

My mom died two years ago just before the start of the High Holy Days. I've been thinking about her and remembering how much we loved each other ... and how that was not enough to keep our relationship from getting very tangled when I was in my forties. I felt Mom growing distant, often expressing anger toward me in situations where I felt it unjustified. I, in turn, pulled away, and our relationship continued to disintegrate until a few years after that on my annual visit to her in Florida.

Our dinner conversation was predictably uncomfortable. When I returned from a Shabbat service, Mom picked up where she'd left off. I thought of the rabbi's sermon that evening in which he took Moses to task for not having listened well enough to the children of Israel, which the rabbi felt had led to some of Moses's leadership problems. He urged his congregation to be better listeners to their children and grandchildren. I mentioned this to Mom, who exclaimed: "But you're not hearing **me!**"

Shocked, I asked her what she meant ... and then listened very closely, without interrupting her to insert my feelings, as she explained why she had been angry with me all those years. I now heard the deep hurt that she was feeling and for the first time, even though she was saying many of the same things that she had said over the years, I heard and understood why she felt that way. I had always understood the situation that disturbed her very differently ... and had assumed that she had understood it as I did. But we had two completely different understandings. Once I knew what and why she had felt and acted as she had, I could apologize for my unwitting but nonetheless hurtful behavior. She, in turn, listened quietly as I explained the pain her behavior over the last few years had caused me. She gave me a hug and then also apologized. Although it was Pesakh, that moment of mutual *teshuvah* opened us up to each other, and until the day she died we enjoyed ... truly enjoyed ... a warm and loving relationship where we no longer assumed each knew what the other was thinking, but asked to make sure and then listened closely to the reply.

The eminent retired clinical, research, and academic psychologist Dr. Roni Beth Tower writing in *Psychology Today* teaches:

"By making space for loved ones to express themselves fully and completely, we permit them to say what they intend to say, allowing them to correct their words or clarify their thoughts along the way... By listening carefully, we can hear cries for help and offers to provide it."¹

"...the most important thing about listening[:] Use it to gather clues and NOT to make assumptions... By being comfortable with silences, we can allow another person the time to formulate their thoughts into words. By allowing the space for such reflection, you communicate respect."² Wise words!

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/life-refracted/201708/52-ways-show-i-love-you-identify-the-meanings-silence> .

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/life-refracted/201701/52-ways-show-i-love-you-listening>

Why **do** we listen? Dr. Tower goes on to explain:

"Above all, we listen to connect to each other, to feel that we are not alone... One of the most powerful ways in which we learn is through listening. Hearing is the first sense to fully develop. Indeed, a baby responds to the sounds of its mother's voice and heartbeat while still in utero."³

Our tradition greatly prizes and praises the value of listening and of hearing, from Torah and Talmud through generations of commentators up to the present day.

In speaking of divine gifts, the prophet Isaiah shares that "Each Morning by morning God awakens me, awakens my ear: teaching me how to listen." (*Isaiah 50:4*)

According to *Pirke Avot*: "A wise man ... does not break into his fellow's speech; And is not hasty to answer."⁴

As Cantor Ellen so movingly chanted from the Haftarah, Hosea says that if the Israelites will listen to and hear God's words spoken through him and return to God, making *teshuvah* for their idolatrous actions, then God will hear them, heal their affliction and generously take them back in love.

Just a few weeks ago on another Shabbat, Rabbi Billy asked us: "How hard do we listen, and how much do we hear?" Questions we urgently need to ask ourselves as we take our *Heshbon HaNefesh*, the accounting of our soul. He has worked tirelessly over the years encouraging us to create a culture of honor here at Woodlands, among many initiatives implementing the "*B'rit Lashon HaTov*, a Covenant for Communicating in a *Kehilah Kedoshah*, Guidelines for Tolerant and Respectful Conversation where Community is Sacred"⁵ as the foundation for the workings of our Board of Trustees.

The B'rit quotes five sacred teachings, including these two from the Talmud: "Disagree for the sake of Heaven" ... and ... "There is a time to be silent & a time to speak." It reminds us, in its words, to "Strive towards listening and hearing each other as members of a holy community – in public meetings, in community forums, in our homes, in classes, in email, on the phone, [and] at WCT," here in our spiritual home, the place that our hearts hold dear.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, has written the following about listening: "Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, *Shema*: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what He wants from us. If you would only listen ... *Judaism is a religion of listening*. This is one of its most original contributions to civilization... Not by accident does justice presuppose the rule of *audi alteram partem*, 'Hear the other side.'"⁶

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *Pirke Avot 5.7*

⁵ adapted from Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in NYC

⁶ <https://rabbisacks.org/spirituality-listening-ekev-5776/>

Rabbi Sacks continues: "Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing... Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow... Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners.⁷"

Indeed. Changing lives is at the heart of these *Yamim Nora'im*, these Days of Awe. Through the month of Elul and these ten days, through *Heshbon HaNefesh* and *teshuvah*, we work to change our lives ... to return us to a better path ... to restore wholeness in our relationships ... and in so doing, we hope, to change for the better the lives of those with whom we are either seeking or granting forgiveness.

May God bless us with the wisdom to remember that to be in relationship means to listen ... truly listen ... and to hear ... truly hear ... which leads to the opening of the heart that allows us to effect the *tikkun*, the fixing, that needs to be done from time to time, even in the best of relationships, as with my mom, to keep them healthy and whole. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will.

⁷ *ibid.*

Closing

According to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great 16th-century mystic of Kabbalah, as God began to create the world, God's presence was so all-encompassing that it left no room for the universe that God was to create. Through *tzimtzum*, through contracting God's self, God was able to form empty space and so made room for God's creation.

M'hayeh HaKol ... Giver of Life to All ... help us find the wisdom and the courage to follow Your example of *tzimtzum* ... to know when to stop speaking, to withdraw ourselves, and to listen ... truly listen ... giving ourselves the gift of fully hearing others... giving others the gift of being fully heard.

During these Days of Awe may that help ground our acts of *teshuvah* in reality, allowing a return to wholeness in all our relationships ... with others and with You.

Ken y'hi ratzon. May this be Your will.