

Truly Hearing (the Call of the Shofar)

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - 5771 (2010)

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A number of months ago, I sat on a bench right outside of Alta Bates Hospital, waiting to meet one of our community's members. Thank God, the person was running late, and I got to sit there for about a half an hour. Something very strange occurred to me during those thirty minutes.

I spent time with three separate individuals, one after the other, who were not aware of the person I was with just moments before. Each chose to sit next to me on that bench to share personal hospital stories.

There was the Catholic man who asked me if I was a minister and when he heard I was a rabbi he hesitated at first, and then proceeded to tell to me about his struggle with God.

The atheist, who was drawn to my kippah, and though he made it very clear that he wasn't religious, shared a deep moment of faith that he had just experienced in the hospital.

And yes, there was even a Jew, who was happy to see another Jew, though he hasn't been in a shul for more than a decade.

Initially, it was very clear that they were talking to my kippah. It wasn't me they were speaking to as much as what I represented to them at that moment. Ultimately however, they were just looking for someone who would hear them. They needed to speak and I needed to listen.

If you sit at the entrance of Alta Bates hospital something simple becomes very clear, very quickly. The act of listening is profoundly needed, and is profoundly missing in this world. People are looking to connect and nobody is listening.

It is no surprise therefore that our tradition placed listening as a central component of Rosh Hashanah and linked listening to the process of teshuvah.

In fact, listening is so critical that it may be the very first step of our return.

Consider the mitzvah of shofar - the central mitzvah of Rosh HaShanah.

It is quite a strange mitzvah - one that seemingly has nothing to do with the content of the day itself. What does blowing the ram's horn have to do with the critical process of teshuvah, of penitence?

The rabbis of course offer a variety of explanations. The horn is reminiscent of the ram that replaced Isaac on the alter, reminding God of our ancestral sacrifices; the contorted shape of the shofar is symbolic of a broken heart, humbled by repentance; finally the sounding of shofar blast itself is an alarm call, demanding that we wake from our slumber and do teshuva.

None of these explanations draw our attention to the very basic act, the very elemental deed that is demanded of each of us during these days. Beyond poetic or ephemeral symbolisms, the mitzvah of shofar requires that we simply learn how to listen.

But listening is not so simple.

A quick google search reveals countless articles on the topic of effective listening, each listing top rules of engagement:

1. When possible, take control of your listening environment.
2. Despite distractions, concentrate on what's being said.
3. Focus early on the "central idea."
4. Listen "between the words" for attitude, tone, level of conviction.
5. Concentrate on what is being said rather than how you are tempted to respond.
6. Judge the message only after you completely understand it.

There are even listening rules for children:

Lips closed, ears listening, sit up straight, hands and feet quiet.

And many more.

Jewish law offers its own set of strict rules that govern and dictate the way in which we are supposed to hear the sound (literally, the voice) of the shofar.

Here are just a few examples that clearly echo the guidelines I just shared moments ago:

“Ikar ha’mitzvah havei ha’shmiaah” – Listening is the essential act of the mitzvah. In other words, Jewish law, which we know is always focused on actions and deeds, views listening as an action, as a form of doing. Active listening becomes the halakhic standard and passive hearing is ruled out.

“Tzarich li’shmoah et kol ha’shofar bli acher meorav bo” – one is required to listen to the voice of the shofar without hearing another voice mixed into it. In listening, we are required to focus on a single voice. No sound is allowed to mix in, not the voice of others, and especially not the sound of our own voice. In other words, we are asked to control our listening environment and refrain from offering a quick response.

“Ein ha’shome’a yotze ela im hitkaven la’tzet” – The person hearing the blast of the shofar only fulfills the mitzvah if he intentionally listened to its sound with the sole purpose of listening to it. We are challenged to listen for the sake of listening, leaving out any external motivations.

When we place “Google’s” rules of effective listening side by side with these Halakhic rules, it becomes very clear that listening to the particular sound of the shofar, according to the norms of Halakha, is meant to open our ears more broadly. Listening to the shofar teaches and challenges us to listen better to the people we love, our family members, community, and friends, as well as to our own selves and to the voice of God.

The shofar is the central ritual of Rosh Hashanah because intentional, meditated, active listening is central to our ability to reconnect with one another and engage in the process of teshuvah as a form of return to healthy relationships.

Listening is also a central motif in the special Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah – a narrative replete with examples of bad and good listening.

As we know from this morning, the Torah gives us a glimpse into an episode in the marriage of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah is struggling. Despite having her own child, Isaac, she maintains unresolved feelings towards Hagar, who gave birth to Abraham's other son Yishmael. Those feelings are only exasperated by the sight of Yishmael mocking his younger brother, her beloved son, Isaac.

Sarah demands that Abraham exile Hagar and Yishmael. In desperation, Abraham turns to God, and God in turn offers him shocking advice.

"Shma be'kolah" – "listen to her," says God to Abraham.

"Listen to her."

How could God give Abraham such advice? Did God truly mean for Abraham to cast out Yishmael in this way?

Clearly, that was how Abraham understood and interpreted God's advice. He obeys Sarah and sends Hagar and Yishmael away.

Abraham obeyed Sarah, but perhaps, perhaps Abraham never really took the time to listen to Sarah, as God had originally suggested.

"Shma be'kolah" – "listen to her."

How different the story would have been had Abraham taken some more time to listen, to actively listen to his wife, to Sarah's lament.

"Shma be'kolah" – might have simply meant, listen to the pain in her voice; listen to the longing in her cry.

If only...If only Abraham followed the laws that pertain to listening to the voice of the shofar...If only Abraham didn't rush to fix the problem, but instead spent time validating Sarah's feelings; profound emotions that were caught in years of struggles with infertility...If only Abraham had connected, for just a moment, with Sarah's deep concerns for Isaac's future as the inheritor of his father's spiritual legacy.

How often does our lack of listening, our need to fix, or our impulse to offer advice, result in broken family or communal dynamics, in the casting out of one over the other, of sending away people whom we truly love.

"Shma be'kolah" – like the shofar, challenges us to take the time to listen, to hear and validate, so that we may connect, so that we may find each other and heal.

The conclusion of this same narrative offers a striking contrast by way of God's personal example.

The reading ends with the disturbing image of Hagar casting Yishmael to the side. Lost in the desert, Hagar can't withstand the sight of her son dying from the heat, from hunger and thirst. Hagar breaks down and cries out to God.

The next verse is astounding – *"Va'yishma Elohim et kol ha'naar"* – "And God heard the voice of the lad." It is astounding because the Torah never described the voice or the cry of Yishmael at all, only that of Hagar. In actuality, we are led to believe, the child never even raised his voice, Yishmael never cried. And yet, God hears the voice that does not speak, the cry that does not come out.

The name Yishmael literally means God will hear. God is an active listener, so much so that God hears between the lines, God hears even the things that are not being said.

Like the famous Paul Simon song, the Sound of Silence, Abraham listens but doesn't hear and in contrast, God hears even when no one is speaking.

In the Shofarot section of the Mussaf service, we read the words of the prophets: “*Ve’kitekoa shofar tishmau*” - “And you shall hear it as if a shofar was sounded.” We are challenged to hear “*kitekoa shofar*” – listen as one would the call of the shofar.

Imagine how different our relationships with ourselves, or with each other, or with God and the torah, were to become should we learn to listen “*kitekoa shofar*” with the intentionality and focus associated with the sounding of the shofar.

This year, I begin my fifth year as our shul’s rabbi. To be sure, these first four years have been filled with blessed moments. I thank each of you for the opportunities we had to grow, to mourn, to study, and to celebrate together. At the same time, like each of us, I have a few regrets; some decisions and some words that I wish I could take back. But more than all of these, I regret moments when I may have failed to connect, to stop and hear, and truly listen. I pray that if I let some of you down, and I am certain that I did, that you will give me the opportunity to hear you again, so that we can continue to grow and connect.

Rabbi Daniel Landes, Rosh Yeshiva of the Pardes institute in Israel, tells this story about his great uncle, Rav Aryeh Levin, the famous Tzaddik of Jerusalem.

When Rabbi Landes was in his late teens, Rav Aryeh brought him around on his many visits to sick and needy people throughout Jerusalem. They would visit each person for about five minutes and then go visit the next person. Rabbi Landes recalls how as a young man he felt worn out by the running around and seeing of so many people.

And yet, years later, at Rav Aryeh's funeral an old woman came up to R. Landes. She was one of the people whom he visited with his great uncle many years before. The woman told Rabbi Landes how she couldn't believe how much time such an important person as Rav Aryeh would spend with her each time he came to visit. She said she felt like he was with her for hours.

Rabbi Landes ends the story by commenting on how the quality of Rav Aryeh's attention was so powerful that a few minutes of this "active listening" could feel like hours. He was so present

with each person that they felt like they were with him for a long time.

We are about to hear the blowing of the shofar. The sounding takes but a few short minutes, but the impact of our active listening can last a life time.

This year, as we listen, as we truly hear, may we begin to connect anew, and may we return speedily to each other and to God.