

Hearing and Listening on Rosh Hashanah

A few years ago the Town of Brookline put in a system in Coolidge Corner where the pedestrian walk signals were accompanied by a chirping sound to allow people who couldn't see the walk sign to know when to cross the street. Soon after the system was put in, I was walking down Beacon Street toward the busy intersection of Beacon and Harvard Streets. I was about thirty feet away and saw a blind person with a red-tipped cane standing alone on the corner waiting to cross. The light changed, and the chirping started, indicating that traffic was stopped on Beacon Street. I watched the blind person step off the curb and proceed to cross Harvard Street where the cars were just beginning to come into the intersection. This was terrifying. What I wanted to do was to scream as loud as I could "Stop! don't cross the street!" And I tried. But what came out was something like this: "aghgh!" it was a garbled panicked sound and I was not even sure it left my mouth. And immediately the person stopped and moved back onto the curb.

Now I don't know what happened. Perhaps at the same moment I tried to cry out they heard the traffic, but it seemed to me that that cry, inadequate as it was, somehow reached that person.

There is something in our voices before words –something that we hear and respond to without recognizing it. I am sure many of you have had the (pre-caller ID) experience of calling someone with whom you are very close. There's something wrong and you know it from the first syllable of "Hello." We know instantly. Not by words, but by some sound in the voice. We experience things beyond the words, beyond speech. Those sounds are always there. The question is: Can we hear them? Can we respond?

Jews are known as animated talkers and for our voluminous rabbinic books. But we also have a rich tradition of hearing and listening. As a starting place on the topic of Jewish hearing of course is the Shema – those six central words of our tradition begin "Shema Yisrael!" Hear O'Israel. And goes on: *Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echad*. "Adonai is our God, Adonai is One", the mitzvah is to say the Shema twice daily once in the morning and once in the evening.

But what is it? It's not a prayer. It isn't addressed to God. It is addressed to us. The last four words, *Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echad*, describe our attachment, and our understanding of the nature of God. It is Judaism's statement about the deep spiritual reality of the unity of the universe: *Adonai Echad* – God is One.

But if that's the case, why those first two words "*Shema Yisrael*"? Why are we saying "Hear Israel?" Because it is not enough to state this reality of unity – our challenge is to *respond* to this reality. The challenge is to make unity, connectedness, 'oneness' central to our lives and so we remind and encourage one another.

There are a few different ways these six words of Shema fit into our liturgy. We have said the Shema together tonight, and you will see tomorrow morning, or on Shabbat, that it is also said when we take out the Torah, and again in the Musaf service in the call-and-response, during the Kedusha. Just like we say, raising up on our toes, "Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh", we also say "Shema Yisrael." Those are the big outward public moments of calling out "Shema Yisrael!"

But we also say it, and this is the central one, before the Amidah. If it's in the morning, before saying the Shema we gather our tzitit together and (some of us) close our eyes.

The recitation of Shema is called *Kriat Shema* - "the calling out of the Shema" so this makes sense, this calling out when we say it aloud together in the Kedusha in Musaf, or when we take out the Torah and it is called out to the whole community. But what about when it's just us, when we've got our eyes closed and our tzitit all gathered up, for that inward moment? Why say "*Shema Yisrael*" - Hear o'Israel to ourselves? Shouldn't we just say "*Adonai Elohayny Adonai Echad*"? To whom are we calling out when we're talking to ourselves?

I'll come back to that question in a moment.

That is the Shema and our daily challenge to hear. But of course, on Rosh Hashanah, the distinctive hearing we do is for the voice of the shofar.

The mitzvah is not to blow the shofar but to hear the shofar - that primal cry with layers and layers of meaning and yet always beyond words and meaning. The great scholar Sadya Gaon in the 10th century has a list of 10 things of which the shofar call reminds us. It reminds us of the Day of Judgment, it reminds us of the ram caught in the thicket, it reminds us of a call to battle, etc. etc. Others observe it reminds us of sobbing or a woman in labor - that the first 99 calls are a woman in labor and the 100th the tekiah gedola is the cry of the new baby. The shofar call is all of these and none.

The great liturgical poem of the High Holidays in Musaf - *Unetanneh Tokef* is most famous for its meditation on the fragility of life and the list of all the variety of possibilities that await us in the coming year and for the images of God as judge writing down judgments on Rosh Hashanah that will be sealed on Yom Kippur.

In this rich text, I want to focus on one line that says *v'Shofar Gadol Yitakah* - "The great shofar is sounded" *v'kol dma'ma dakah yishamah* (1Kings 19:12) "and the sound of a thin silence is heard." *Kol d'mama dakah* is poetic so very hard to translate. Our book translates it "still small voice". This is a sound you can only hear if you are listening very carefully.

V'shofar gadol yitaka v'kol d'mama daka yishamah!

The great shofar is sounded and the sound of a thin silence is heard.

Notice that the mitzvah, the *hearing* of the shofar is missing here. What is important is another sound - not the one we all hear together - the shofar, but the one each of us alone is able to hear if we are listening carefully. The conclusion of *Unetanneh Tokef* gives a clue what that voice might be saying. The poem ends "*u'teshuvah u'tefillah u'tzedaka meavirin et roah ha gezayrah*"

Teshuvah- repentance,

Tefillah - prayer, and

Tzedakah - charity

can avert the harshness of the decree.

I think that *thin voice of silence* is coming to tell us how we can make repair, and transform ourselves.

The great shofar is sounded and we are trying to hear the answering *kol d'mama dakah* – the unique echo of the shofar within our own souls. We are trying to hear that echo in a way that transforms us so that we can enter into the new year rededicated to living meaningful lives through

- *Teshuvah* – reconciliation and commitment to being a better person,
- *Tefilah* – a spiritual practice and evolving relationship with God, and
- *Tzedaka* – reaching out to help people in need.

All these three Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedaka demand being deeply connected

- with our friends and family and anyone we've wronged this year,
- with the needs of the community and the world, and
- with God.

Opening to these three challenges requires great identification and compassion. This is where the message of the Shema, of the Oneness of God, is important.

If the pain I have caused also becomes *my* pain, if the need and desperation of others awakens in me the need to help and heal, then I am living out the unity we declare in the Shema – *Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad*. All is connected, all is one.

And the question I asked earlier, when we are wrapped in a tallit with our eyes closed, how is it we still call "*Shema Yisrael*"? We are calling to ourselves as part of a collective. We are asserting that we can be ourselves, alone, hearing our own silence, and yet not isolated. We are also part of something larger, connected to community, connected to a tradition, and connected to God – a part of the ultimate unity of all being.

- Can we hear it?
- Are we able to respond?
- Can we be renewed and transformed?
- Can we grow?

Our effort to connect will not be perfect. When I squawked out my garbled objection to the person stepping into traffic – that might have been enough. I like to think it was, that my really poor attempt to cry out was enough.

And our teshuvah, our turning and asking forgiveness is often no better than that, but if it comes out of a place of urgency and vulnerability, it can be heard.

We play both parts of the story with which I began. We are all poised to step off the curb in the wrong direction, and we are all capable of crying out a warning. We are all able, if we are listening carefully, to hear a *Kol D'mama Dakah* a thin voice of silence guiding us in a better direction.