

It All Depends What You Are Listening For

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Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, MD

Rabbi David Stern of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, tells a story about two guys walking down the street in New York. There was noise everywhere – trucks, horns, cell phones, whistles. Amidst it all, one of the guys turned to his friends and asked, “Did you hear that sound?”

What sound?” asked the friend.

“The sound of a cricket,” said the guy.

“A cricket?”

“Yes. There’s a cricket in that window box across the street.”

The friend could not believe what he was hearing. “there’s no way, with all this noise, that you could possibly hear the sound of a cricket in a window box across the street. No way!”

The two friends went across the street to check it out, and sure enough there was a cricket! The friend expressed his amazement. “How in the world did you do that?”

The guy said, “It’s easy. Now watch this.” He reached into his pocket, took out some quarters, held them at shoulder height, and let them drop to the sidewalk.

As soon as the coins clicked, all the trucks stopped. The cabbies stopped honking their horns. People stopped talking on their cell phones. Everyone turned to see where the coins had fallen.

And the guy looked at his friend. “See,” he said. “It all depends on what you’re listening for.”

It all depends on what you’re listening for. I question a few of the details, but not the larger message. Ours is a big world, and perspective matters. When constructing any narrative, when trying to make sense of anything, we constantly make decisions about what we are going to notice and what we will ignore.

You could say this is the message of the *sukkah*. The roof of the *sukkah* is in-between. It must provide enough shade to protect you from the sun, but it must also be exposed to the elements. Which means that a person sitting in the *sukkah* can decide what to listen for, what to notice. We can meditate on the precarious nature of our existence or on the protections that exist all around us –shelter, the social safety net, our caring community. We can express wonder at the beauty of the natural world or worry how much time is left before the next storm.

We get to decide the narrative: the sun or the bugs? The good food or the mosquito bites? The blue sky or the childish decorations and old plastic fruit? The *sukkah* reminds us that there is so much in this world we cannot control; but we *can* control the narrative. Because that depends on perspective.

Earlier we read from Ecclesiastes, Kohelet. At first, it seems like a strange reading for the festival we call “*Zeman Simhateinu*, the Season of our Joy.” Kohelet doesn’t seem very joyful: “*havel havalim amar Kohelet*, Utter futility! Utter futility! All is futile.” “The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then have I been wise?” “God will doom both the righteous and the wicked. ... Both go to the same place...”. It sounds like a real downer. Why bother? And why on earth would we read this book specifically during the Season of our Joy?

If we read carefully, though, we see that Kohelet is not depressed. He is simply realistic. He notices the inequities in the world; he recognizes that the righteous suffer in ways that don’t seem fair; but he doesn’t let those things get him down. To the contrary, Kohelet suggests that we enjoy life in spite of its disappointments: “*Samah bahur b’yaldutekha*, O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young” because the sorrows are inevitable. Righteous people don’t suffer because God singles them out; righteous people suffer because all people suffer. There is no way around that. The suffering is real, but so are the joys. It all depends on what you are listening for.

Indeed, that is Kohelet’s conclusion: *סוף דבר הכל נשמע*, The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: *את האלהים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם*, Revere God and observe God’s commandments, for this is what is in store for all of humankind.” The wise person understands that “why?” is the wrong question. The right question is: How? How will I respond to a world that sometimes feels arbitrary or cruel? Kohelet suggests that we keep going, but not just that; we must observe *mitzvot*. Modern thinkers call this Process Theology. Instead of asking why God isn’t perfect, we imagine God on a process of improving and we imagine how we might become God’s partners in moving that process along. The world may not always notice, but our actions matter.

Very little of today’s Torah reading dealt directly with Sukkot. It’s just four words near the end, half a verse: You shall observe the Feast of weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest (that’s Shavuot); **וּחַג הָאִסִּיף תְּקַוְּפַת הַשָּׁנָה**, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year.” The rest of the reading doesn’t mention Sukkot. But it does speak to this message of learning to live, learning to enjoy life in spite of the injustices and uncertainties.

It began right after the episode of the Golden Calf. The people have been punished for their sin. Moses is worried that God may get angry again. Maybe not all the people who suffered deserved the harsh punishment. Maybe the people will rebel again. Maybe there will be some other tragedy and Moses will not know how to react. God is telling Moses to move on, but Moses isn’t sure he is ready. He wants more assurance. He wants to know how God operates. He wants to see God.

And God responds that this is impossible. “I will make all My goodness pass before you,” God says. “I will even let you see my back.” But there are limits: “*וּחֲנַנִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֶחָן וְרַחֲמֵי אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֶרְחַם*,” which I translate as “I will be as compassionate as I will be compassionate and I will show mercy as I will show mercy” but you are not going to be able to figure Me out. “You will not be able to see My face, *lo tukhal lir’ot et panai*, for human beings cannot see Me and live.” In other words: this is just the way of the world. God is not answerable in that way. You will see plenty of goodness, but you won’t like everything. And you can’t just stop. You will have to live with a bit of uncertainty. Your enjoyment of the journey will depend on what you are listening for.

This, for me, has been the narrative of 19 months of pandemic. For me, the disease has not been as bad as the uncertainty of it all. We can protect ourselves in the moment, but it is really difficult to plan when we don't what will be next. For a few months, it was a near-total lockdown. Grocery shopping could wait; school could wait; most surgeries could wait; even *brit milah* was delayed. It felt right because we were dealing with something unprecedented and nobody knew how bad it could get or what might come next.

But we realized that full-scale quarantine could not last forever. Reasonable people could disagree about which activities were essential. We knew that precautions like masks would be with us for a long time. We cannot ignore the dangers. But we had to learn to live with some uncertainty because babies were still going to be born; children were going to have to return to school; we have to celebrate *b'nai mitzvah* and weddings; we have to bury our dead. I still wish we could know a few more things "for sure," but God's interaction with Moses is instructive. We will experience many blessings in the year ahead, but we aren't going to like everything and we will never be able to accurately predict exactly what comes next.

Sof davar hakol nishma. In the end, we will have to learn to be comfortable with that. There is a lot of noise. The dangers and uncertainties and injustices abound. And if we are to enjoy our holidays, if we are to make sense of a chaotic world, if we are to grow as human beings and as Jews, it is going to depend a lot on what we listen for. Shabbat Shalom and hag sameah.

