

When Paying Attention is Hard to Do
Parashat Naso
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I want to say a few words about a very curious moment in this week's *haftarah* that I think has an important lesson to teach us.

You'll recall that the story that we read in today's *haftarah* is about a childless couple, a man named Manoach and his wife. An angel comes and tells Manoach's wife the wonderful news that she's going to have a baby, and that they will have to raise him to be a Nazir, someone who's not allowed to **drink wine** and not allowed to **cut his hair**.

Manoach's wife relates all this to her husband. She tells him what they need to do to raise their son properly.

And then Manoach prays to God and says, "Please send that angel again, so he can tell us what to do."

You can imagine what Manoach's wife felt like saying to him at that moment: "*Hello!* Didn't you hear what I just said?"

It's as if he didn't **hear** her, or wasn't **listening** to her.

Now, is it possible that he simply didn't **hear** what his wife was saying? After all, that's possible.

Yesterday morning, I saw a truly touching video: it shows what it looks like and what it sounds like when people discover that they can hear.

People of all ages were, for the first time, being outfitted with hearing aids designed to overcome profound hearing loss. It was very, very touching. (See: <https://www.facebook.com/HuffPostGoodNews/videos/777741638978689/?pnref=story> .)



I don't think that that's what is going on in today's *haftarah*. Manoach doesn't become ecstatic when, later, the angel talks to him. There's no suggestion that he literally didn't *hear* his wife, and then was able to hear the angel. Something else is going on.

Is it possible that he wasn't paying attention? Sometimes you can have perfectly good hearing, but you're just not listening carefully. This should be familiar to us.

Today, voice recognition software is all over the place. Many of us have gotten to know Siri, which is the name of the voice recognition software on the iPhone. And we depend on it understanding us.

I remember a few years ago reading a review of a different voice recognition software program. It was an early version of Dragon Systems, produced by Nuance. The reviewer was saying that it wasn't a perfect system; it was necessary sometimes to repeat, sometimes twice and sometimes three times, what he wanted the computer to do.

But, the reviewer added, he didn't mind. It was really no different from his experience talking to his teenage son. In fact, the computer was possibly a little *more* responsive, and so talking to the computer was possibly a little more enjoyable.

This phenomenon is what you might call "selective hearing loss": when your parent is trying to tell you to clean up your room, you focus very intently on what's on your smart phone screen.

But I don't think that that's what is going on in our *haftarah* either. I think that yet a different phenomenon is at play. Sometimes, you can hear perfectly well, and you can be listening intently, but still find it challenging to comprehend what is being said.

Just the other day, I conducted a funeral for a member of our congregation.

Just before entering the sanctuary, one of the family members came up to me:

"Are you going to be speaking," he asked, "before I and my siblings speak?"

"Yes," I said.

"Are you going to be speaking afterwards as well?"

"Yes," I said.

“Do you have your remarks written out?”

“Yes,” I said.

That was odd. I’d never been asked that before. What was he getting at?
And then he told me:

“I’m asking,” he said, “because I don’t know if I’m going to be able to concentrate on what you’re saying; I was hoping I could read it afterwards.”

That makes sense, doesn’t it?

Sometimes we can be so caught up in a moment that we just can’t concentrate on what is being said to us.

That is what I think is happening in the story we read today. The story in our *haftarah* is about someone who’s just been told surprising news, extraordinary news. It can take a while for such news to sink in. And until it does, you can be in a cloud.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Neal Loevinger, who’s a hospital chaplain, wrote that this moment reminds him of something he faces every day. Often, he says, he encounters people—intelligent, accomplished people—who have just met with a doctor who’s given them a diagnosis or a treatment plan. They may have notes in front of them of their discussion with the doctor. And then they turn to him and say, “I don’t have a clue what the doctor was talking about.”

Rabbi Loevinger says, that’s what he thinks of when he reads the story of Manoach. He’s just been told by his wife that their presumably lengthy quest for a child is over. And he can’t believe, he can’t comprehend, what he’s hearing. He’s in shock.

And if you look at Manoach in this way, you can see that he is “taking in only as much as he can, under circumstances which might otherwise completely overwhelm his natural resilience.”

What is the lesson here for us? Well, “we’ve all been there,” haven’t we? Or if we haven’t, we may very well be one day.

Reading this story is a beautifully simple reminder that someday, we may “have a chance to be a patient angel to another person when they need help in slowly awakening to a new and disorienting reality.”

“Manoach isn’t just the father of a great hero, he’s also everyone who has desperately wanted [and needed] the world to slow down when it’s moving too fast. This calls for great mercy and compassion, which may be easy for angels but requires thought, love and dedication from the rest of us.” (Neal Loevinger, “The Limits of Hearing,” May 28, 2015.)

When we encounter someone in need, someone who isn’t getting the story straight, let’s not be impatient. Let’s not start shouting, as if the person can’t hear us. Let’s not imagine that we’re talking to a teenager who’s so engrossed in the multiple apps running on his or her smart phone that they can barely sustain a normal human conversation.

Let’s instead imagine that we’re talking to someone who needs some help absorbing and processing what could be mind-blowing information. Let’s try to be patient and understanding, and let’s try to give that person the help he or she needs.

Shabbat shalom.