Sh'ma b'Kolah

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Rosh HaShanah Morning I 5783

Temple Beth El, Tacoma

I love you. *I* love you. I love *you*. I *love* you. I love you? (heading out the door) I love you! (excited about gift) I love you!! (whispered) I love you.

Three identical words. But they don't mean the same thing.

In one of my courses in rabbinical school, which we affectionately called "Drama," we spent a good portion of one class trying to come up with different ways of saying the same phrase. As we offered different suggestions, we were also instructed to think about what the phrase meant. Our intonation, the word or words we emphasized, the length of each word and the space in between, all affected how we understood the exact same words. And that didn't even account for the expression on our faces, the way our bodies moved, or the context we imagined ourselves in.

"I love you," whispered to a child when tucking them in at night, means something different than when it's called after that same child running into school. While the words are the same and the presence of love is consistent, the whispered "I love you" is intimate and prayerful, capturing the awe and wonder of watching a child grow in a moment when their unbridled energy has transformed into peace. Calling "I love you" after a child running away is a reminder, a hope to be connected despite the distance. Depending on the child, it might also carry a little warning, an unspoken "be good and listen to your teacher" that didn't get

out before they were out the door. Or it might be a conciliatory “I love you” called out after a rough morning to make sure that the last words weren’t harsh or spoken in anger.

So much meaning hides behind three simple words. What happens when there are more words and they’re not so simple?

Our Torah reading this morning has an agonizing episode where the words that were said were taken too literally. A reminder of what happened:

Sarah, after decades of infertility and then assuming she was too old to get pregnant and have a child, finally gives birth. She’s ecstatic at her good fortune and laughs with joy. Abraham names the child Yitzchak, Isaac, “he will laugh.” But as Isaac grows older and is weaned, Sarah becomes concerned about Abraham’s older son, Ishmael.

Remember, years before the birth of Isaac, Sarah assumed she was barren. She wanted a child in some way, so she gave Abraham her handmaid in an ancient form of surrogacy. The handmaid, Hagar, got pregnant and gave birth to a son, Ishmael. Ostensibly, Ishmael was Sarah’s child, but the Torah tells us that Hagar never let Sarah forget who bore and birthed him. Hagar taunted Sarah and Sarah treated Hagar harshly.

It’s no wonder, then, that once Ishmael is born, Sarah seems not to have any positive connection to him---unlike Rachel and Leah who named the children birthed by their handmaids, it’s Abraham who names Ishmael, not Sarah. The next time we hear about Sarah and Ishmael, it’s in this morning’s story.

We read earlier: “Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, ‘Cast out that handmaid and her son, for the son of that handmaid shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’”

There’s quite a bit of commentary about what Ishmael was doing in his play that distressed Sarah so much. Was he behaving like the future master of the house, as Rashi and other commentators suggest, because he was older and more established in the household? Was he pointing an arrow at Isaac, threatening to kill him, as one midrash suggests? Was he engaged in sexual immorality or idolatry, as another midrash says? Did he mockingly question Isaac’s paternity, harkening back to the previous chapter, where Sarah spent time in Avimelech’s palace, as the Renaissance commentator Sforno claims? Or was he just playing, as medieval commentator Ibn Ezra says, and Sarah was simply jealous?

The Torah doesn’t tell us what Sarah saw or what she was thinking, just that she demanded that Abraham cast out Ishmael and Hagar. Abraham, unfortunately, doesn’t ask any questions, doesn’t try to understand what’s going on, doesn’t even talk to Sarah about this request. He’s just “distressed” and asks God what to do. God responds with a reassurance that both sons will become great nations but that the inheritance will pass through Isaac. And tucked within the matter of inheritance and promise, is an incredible piece of advice that got entirely overlooked: “כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקֹלָהּ Whatever Sarah tells you, *sh’ma b’kolah*, listen to her voice.

Most translations of the phrase “*sh’ma b’kolah*” say something along the lines of “do as she says.” That translation makes sense---we often use the expression “listen to me” (or, “listen to your mother” or “listen to your

teacher") as a directive meaning "do what I (or your mother or the teacher) say." But the Torah isn't describing a scenario where someone who's likely to ignore rules or instructions is about to encounter the person they're likely to ignore. Abraham is not a mischievous child. He's an adult who's seriously concerned about what his wife said and what that might mean for his progeny. I can't imagine God responding to that concern with, "Don't worry, Abe. Do whatever Sarah says and I'll make sure it comes out right for you. Happy wife, happy life, am I right?"

No! I look at the text and see Sarah's distress, which leads to Abraham's distress. Rather than talking it out with his wife, Abraham goes to God, who rightly tells Abraham to turn back around and have a conversation with Sarah. "Don't worry, Abe, I keep my promises. But whatever Sarah says, listen to her voice. Hear her concerns and her fears. What's behind her words?"

Between email and text messaging, posts on social media, and conversations on Slack and Discord, we might spend all day communicating but rarely hear the voices of our interlocutors. Maybe when we write, we imagine the intonation and emphasis we would use in speaking, but it doesn't come across on the other end. Emojis and other symbols might help to express some of the nuance that gets lost, but it doesn't capture everything. As readers, we need to figure out how the writer meant the words to be heard. Maybe we can read them as intended, but often we put our own feelings---for better or worse---into the writer's words. I can't even count the number of times I've asked a friend or coworker, or have been asked by one, to help interpret a message that could be read or understood in different ways. It can be

helpful, sometimes, to hear another person's voice instead of just reading what they have to say.

We also live in a world of soundbites and decontextualized quotes. Rather than getting the larger sense of what someone has to say, reporters need a quick verbal snapshot. Either speakers have to reduce their thoughts to just a couple of sentences or they risk having their words twisted into catchier but less accurate clips. Ultimately we often hear the words the way others want us to hear them, not necessarily the way they were intended. As a result, we have lost some of our ability to hear the voices behind the words. We need to get better at paying attention to what people mean, not just what they say.

There's a famous Talmudic story that starts toward the end of an argument between some rabbis. OK, I know that they have arguments between rabbis. In this case, the rabbis arguing are Rabbi Eliezer, one of the leading rabbis in the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic council, and Rabbi Joshua who was Rabbi Eliezer's close friend and classmate, and who later became the head of the Sanhedrin. They, along with the rest of the rabbis in the Sanhedrin have been arguing about the kashrut status of an oven made of clay bricks interspersed with sand. Rabbi Eliezer says that this oven is kosher, gives his reasoning, and answers all of the questions. Nevertheless, ALL of the other rabbis, led by Rabbi Joshua, say it's not.

Rabbi Eliezer knows he's right and sets out to prove it. But how? "If the halakhah, if the law, follows my opinion," he declares, "let this carob tree prove it!" And the carob tree that had been rooted to one spot for hundreds of years uproots itself and moves 100 cubits away! "Carob trees are not valid proof!" retorts Rabbi Joshua.

Rabbi Eliezer tries again, “Then if the halakhah follows my opinion, let this stream prove it!” And the stream began to flow backwards. “Streams,” Rabbi Joshua responds, “are not valid proof!”

“Then if the halakhah follows my opinion, let the walls of this beit midrash prove it!” And the walls start to cave in. “Wait!” cries Rabbi Joshua, speaking to the walls. “What right do you have to get involved in disputes between rabbis?” So the walls stop falling but remain tilted so they don’t have to choose between rabbis.

Finally Rabbi Eliezer calls upon God: “If the halakhah follows my opinion, let the Heavens prove it!” And a Heavenly Voice calls, “Why are you arguing with Rabbi Eliezer? The halakhah always follows his opinion.” And quoting from last week's Torah portion, which we will read again on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Joshua stands up and calls to God, “The Torah is not in the heavens! You gave the Torah at Mt. Sinai and told us to follow the majority. Since then, we don’t listen to Heavenly Voices!” (Talk about chutzpah! The guy just told God to butt out!)

The relationship between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua gets worse from there. Somewhere in the discussion about whether the oven would be kosher, they stopped listening to each other and got entrenched in their positions. Rabbi Eliezer got wrapped up in his own sense of being right, which was also tied up with his ego. Rabbi Joshua used the power of the majority to push through a legal ruling that even God said was wrong. If they had been able to step back from their positions to hear the concerns and fears that hid behind their words, the devastation that ensued might have been prevented.

Because the story continues: Since the majority of rabbis think the oven shouldn’t be kosher, they send out a call that any oven that Rabbi

Eliezer had declared kosher needed to be brought to them and burnt. They also excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer, which meant that his entire community has to treat him as though he were dead. In his anger and anguish, Rabbi Eliezer calls for widespread destruction, and one third of the barley, wheat, and olive crops are instantly lost.

In our own community and country, we don't typically have such drastic and immediate consequences for not listening beyond the words that are said or written, but we have certainly suffered as a result of our own entrenchment into political and ideological camps. Instead of looking for shared goals and exploring how to reach them together, we vilify people who don’t share our opinions and try to work around them. Instead of addressing fears and concerns about change, we label people and write them off. Instead of asking questions and digging in deeper, we make assumptions and disengage. Our communal alienation makes it nearly impossible to move forward and deal with major social, environmental, and political issues. We're stuck.

We need to get better at listening to each other and hearing the thoughts and emotions behind the words that are said. For hot-button issues, I hope to be able to open up dialogue, so we can understand each other's beliefs and opinions and why those are held. Dialogue of this sort is not meant to change opinions about anything, but rather to understand each other better, to grow in our trust of each other, and open our hearts and minds to other possibilities.

I also want to hear your voices as we move this congregation into its next chapter. I want to get to know you, get to know what drives you, and

get to understand your connection with Temple Beth El. During my interviews, I shared that one of my priorities for my first year would be to meet with as many congregants as I could, with a goal of talking with folks in every one of our households. It's an ambitious goal and I can't accomplish it without your help. In the coming weeks, we will start to lay out opportunities for small-group gatherings, both in-person and online. Please sign up for one of these gatherings. I'm also happy to meet one-on-one---my business card and email signature both include a link for you to be able to schedule some time to talk. By next Rosh Hashanah, I want to recognize just about everyone in the congregation---even those of you online! That being said, please still wear your name tags, both for my sake and for the rest of the community---it's easier to hear what you're saying when we're not spending half of our conversation trying to remember your name.

I know that the leaders on our Board of Trustees also want to hear your voices. If you have ideas, questions, concerns, half-baked thoughts, musings, or wishes, reach out to one of them and find a time to talk. At our board meeting last week, everyone present committed to making time to hear what you have to say. Hopefully most of you have gotten calls or emails from a board member wishing you a sweet new year and inviting you to talk. Please take them up on this. Your involvement in our congregation will help guide us as we move forward.

If Abraham had listened to Sarah's voice in addition to her words, he might have asked her about what she saw Ishmael doing and about her fears. Clearly her son's inheritance was an issue, but there was probably more. Certainly most of the rabbinic commentators thought so. If

Abraham had listened to Sarah's voice and invited more conversation, maybe they could have come up with a solution that wouldn't have sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only a skin of water and a loaf of bread. If Abraham had listened to Sarah's voice, maybe he would have done exactly the same thing but with more understanding and less distress. We will never know---he heard only her words and didn't listen to her voice.

My heartfelt wish for all of you this Rosh HaShanah morning is that you take the time to hear each other's words and listen to each other's voices. It requires us to slow down and be intentional, so it can be difficult in our fast-paced society. But it will bring a depth of connection that we so desperately need for healthy and whole communities. If we can do this, I know that our year will be one of blessing and sweetness. L'shanah tovah um'tukah!