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Listening With Our Eyes

An excited little girl came into the kitchen to tell her mother about her art class that day, and to show her the picture she had painted. Her mother was at the kitchen table, her head buried in her phone, catching up on email. “Mom guess what?” the little girl squealed. “Today we got to use oil paint instead of the runny water colors, and we had to paint a picture...” “Mom, MOM you’re not listening!” And without looking up from her phone, the mother responded by saying, “I’m listening, Sweetie!” “But Mom,” the exasperated girl pleaded, “you’re not listening with your eyes!”

Those intoxicating devices of ours; how they entice us away from the important moments. Earlier in our service we shared Yom Kippur’s capstone prayer, the *vidui*, or confessional prayer. And many of the sins we confessed to speak to this *sin* of favoring our screens over actual people. Remember what we all confessed? *Al Cheyt Shechatanu*: The ways we have sinned unconsciously, through thoughtlessness, making light of serious matters, disrespect. It’s not that we mean to insult them by ignoring them. It’s just that whatever is happening online right now, is more important than they are. We will pay attention to them, right after checking Facebook, right after answering that really important text that absolutely cannot wait.

In our Yom Kippur Torah reading this morning, Moses began among his last words to his people by saying: *Atem Nitzavim*: *You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God*. Rabbi Arthur Green, professor of Jewish mysticism, comments that the words *Atem Nitzavim*, *You stand*, don’t actually refer to body posture. It’s not that they were all standing; it’s that they were all fully present. He writes that Moses was pleased, because his charges were “so close to God that no one could imagine distraction.”

And avoiding distraction is hard for us modern human beings, for two reasons. First, there is no refuge from the distractions. According to the research, we spend on average two and a half hours a day just on social media just on our smartphones. And we’re now learning what those little screens are doing to our brains, making us less attentive, less patient, less able to listen. According to my family, I’m as guilty as the next guy. Not unjustifiably, my family, accuses me of selective listening. Sometimes, I will confess, that’s deliberate.

And the second reason we find it hard to listen, is that we live in a time of hardened opinion. In our culture of political and social debate, we watch people shouting at each other on cable news, preaching and accusing, and now this has become the new cultural norm. But listening is choice, a discipline and an affirmative act. It requires our full attention because it's not just what a person says; it's what their eyes reveal. It's the subtlety of their voice. It's their body language, the tension in their arms and shoulders, the frown of their brow. We learn as much from paying attention to these emotional cues as we do from the words they speak. But that requires concentration, blocking out all those distractions. It requires listening with our eyes. Scripture teaches us over and over that when we are *nitzavim*, when we are fully present with another person, lives are transformed. When Moses left Egypt, the cries of the slaves, his kin, remained with him, and so he was fully present when God called out from the burning bush and commanded him to return to Egypt to save his people. In the Purim story, King Ahashverosh not only heard Queen Esther's pleas and behalf of the Jews. He saw the fear in her eyes, and changed his mind. He annulled his decree and he saved her people.

We fail in difficult conversations when we are only hearing ourselves, when, so consumed by our own voices, or worse, self-righteousness, that we can't see the pain, the fear, the longing, the desperate desire for connection staring right at us. But what if we entered a difficult conversation as *nitzavim*, standing still, fully present, with the determination to stay silent and listen more than to talk. To pay attention to those non-vocal cues. What if, in a fraught relationship, we asked: *Would I want someone to talk to me, the way I'm talking to her?* What if we decided: *Rather than just argue my way to the answer I've already decided is the right answer, I'm going to be open to his perspective, and assume that he might have a point.*

In a recent piece in the Times, David Brooks tells the following exquisite story. He quotes the book "Practical Wisdom," by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe. It's the story of a hospital janitor named Luke. In Luke's hospital there was a young man who'd gotten into a fight and was now in a permanent coma. The young man's father sat with him every day in silent vigil, and every day Luke came in and cleaned the room. But one day the father was out when Luke cleaned it. Later that afternoon, the father found Luke and snapped at him for not cleaning the room. Luke could have snapped back by saying: *I did clean the room. You were out.* But that's not what Luke did. Instead, Luke smiled, and cleaned the room, again. That father could do nothing for his son, save watch and make sure that his room was cleaned every day. And in an act of humble generosity, Luke listened, and he gave that father what he needed in that moment.

The watchword of our faith is *Shema Yisrael*. Listen, Israel. And in the verse in the Torah that follows we read *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*. Love Adonai your God. Listen and love. Because listening is THE most sacred expression of love. Think about it. How

do you know a person really cares for you, about you? It's when you know you are heard. It's when you know you have their full, open attention. No judging, no canceling your feelings. You know you matter to another person when they receive and absorb your pain, when they are moved by your joy, and when you can see that they are changed by it. What if all that remains in human interaction is the hardened conviction that I am right and you are wrong. What if conversation is reduced to nothing more than closing arguments. Is that not the very definition of indifference?

Celeste Headlee, author of We Need to Talk, writes that in order to have important conversations, "you sometimes have to check your opinions at the door. There is no belief," she writes, "so strong that it cannot be set aside temporarily in order to meet another human being where they are. To learn from them, to offer the patience, and the kindness that we would want to receive." She offers some rules for any conversation. And even though she is not Jewish, they are most definitely Yom Kippur mitzvot.

Rule number 1: Do not multitask. She writes, "Put down your phone. Look up from your screen. Do not be thinking about that argument with your boss, or where you're going for dinner." Research confirms that we human beings cannot multitask. We think we can, but we can't. The science is clear: if you're focusing on a screen, your brain will force you to ignore the person in front of you.

Number 2: Don't pontificate. Pontificators, she writes, just want to hear the sound of their own voices. They have zero interest in what you have to say. They know what's right for you, and they know what you should do, and they know that if you'd just listen to them, your problems would be solved. And perhaps we might ask: If that has ever worked for you?

Number 3: Don't equate your experience with theirs. She writes, "Your family is not theirs. Your job is not theirs. Your grief is not theirs. Your experience is not theirs." When we decide that this conversation is not all about us, then we become the listeners, the human beings the people in front of us need us to be.

Number 4: Stay with it. It's a common impulse to run away when things get tough. That's when we need to become *nitzavim*—to remain, to listen, to be open to hearing hard and even painful truths, and to resist the impulse to deflect responsibility or to change the subject to something more comfortable, like the time THEY are wrong.

Good Yom Kippur mitzvot these. It's not easy—revisiting the negativity, the disappointments, the ways we were distant, the faces of the people we ignored, the feelings of the people we ignored. But isn't that why we are all here for Yom Kippur's

sacred work? Here is Yom Kippur wisdom: We are each the handiwork of the Divine, and we also each a little broken too, a little in need of healing.

And today God's voice echoes from our prayerbook and calls to us: If you are willing to look deeply within, you will find the voice of goodness, of kindness, of generosity, of patience and of humility inside you. I know they are there, God says, because I put them there. And if you are willing do the hard work. If you are willing to repent, God says I will wash your soul clean. Yom Kippur is a promise of the reparation of our souls.

So if we are ready, maybe we can start with one simple pledge, one change that will draw our loved ones, everyone in our lives, closer to us. Out of the mouths of babes, let us all commit to listen more, with our eyes.