook it on the first day of Sukkot, it wouldn't count. But if I stole a shofar and blew it - it would. Why?

What's the difference between these mitzvot, and what can it teach us about an essential aspect of Rosh Hashana, of what this day is about and what we are meant to do this year?

Let's look at the Torah reading from this morning for some guidance.

It's a familiar story: For years, Avraham and Sarah tried to have a child to succeed the spiritual mission they started. Sarah couldn't conceive, so she came up with the idea of conceiving through Hagar, their slave. It worked, and Hagar gave birth to Yishmael.

A few years later, at the age of 89, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Yitzchak. All seems well, until one day, Sarah saw Yishmael metzachek, mocking, laughing, with Yitzchak. "Cast this slavewoman out of my house!" she said to Avraham. "For he will not inherit with my son Yitzchak."

וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד, בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם This thing that Sarah said was greivous in his eyes.

At this difficult moment, God appears, and gives an instruction:
כָּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה, שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ Everything that Sarah is saying to you, listen to her voice.

Shema bekola, listen to her voice.

So what did Avraham do?

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר וַיִּקַּח-לֶחֶם וַחֲמַת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל-הָגָר
water and gave it to Hagar and the child and sent them away.

Did you catch that?

A few weeks ago I was driving back from paying what was essentially a shiva call at the house of Saif Akonjee, a Queens imam murdered walking home from his mosque. I was in a car with Rav

Avi, Rabba Ramie, and Rabbi David Kalb, and I'll never forget this insight that Rabbi Kalb shared.

He said "look at the verses carefully. God didn't say, do what Sarah said. God didn't say, get up early, pack some food and water and send them out. God said, listen to Sarah's voice. And Avraham actually never does that!" God said, "listen to Sarah" - and Avraham got up early and made sandwiches.

There's a scene in a great movie, *White Men Can't Jump*, where Gloria and Billy are in bed. Gloria says to her boyfriend: "honey, my mouth is dry, I feel thirsty." Billy gets up, gets her a glass of water from the kitchen, comes back to bed, hands it to her, and she promptly splashes it back in his face. They get into a fight, which ends with her saying: "I don't want a glass of water, I want you to say, 'Gloria, I too know what it feels like to be thirsty. I too have had a dry mouth.' I want you to connect with me through sharing and understanding the concept of dry mouthedness."

Men get a lot of heat for doing this, but women do it too. We all do it. Someone shares a problem, a hard feeling - and instead of listening we go into action!

"I had a terrible day at the office..."

"let's figure out how to get you a new job!"

"School is really hard for me right now..."

"We are hiring you a tutor!"

We're not listening. And it's getting worse.

In 2000, the year the first smartphone was released, the average attention span was 12 seconds. Today, the average human attention span has fallen to 8 seconds. Goldfish, on the other hand, are said to have an attention span of nine seconds.

I see it in my rabbinate. I see it all too often in myself.

How many of us were guilty of this since last Rosh Hashana, causing real harm and pain to another person by not listening, and not just to any person, but to the people we most love and cherish in the world!

What might have happened if Avraham had just listened to Sarah? How might the story have been different if Avraham had sat down with Sarah and said - "tell me about it." It probably would have been a hard conversation. Think about all that Sarah has gone through. Led by Avraham to follow a God that no one has ever heard of and cannot be seen far from her home and anyone she ever knew, schlepped around the desert, given as a concubine by her husband to the Egyptian pharaoh, barren for 89 years, and now this other kid of yours is going to hurt my one child? The one thing that's gone right in this whole crazy adventure!?

Instead of that difficult conversation, our parsha continues today with some most painful verses in all of Tanach - Avraham sends them into the desert with minimal provisions, and of course they shortly get lost and then quickly run out of food and water. Her child is crying and she can't provide for him, and she can't bear his tears, so she leaves him in a bush, and wanders away until she too sits and weeps bitterly. Each one crying out, alone.

I read about a study of teenage prostitutes in San Francisco. When asked about their journey to the streets, they were asked: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" The most common response, usually said through tears, "What I needed most was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me."

Listening to someone isn't just about being nice. Listening to someone can be about life and death.

So then why don't we do it?

It's not because we're all narcissistic big jerks who are addicted to our phones. It's because listening is incredibly, incredibly hard. We have our own problems! It's tiring! And when you listen to someone close to you, especially someone who is close to you, you might hear something that's really painful - you let me down, you aren't providing me what I need, you hurt me.

Who wants to hear that? So we change the subject, counterattack, or offer a solution.

It's really hard not to.

When God appears to Shlomo Hamelech, newly appointed King, and tells him: Ask anything, **לְשׂוֹאֵל מִה אֶתֵּן-לְךָ** - Shlomo doesn't ask for military power, wealth, or prophecy. The wisest person in the world asked for, needed, a lev shomea. A heart that hears. Listening isn't natural. We have to want it, work for it, pray for it.

We have to practice it. In fact, we're all going to practice it, in just a few minutes.

Here are five easy things we're going to try together. I didn't get from a psychology book, I got them from the halachot of shofar blowing:

1. Free yourself of distraction.
2. Don't interrupt.
3. Treat the sound you are hearing as if it's the most important thing in the world.
4. Focus to every last utterance, even if it's 100 of them.
5. Say an intention before you really listen to get yourself in the proper state of mind.

Familiar?

Isn't it interesting that after reading this really painful story about not being heard, the first thing we do, which is the only unique mitzvah we have on Rosh Hashana, is basically a 15 minute listening exercise?

About 1000 years ago, there was debate between about what bracha we say on the shofar.

Some scholars claimed we should, should be baruch atah... litkoah beshofar - to sound the shofar. Others claimed it should be "baruch atah hashem elokienu melech ha'olam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav lishmoah bekol shofar" - Blessed are you God, who sanctified us with your commandments, to **listen** to the kol, the voice, of the shofar.

Unlike many great debates in Jewish law, this one was settled. It's lishmoa.

Because unlike a lulav, the Shofar is not about the ritual object itself. It's about the sound that enters our ears, our hearts. That's why a stolen shofar works. The Mishna Brurah (586:9) explains

לפי שמצות השופר אינו אלא השמיעה לבד

Because the mitzvah of the shofar is exclusively through the listening. He continues: ואין בשמיעת קול דיני גזל and in listening to a voice, there is no such thing as stealing.

That's the amazing thing about listening - you can't steal a sound, in fact it's the opposite: receiving the voice is giving.

And when you start listening, amazing things start happening.

Just look at the conclusion of our parsha. After all the pain of the first half of the story, this is what comes next:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנְּעָר

And God hears the child's cry, the cry that no one - not Avraham, not Sarah, not even his own mother would listen to. The voice of a child named Yishmael, "God will hear."

And God says:

אל-תיראי, כי-שמע אלוהים אל-קול הנער באשר הוא-שם.

Don't be afraid, because God has heard the voice of the child, exactly where he is, from his place. Not where I want him to be, not how I want him to think or feel, but b'asher hu sham. Where he is.

And then, after being heard, Hagar's eyes are opened, *vayifkach einieha*, and she sees a well of water, a well of water that was probably there all along. But until someone heard their cries, they couldn't see it. By being heard they are redeemed. By being heard we are redeemed.

Listening is where we find wells of redemption. Listening is where we find God.

It's the only sense we have to connect to God - we don't touch God, we don't smell God, we don't taste God, we don't see God, but throughout our tradition we hear God. The thundering voice on Har Sinai. The Bat Kol - God's feminine voice. The Kol Dmama Daka - the still silent voice. Listening might be the only sense we have to connect to God.

And God hears us. Always. And as God listens, we strive to do. *Shema yisrael*, following the commandment of *v'halachta bidrachav*, and of walking in God's path; Just as God is compassionate, so strive to be compassionate. Just as God listens, so we strive to listen. That's why we read this today, and then we read the haftorah of Chanah being heard, and tomorrow we read about Avraham at the last moment hearing the angel, and then we'll read the haftorah tomorrow that *כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע* - So says the Lord: A voice is heard on high.

Maybe that's why we have this mitzvah of the shofar today: to remind us at the beginning, to stop and listen.

I want to bless you and you to bless me, this Rosh Hashana, that this be a year of *shmiah* - of listening.

Listening like we are going to listen in a moment to the shofar: without distractions, without speaking, with intention. Listening, even when we want to shut down or tune out or push back, but instead choose to be Godlike, viewing that listening moment as the biggest, most crucial mitzvah of our day, listening *basher hu sham* - hearing the voice that is speaking to us from its place in all its fullness, rawness, pain, brokenness and hope. Listening to loved ones, children, to our inner selves just like they were a shofar...

And when we do this, I just know, that 5777 will be a year where the most amazing things happen - parents will turn towards children and children to parents, feuds will end, wounds will be healed, wells of redemption will appear.

You will be changed, they will be changed. No less than the world will be changed.

If we can just... *shema bekolah*.

Listen to her voice.

Shana tovah.