

Do You Hear Me? Hearing vs. Active Listening

Kol Nidrei Sermon

By Rabbi Lisa S. Malik, Temple Beth Ahm, Aberdeen, NJ

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Some of you may recall **Mel Brooks** in "History of the World Part I", with his humorous rendition of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai holding the tablets with the commandments inscribed on them. In the movie, the big booming voice of God calls out, "Moses, Moses, can you hear me, Moses?" To which Mel Brooks (in the role of Moses) responds, "**I hear ya, I hear ya, a deaf man can hear you.**"

Just as God tried to get Moshe's attention by calling out his name twice, so too did the angel of God call out Abraham's name twice in **Parashat VaYera**, the Torah portion from which we read in shul on Rosh HaShanah. On the **second day of RH**, we read the story of **Akedat Yitzchak**, the binding of Isaac, by his father, Abraham. In the Torah reading, as Abraham was ready to do the unthinkable, about to sacrifice his son, with his knife raised overhead, an angel of God called out, "**Avraham, Avraham.**"

Why the need to say his name twice? Apparently, calling out Abraham's name only once failed to get our patriarch's attention. It wasn't until he heard his name twice that Abraham put the knife down and refrained from slaughtering his son on the altar.

Earlier on in Chapter 22 of the Book of B'raisheet, God called out to Avraham and apparently commanded him to sacrifice his son, his only son, the one he loves, Isaac, on that altar. To which, Avraham responded, "**Hineni.**" "**Here I am.**" Although Avraham seemed to hear God's command, was he truly listening? Did he truly understand what God wanted from him?

Some commentators suggest that Avraham failed the test of “*Akedat Yitzchak*” in the sense that he heard God's words at a superficial level, but didn't listen to God's intent. Perhaps the entire Akedat Yitzchak episode reflected a misunderstanding by Abraham. According to **Rashi**, Abraham thought that God wanted him to kill Isaac, but that this was never God's intention. After all, the Hebrew word that God used in his command to Abraham was “*v' haalehu*”, which literally means, “bring him up.” While most English translations of the Bible render this Hebrew word as, “offer him up as a sacrifice,” perhaps all that God meant was, “Bring him up to Mount Moriah... just to show me how much faith you have in Me...but then bring him down again”—alive and not dead.

Have you ever said *Hineni*, “Here I am,” when your mind was really somewhere else? When your children were talking & you were on the internet, your phone, your computer? When your spouse was trying to get your attention or have a conversation with you & you were more interested in watching a movie or TV show that you could have very easily put on “pause.”

“*Ashamnu.*” We've all done that.

Consider the following joke told by my colleague, **Rabbi Perry Rank**:
An elderly couple was faced with the usual medical challenges brought on by old age. Fearing that her husband was losing his hearing, a woman decided to create an experiment to determine once and for all if his hearing was failing. One day, while her husband was sitting outside reading the news, his wife quietly crept up behind him, and from a bit of a distance, she said, “Irving, can you hear me?”
No response.
She crept up a little closer and said, “Irving, can you hear me?”
No response.
Finally, she got right behind her husband's ear, and said, “Irving, can you hear me?”
To which Irving replied, “**For the third time, 'Yes.'**”

(This joke is quite reminiscent of Mel Brooks', “I hear you, I hear you, a deaf man can hear you.”)

Now consider the following story, adapted from one that I was told by my colleague, **Rabbi Dan Moskovits**:

A little girl comes into the kitchen to show her mother a drawing that she made in school that day. Her mother is at the kitchen table, on her laptop computer, catching up on email and FaceBook.

"Mom, guess what?" the little girl squeals, waving the drawing.

Without looking up, her mother responds, "What?"

"Guess what?" repeats the little girl.

Again the mother asks, "What?"

"Mommy, you're not listening."

Still not shifting her focus from the computer, she says, "Sweetie, yes, I am,".

"But Mommy, you're not **listening with your eyes.**"

My message for this New Year is simple: **we are failing in the art of listening.** We may not be "hard of hearing", but we sure are "hard of listening." We are so engrossed in our activities, so head down and task oriented, that we not only forget to listen with our eyes, we fail to open our ears. Our community, our congregation, our families, this very sanctuary is **filled with souls that yearn to be heard**, stories that speak about who we are and how much we have in common, **but we no one seems interested in listening.**

In this New Year, I urge us to strive to observe the commandment that stems from the Hebrew prayer that most Jewish people know by heart.

"**Shema** Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad".

What does the word, "*Shema*", mean? Many of us undoubtedly memorized the popular English translation of the *Shema*, which reads, "**Hear** O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One".

But perhaps the meaning of prayer is deeper than that.

Yes, the word "*Shema*" can be translated as, "Hear". But, is that really what it means? The Hebrew root of the word *Shema* appears hundreds of times in the Torah, 92 times in the book of Deuteronomy alone, which is the book where the "*Shema Yisrael*" prayer can be found. So, it must be a pretty important word. But the word has many more meanings than you may realize.

Yes, "*Shema*" can mean "Hear", but it can also mean, "**Listen**" or "**Heed**" or "**Pay attention.**" On some occasions in this shul, I have taught a **sign-language** version of the "*Shema*" prayer that I first learned from the cappella group, "Nashira." (SHOW: block out distractions from both sides.)

The word, "*Shema*," can also imply a desire or command for someone to **obey** you or to **fulfill something that you have requested or required.**

Many new **parents** often use the phrase, "**good listener**," when complimenting their children for **doing what is expected of them.** One of the highest forms of praise a teacher can give a preschool student in a progress report or informal conversation with his parents is, "Jake is such a good listener." On the flip side, no father wants to get a progress report in which his child is described as "not listening" to teachers, which generally means, "not following instructions." And certainly, every mother has expressed frustration at one time or another when her child wasn't doing what was asked of her around the house.

In the context of the *Shema* prayer, perhaps God is saying, "**Listen**" or "**Heed**," as in "**Follow**" or "**Observe my commandments.**" My colleague **Rabbi Craig Ezring** teaches that in a sense, God's "*Shema*" command to the Jewish people is analogous to the advice that is given to some guys when they get married: "Do whatever your wife asks of you." He suggests that "*Shema*" is a biblical way of saying, "**Yes, dear**"... but really **meaning** it.

SKIP: Rabbi Ezring further suggests that "*Shema*" may mean, "**Get**" as in "**Truly understand**" another person or Being. When I asked a recently engaged young couple how they knew that they were "meant to be" with each other, the bride-to-be turned to me and said, "He just really gets me." Conversely, in a marriage counseling session with another couple, a husband expressed his frustration about his wife "not getting him." She expressed the same frustration about her husband. It's difficult to be in a relationship with another human being if you don't "get" each other. And when you do "get" each other, what a wonderful feeling that is for all involved; a relationship between two people who "get" each other is bound to succeed and thrive.

Another possible translation of the Hebrew word "*Shema*" and another possible synonym of the English word "**Listen**" is "**Take in.**" Think about what that definition does to the meaning of the *Shema* prayer. Perhaps "*Shema*" is a command for the Jewish people to **take God into our hearts, our souls, our lives.** Considering that the *Shema* prayer is written on the tiny parchment that is enclosed in a mezuzah case, perhaps the mitzvah of mezuzah is meant to remind us to strive to **take God into our homes.**

There is obviously a **distinction** to be made between “**hearing**” & “**listening,**” between “just hearing” & “truly listening” by “**taking in**” what they are saying.

Hearing simply **happens**, as in the joke I told about Irving. You can hear someone calling your name or asking you the same question three times and still not be truly listening.

In contrast to merely “hearing”, **listening** is a **conscious choice**. Listening requires paying **full attention** & **concentrating** in a way that enables your brain to process meaning. It is not passively hearing, but **actively listening** that can lead to **understanding**. Listening requires, not only your ears, but also your eyes, your heart, your mind, your complete being.

Listening plays a very important role in Jewish ritual and that is certainly the case on the High Holidays. We try to **listen to our conscience** at this time of year and confess to our shortcomings. We **listen to the words of the Torah**. We **listen to the shofar** and allow the blasts to penetrate our souls.

When we blow the shofar, the *bracha* (blessing) that is recited is:

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher ki-d'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu lishmo'a kol shofar. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who makes us holy by giving us the opportunity to observe God's mitzvot & who gives us the mitzvah of listening to the sound of the shofar.

The piercing sound of the shofar forces us to stop and **listen** to it.

It is hard to ignore a shofar blast.

The shofar reaches our ears like an **alarm clock** following a long slumber. It is an alarm clock that does not enable us to press the snooze button and go back to sleep.

We are compelled to **listen**.

Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin points out that a shofar is nothing special to look at. We are not encouraged to adorn a shofar and make it beautiful, like we are with so many other mitzvot involving ritual items, such as our Sukkahs or our Shabbat candlesticks & challah covers. With a shofar, the only one of the five original senses that we need to use is our hearing... but passively hearing the shofar is insufficient; we have to **actively listen** to the shofar by **concentrating on & directing our intention** to its blasts.

There is a **Mishnah in Masechet Rosh HaShanah (27b)** (Mishnah, Masechet RH, Chapter 3, *Ra-uhu Beyt Din*) that teaches the following halacha:

[v'chen] mi she-haya ohver achorey Beyt Ha-Kneset

o she-haya beyto samuch l'Veit Ha-Kneset

v'shama Kol Shofar o Kol Megillah:

If someone is passing behind a synagogue

or if someone lives in a house that is adjacent to a synagogue

& he hears the sound of the Shofar coming from the synagogue on Rosh HaShanah, or he hears the sound of the Megillah reading coming from the synagogue on Purim,

the law is as follows:

Im kiven libo, yatza; v'im lav, lo yatza.

If he concentrates and directs his mind/heart to the Shofar blasts or to the Megillah reading, he has fulfilled his obligation.

But if he does not concentrate and direct his mind/heart to the Shofar blasts or to the Megillah reading, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

In other words:

If the passer-by has the *KAVANNAH*, the intention & the mindfulness, to actively listen to those Shofar blasts or to the Megillah reading for the purposes of fulfilling a mitzvah, then he has in fact fulfilled the mitzvah of listening to the Shofar on Rosh HaShanah or the mitzvah of listening to the Megillah reading on Purim.

If, on the other hand, the passer-by 'just happens to hear' the Shofar blasts or the Megillah reading & he does not have the *KAVANNAH* to listen, then he has not fulfilled the mitzvah of listening to the Shofar on Rosh HaShanah or the mitzvah of listening to the Megillah reading on Purim.

The Mishnah concludes its discussion of this law by saying:

Af al pi she-zeh shama v'zeh shama, zeh kiven libo v'zeh lo kiven libo.

Even though this one heard the sound & that one heard the same sound, this one directed his mind/heart to it, whereas that one did not direct his mind/heart to it. Therefore, the law is different for each of them.

In other words: The key component that is necessary in fulfilling the mitzvah of listening to the Shofar or fulfilling the mitzvah of listening to the Megillah reading is *KAVANNAH* is essential in the observance of these mitzvot. It is insufficient to merely passively hear these sounds. In order to fulfill one's obligation, one has to actively listen with intentional concentration & mindfulness.

To **truly listen** (whether its to the sounds of the **Shofar** or **Megillah** or **to another human being**) you **have to be present, not only physically, but also mentally & emotionally.**

During the High Holidays season (beginning on the first day of Elul, continuing on Musaf of Rosh HaShanah & culminating in the final Shofar blast at the conclusion of Yom Kippur Neilah services), the **shofar** serves to remind us to **be fully present** & to set aside some of the images that inundate us and prevent us from **truly connecting with each other.**

Unfortunately, deep connections between people seldom happen in this age of images. Many of us spend much of our day in front of cell phones, computers, televisions, computers, or video games.

Ashamnu for checking email and Facebook as soon as we wake up in the morning.

Ashamnu for keeping the laptop on the table during precious family dinner time.

Ashamnu for watching our children's lives unfold through our cameras, instead of **being present**, and listening to their first sounds, sentences and questions.

For so many of us, our lives take place through the screens that constantly seem to be in front of our eyes. The shofar tells us to **put these screens away** and really involve ourselves **with each other**.

Listening to another person is about being fully present, being in the room and while there, giving your **full attention** to the person beside you. My colleague **Rabbi Dan Moskovitz** tells the following story: A student was visiting **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel** in New York, when the phone rang and Heschel **was informed that his friend's sister had** died earlier in the week and that his friend had flown to the East Coast from California to attend the funeral and sit shiva with his family in Boston. Heschel announced to the student, "I have to go now. Please come with me to pay a shiva visit." They drove to Boston and went to the house where Heschel's friend was sitting shiva. Heschel walked into the house, hugged his friend, and sat beside him on the sofa for an hour. He didn't mumble a single word, not one cliché, not, "How old was she?" Not, "Time will heal." Not even, "I know how you feel." He sat there in silence for an hour and listened, and when his friend was done talking and crying and storytelling, he got up, hugged his friend again, and left.

On the ride back to New York, the student asked Rabbi Heschel, "Did you know her well, the sister of your friend who died?" Heschel responded, "I'd never met her."

The student was puzzled. **"Why did we drive an hour to just sit on your friend's sofa?"** **The great rabbi responded, "Because that's what he needed."**

Can we be like Heschel? Can we be a community, a congregation that shows up for each other? Can each of us be the kind of individual who is able to be **truly present** for our friends and others in need? to **actively listen**, rather than just to passively hear what others have to say, without interrupting them & without getting distracted by other things?

Rabbi Craig Ezring points out something very interesting about the word, "LISTEN.". **If you scramble up the letters of the word, "LISTEN" and anagram them, you can find the word, SILENT."** **Implicit in this anagram is the idea that you cannot LISTEN unless you are silent.**

It's **not just putting your cell phone on silent**. It's putting the thoughts of how the Mets or Yankees are doing on hold. It's putting aside thoughts about what you are going to have for lunch, what you are going to do this weekend, or what you need to add to your shopping list. It's **ignoring distractions & focusing on what is most important right here and right now**. **Listening** is about **being present in the moment** and **paying full attention** to the person who is by your side.

You know, we have a lot of chutzpah on the High Holidays. Several times on Yom Kippur, we express our plea to God, "**Shema Koleynu.**" "**Hear our voices... pay attention to our prayers.**" We constantly ask **God to listen to us**.... but how well do we **listen to each other**? Even though most of us are not such great listeners (i.e. we are "hard of listening"), we have the audacity to repeatedly ask God to listen to us.

At the end of the Book of Malachi (3:16), the prophet describes his vision of the future, in which **people do listen do each other**; & as a result, God pays attention and listens to them.

*Az nidvaru yirei Adonai ish el re-ehu
Vayishma Adonai va-yakshev
Vayichatev Sefer Zikaron l'fanav*

"Then those who revere God will respectfully speak and **listen to one another**, and **God** will pay attention and **will listen to them**, and they will all be written in the Book of Remembrance."

The essence of Malachi's vision comes across in a contemporary High Holidays prayer-poem that was written by Rabbi Rabbi Harold Kushner & Rabbi Jack Riemer [I adapted the poem slightly, by replacing the word "hear" with "listen" throughout the verses, & by replacing "Rosh HaShanah" with "High Holidays."]

It is with this prayer-poem that I would like to conclude my sermon today:

On these High Holidays, Adonai,
Sharpen our ability to LISTEN.
May we LISTEN TO the music of the world,
and the infant's cry,
and the lover's sigh.

May we LISTEN TO the call for help of the lonely soul,
and the sound of the breaking heart.
May we LISTEN TO the words of our friends,
And also their unspoken pleas and dreams.

May we LISTEN TO the yearnings within ourselves
that are struggling for expression.

May we LISTEN TO You, Adonai.
For only if we LISTEN TO You
do we have the right to hope that You will LISTEN TO us.

God, please LISTEN closely to the prayers that we offer to you on this holy day.
And may we LISTEN to them... and **to each other**.

Ken Yehi Ratzon & Shanah Tovah Tikatevu v'Techateymu/ Gmar Chatimah Tovah.