



Temple Rodef Shalom

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A Listening Heart

We all know what we say to our kids will come back and haunt us. One morning, when Aaron was four, he asked for some milk. I was too busy filling cereal bowls and trying to prevent the usual breakfast spills. When Aaron got frustrated, what he said was jarring to hear in his little voice: “How many times do I have to ask you?”

Clearly, these were not the words of a four-year-old. The words were mine. But the experience was Aaron’s, and Shoshie’s and Jonah’s. As kids, they know very well the feeling of not being heard, just as, apparently, they know what it is to be accused of not listening. These might be two of the first lessons we learn as children, and unfortunately, most of us learn them over and over as life goes on.

For Aaron and his siblings, listening means do as you’re told: Get dressed. Put on your shoes. Get in the car. Stop grabbing your brother’s magic wand. Use your inside voice, please. To listen is to obey. But as we get older, we come to understand that these are two different things. When the Israelites receive the Torah at Sinai, they respond with two words: *Na’aseh V’nishma*. *Na’aseh*, we will do or we will act, teaching us that Judaism is a religion of action. And, *Nishma*, we will listen. Judaism is also a religion of listening. I would like to explore with you today what Judaism teaches us about listening, how important it is to the human experience, to our understanding of ourselves and to our relationships with others.

*I am sitting at a café, overhearing a couple’s conversation. The guy is looking at the menu. Maybe he’s thinking about something he has to do at work, or rescheduling a doctor’s appointment. Maybe it’s garbage day and he didn’t pull the cans to the curb that morning. The woman is talking about an argument she had with a coworker, how she regrets some of the things she said; she’s trying not to get angry so easily but she just couldn’t help it this time. But she’s not getting any reactions from her husband. Finally, she taps her keys on the table. Are you listening to me? He puts down his menu and looks at her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear a word you said.”*

Does this sound familiar? Every one of us has been on both sides of this experience. Perhaps that’s why the first promise the covenant requires of us is *Nishma*, we will listen, and why every morning and every night tradition calls us to repeat the same command: *Shema!* Especially today, the special Yom Kippur melody of this prayer calls out to us. Like a shofar blast it demands our attention and knocks us out of our preoccupations. During the *Shema* prayer, some of us even cover our eyes to block out the visual distractions that get in the way of hearing the prayer’s message.

Listening demands of us something very difficult. We have to silence the million things that are bouncing around our brains, stop planning our own lives for a moment, and give our attention to someone else. Most of us think we're better listeners than we are, and that we get better at listening as we get older. But a study at the University of Minnesota interrupted students in the middle of a lesson and asked them what the teacher was talking about. First graders had no problem. Ninety percent could tell you. Junior high students? Forty four percent. High school? Three quarters of students couldn't tell you the topic in the middle of the lesson. How do you think grown-ups would do? You'll find a quiz on the way out of the service on the key points of my sermon.

Think for a moment about how much time we spend *not* listening. Have you sat in a meeting lately and glanced around the room at all the people looking at their phones? It isn't personal. We have an abundance of things to ponder and keep track of, from whether the Nationals won tonight (I won't tell you in case you're DVRing it), to how the national election polls have shifted in the last five minutes, to worries about our parents or our children, to remembering whether we left the oven on or the door unlocked. So the first question for each of us is, what will we do, when a person is talking to us, to quiet all that other noise? Will we put down our phone? Look up from our work? Can we set aside our other concerns for a moment, clear our minds, and put this conversation first?

Just like many actions, listening is too deep to be expressed in one word. In Hebrew, there is *Leha'azin*, coming from the same root as *ozen*, ear. There is *Lishmoa*, like *shema*, and there is even a third word, *L'hakshiv*, to pay attention. A lot happens when we listen. Good listening has the power to transform us, and even the person to whom we listen. We can gain deeper understanding; strengthen a relationship; move towards change; and, we can give the gift of making a person feel truly heard.

*Moses sits in the Israelite camp, wilting under the blazing sun, with crowds around him all wanting his attention. He is ready to collapse from pressure and exhaustion. You have to feel bad for Moses – nobody listens to him! Not Pharaoh, and not his own people. And when people do respond to him, all they do is complain. We need water. This manna is awful. What were you thinking, taking us here? You're going to get us killed. Suddenly Moses looks up and sees his father-in-law, Jethro, who has come to visit him. Right away he comes back to life. Finally, he thinks – Someone who won't ask anything of me or criticize me, whom I can tell about the exhilarating and tormenting time I've had as the leader of this people.*

*Moses runs to Jethro and kisses him. They go into a tent to be alone, and Jethro is there to listen. Moses begins, emotionally unloading everything that's been on his chest for months: God's enthralling and mind-boggling voice at the burning bush, Pharaoh's anger and threats, how frightening it was when the river turned to blood, the terror of seeing*

*the Egyptian soldiers about to trap them at the edge of the sea, and finally, the miracle of walking to freedom. We don't know how long they sit there, maybe hours, maybe days – as long as Moses needs to be completely heard.*

From this story, we learn what a gift we give when we offer a person our full attention and let them tell us what is on their mind. But the most amazing part of this story, to me, is Jethro's total silence. He listens to Moses without comment. Let's imagine for a moment how this conversation might have gone with the average father-in-law, or spouse, or friend. How many times must Jethro, an experienced Midianite Priest, have wanted to interject during this long and crazy story? "Are you kidding? You just walked up to Pharaoh and *said* that to him? What did you think was going to happen? And, just so you know, next time, you just bear left, a little further north, and you can go around the Red Sea."

But somehow, Jethro knows not to say these things. He sees that he is not there to do anything but hear Moses, and be there with him in recounting his experience. Jethro understands the wisdom that Ecclesiastes' famous words can offer us about listening: that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. We have much to learn from Jethro. He shows us a special kind of listening, one that we know how to do, but every one of us needs to be reminded. Jethro shows us listening as an act of generosity. If we can recognize the moments when we can give this kind of gift, we can bring a person healing, we can help them and ourselves grow, and we can make our relationships much deeper.

Let's look at three things that Jethro does for Moses during this moment in the tent. First, he listens without expressing judgment. We are all aware that there are moments when we are not supposed to express our point of view. Our opinions may come out of genuine wisdom and experience. And of course, we may be right. In spite of all that, when we are listening to someone at an important moment, an opinion from us will get in the way. How many of us have had the feeling of not wanting to talk to our loved ones because we are afraid they will judge us? As listeners, how hard is it to keep from letting our opinions show? When we are vulnerable and in need of support, nonjudgmental listening is the key to being heard.

The second thing Jethro does for Moses? He refrains from offering advice. When was the last time you spoke with a spouse or a friend, and instead of the gift of listening, you received a piece of advice? I'll bet you can think of such a time! It was really good advice! But in that moment, as you were hoping for the gentle hug of a listening ear, it felt like the harsh poke of criticism. When you said, "*I missed my meeting because I didn't have the right address.*" And you were hoping for, "*That's awful. Was it an important meeting?*" But you heard, "*You should really leave yourself more time.*" The understanding is withheld and the advice wasted. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

And the third gift that Jethro gives to Moses is that he doesn't respond to Moses' story with a story of his own. Perhaps Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh reminds him of a fight he once had to wage in his past, but he decides to keep quiet. As Jews, we know the importance of telling our stories. They teach us lessons and define who we are. Sharing these stories with each other and trading similar experiences are the building blocks of relationships and can be of great help. If I hear of a difficult diagnosis that a friend just received, I know that telling them about health challenges my own family has experienced might really help this person to feel they are not alone. But if I'm at my best, I will wait for the right time to bring this up. It might risk cutting them off, keeping them from telling me about their unique experience and how they feel about it.

Jethro reminds us that there are times when a person needs to be heard without interruption; when we need to ask a question instead of sharing information; when it needs to be about them and not about us. Can you think of a conversation when you began to tell a person something really important, and the well-intentioned response you received shut you down? When you've said, "I've had an awful week," and you got the response, "Oh yeah, me too." How might that conversation have felt if the response had been different: "I'm so sorry. Tell me what happened."

Let's try to think of a conversation when we might have failed to do this. Where might that conversation have gone if we had slowed down our talking and tried to listen more first? Perhaps it would have led to a moment of emotional healing? Or to a deepening of a relationship when we learned something about our friend that we couldn't believe we didn't know? There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

There *is* a place for all of these things that Jethro refrains from doing with Moses. We have to give advice – it is one of the ways we help. We need to express our judgments, which can help others as well. And, the world would be a lonely place if we did not tell our stories. But Jethro shows us that the time to do these things is after a person has been completely heard. After we have shown someone that we understand and value their experience, then there is a place for offering our help. At that time, if we have done our work, they will be ready to listen.

Moses is said to be very humble, but almost any time he is criticized in the Torah by another person, he responds fiercely and defensively. The exception is with Jethro. The morning after Jethro has listened lovingly to Moses, Moses begins to hold court, as he usually does, with hundreds of Israelites waiting for him to personally settle their disputes. People stand in line for hours, and Moses has time for nothing else. It's the kind of setup that is clearly a bad idea, and everyone can see that except Moses.

But this morning, Jethro gets through to him. "What is this you're doing?" he says. "This is not good." It's just the sort of blunt criticism Jethro resisted offering the night before. It's the kind of comment that is challenging to receive. But when a person feels they have been heard, they, in turn, will be ready to listen. This is when it becomes possible

to say what has to be said. Moses does hear Jethro, and his advice represents the world's first instance of representative governance. This exchange shows true friendship and growth, and it only comes through the gift of listening.

When Solomon begins his service as King of Israel, the Torah tells us he encounters God in a dream. God says to him, "Ask what I shall give thee." Solomon is overwhelmed. For what should he ask? Courage like his father David? Strength like Samson? Charisma and eloquence like Moses? What does he need to be a wise leader and bring peace to his war-torn kingdom?

Finally, Solomon responds to God, "Give me a listening heart." Solomon understands that true listening does not come easily. It is a skill that takes insight, it is a selfless act that requires the patience to put someone else first. But he knows that it is through listening that we gain understanding. Listening is magnetic and it pulls us closer to one another. It is only by opening ourselves up and hearing what others have to say that we can really be of help.