

Kol Nidre

During Rosh Hashanah we talked a lot about transitions. In the coming year, we as a community and as a country will continue to talk a lot about transitions. Probably every year is a year of transition, but some years allow those transitions to be conscious and more purposeful than others. Whenever I think about imminent changes, my mind often goes back to other times of change. This year is no exception. Recently I was remembering my first contract here at CJC: it ran from August 1, 2000-July 31, 2002. As I was interviewing for this job, I expressed my belief that anyone new to a community should spend the first year or two listening. It was not my job to come in and change you. It never has been my job to change someone else. I am lucky when I can change myself. Rather it is my job to learn about and with you, share my experiences, learn from other places, and then facilitate the change you want for yourself. And so those first two years, I listened and learned. We had parlor meetings all over the congregation; meetings; lots of lunches and breakfasts; Shabbat get-togethers. Boy! Did I get an earful: Girl! Did I learn! Since then I have been interacting with different aspects of what was shared, then and since. You set our agenda and have been setting it from the beginning.

And yet, as I look around the world today, I do not see or hear a lot of listening. In fact, I hear how listening is defined as a lack of action, a form of inaction, lack of commitment, lack of ethics. I can think of nothing more exhausting, enlightening and empowering than effective listening.

Now obviously, to listen, **one** must have someone else or something else to listen to. Someone has to be communicating. And I am sure, based on the rabbinic emails and listservs that I belong to, many rabbis around the country this High Holy Day period are talking about speech, ethical speaking, taking responsibility for our words. Also a very timely sermon if you ask me. **If for no** other reason, Judaism is a religion filled with words. Gd created our **world** with words: Kol Nidre itself is all about words. As Rabbi Dov Elkins wrote, "Words can be a curse and they can be a blessing.On KN eve we are called to use our words **wisely.**" In the traditional *Al Chet*, one of our confessional prayers, 11 of the 44 sins are sins of speech. But as I have been listening, reading, and watching our public and private conversations take place, I have become less and less interested in what we had to say and more concerned with how we were listening or not listening, as the case may be. You see, effective communication really **does need** both a communicator and a listener, and in most cases, the same person is both.

So my question for us today is, “What does Judaism have to teach us about listening?” The prayers in our High Holy Day service **that have** to do with listening can be divided into two categories. One beseeches Gd to listen, while the second begs us to hear. First Gd: the most famous High Holy day prayer requesting, begging, imploring Gd to listen is *Shema Koleynu*. This prayer echoes the *Asher Bidvaro* that we say in the evening service.

Both prayers remind me of a child jumping up and down in front of his or her parent while she/he is cooking dinner, talking on the phone, and trying to plan the evening activity.

“Please Gd, while you are dealing with all the crisis’s of the world, please, please, please hear me. Understand what I want to tell **you**. Hear my words, but more important than my words, listen to my intention, my unspoken needs.” In effect, *Shema Koleynu* is begging Gd to listen to the unspoken prayers. In Psalm 17 we ask Gd to listen to us, not as an end in of itself, but rather as a means to action. The action on Gd’s part is to answer us with justice and compassion. This type of prayer is us talking to Gd, describing the kind of listening that is lacking often in our own world. The kind of listening that hears the intent of the speaker – not just the words spoken. The kind of listening that wants to learn and change the **listener’s** mind rather than listening for the right comeback to make the next point. The kind of listening that gives the speaker the benefit of the doubt; instead of categorizing and dismissing what s/he has to say.

And then there are the other prayers about listening, the most famous of which is the *Shema* “Hear O Yisrael Gd is our Gd, Gd is one.” This prayer, like others, is talking to us, begging us to understand something-not to memorize it, though knowing the prayers by heart, is kind of cool; not to recite the prayer back, though singing loudly is greatly appreciated; but really the goal is not either of these. The goal is to listen. In the second temple period, some scholars think that the words of the Shema were actually a responsive prayer. The priest said, “Listen O Yisrael,” the congregation responded, “Gd is our Gd,” the priest continued “Gd is one.” This one line prayer is one of the oldest liturgically used prayers in our religion. We say it at almost every service. We are to recite it before we go to bed; it is the first prayer we teach our children; it is the last one that is to be on our lips as we die. After the holocaust, it was the *shema* that was used to identify Jewish children hidden in convents.

But how often do we really listen to it? The *shema* is asking us to listen, but what is it asking us to listen to? What are we to understand?

After the priest implored us to listen, we respond that Gd is our Gd. Ok, that makes sense. We are affirming our intention to be in this sacred covenant. But is that really what the priest wants us to hear? If so, how can we hear it if we are reciting it? No, I think that is what we want Gd and the priest to know about us. We are part of this relationship. Not by accident or birth only but also by desire and commitment. We are here, today, because we believe that we have a stake in this religious community. Some of us have bigger stakes than others, but a stake nonetheless. In a busy world where time is money, you have given to us a very valuable resource - your time. May I never take that gift for granted. For some of you, your gift is based on a belief in Gd-for others, it is a belief in community, family, identity, something that transforms the *I* into a *We*, that places each of us in a larger context, part of something bigger than ourselves.

If we go back to the second temple recitation, after we declare that Gd is our Gd, we are not done. Then the hard work begins. We must quiet not only our mouths, but our minds and souls. Some of us, including myself, find it very hard to quiet our minds and souls. And yet how can we possibly listen to the priest or the prayer if we do not? "Gd is one," responds the priest. Ok and? Gd is one? Historically the declaration of monotheism was revolutionary. But today? How does Jewish tradition understand this three word phrase? Gd is one. We are taught by the rabbis that we cannot really know or understand Gd so when the prayers describe Gd, the prayers are really describing who and what **we** should aspire to be. In other words, the phrase, Gd is one, is not really about Gd but rather about us. Are we one?

Now I know we all do not look the same, think the same, and want the same things. I really was listening at all those parlor meetings. So how can we be one? Some of you know that I believe that the best children's books are really for adults. One of those books is by Rabbi Sandy Sasso who will be coming to CJC on March 26th. Stop at the flier table outside and pick up the save the date flier. She is going to speak to adults and children. You do not want to miss it! Anyways, one of her books is entitled In Gd's Name. In this book everyone and everything in the world has a name except for Gd. The people decide they need to find a name for Gd. Each seeker in the book claims he or she alone knows the answer. The woman who cared for the sick offers "Gd healer." The man who tended sheep in the valley said "Gd shepherd." The child who was lonely called Gd "friend." Finally, they come together around a lake and share their names at the very same time. The magic of the story is not that they heard the same thing. In fact, there was no way all of those different beliefs could possibly be conflated, into one name, but

rather, they heard what Gd's name really is by sharing the ultimate harmony of belief in one Gd by people of all faiths and all backgrounds. They heard the harmony of all the names. They listened to the oneness of Gd and heard the necessity of each line of music to make the composition beautiful. They listened and in the silence following the priest declaration of Gd's oneness, I imagine they looked around the room, as I encourage you to do so tonight. They saw people they knew, and liked, people they never met, people dressed like them or maybe people dressed in a way they thought unique. They heard voices that pleased, and voices like mine that sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

And as they looked around at some people snoozing during my sermon, others engaged and still others chatting with their neighbor, they saw for the first time our oneness, our ability to sit around the lake and see each other reflected back in perfect harmony. They listened.

I imagine that they not only heard different names for Gd in one language, rather in many different languages, all spoken at exactly the same time. I have always admired people who are truly bilingual. For a person who is bilingual is also bicultural. Language is a window into another way of thinking and being. So by completely learning another language, one is able to reflect back on a different way of being at our most fundamental level-communicating. As some of you know, I have studied three languages. My second language is sign language. For a while as a student, I was the student rabbi of Philadelphia's congregation for the deaf. As a result, I learned some of the signs for the different prayers. One of the signs that has stuck with me is the sign for the prayer *shema* or rather the word "Shema" which we often translate as "Hear." In the congregation I served at that time over 20 years ago, the sign used was (show sign). Now at the time, I was really confused by this choice because I knew enough sign to know that the sign for hear is (show sign) not (show sign). So why was this community using this other sign. Well, as I learned, the sign (show sign) actually means "pay attention." "Pay attention, Oh, Israel." Pay attention to what you are seeing, hearing, feeling, believing, wanting, doing, being.

Pay attention Oh Israel to what your neighbor, spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend, and community member is seeing, hearing, feeling, believing, wanting, doing, being.

Pay attention Oh Israel. Listen. Hear. Transform who you are, because of what you have heard. For if you hear and are exactly the same, you have not paid attention, you have not listened.

If you see confrontations on the city streets all over our country and only see blue or black, then you have not listened. If you see political debates and only hear educated versus uneducated, you have not heard completely. If you see a hijab and celebrate diversity or feel fear, you have not paid attention. If you see guns as weapons of destruction or weapons of self-defense, you do not see clearly. If you see inappropriate behavior and you call it crazy or sick, you are not being transformed by the experience. If you see a map of the Middle East and see only Judea and Samaria or Israel and Palestine, you are not paying attention. If you categorize people into boxes, how can you truly listen to what they have to say? Our country has forgotten how to listen. We have forgotten nuance, spectrums and, most important, compromise.

Living in community requires compromise-not because one is selling out or giving up or getting something else in exchange, but rather because truth with a capital T is never right or wrong but some confusing mixture of both, just as we are rarely right nor wrong but some complicated mixture of both. The very creation of our legislative system is a compromise called the Connecticut Compromise. Small states demanded a Congress where each state had equal representation. Large states, on the other hand, thought their larger populations meant they deserved greater representation in Congress.

Fortunately, Roger Sherman, a delegate from Connecticut, proposed his Connecticut Plan, also known as the Great Compromise. The plan created two separate houses in Congress: a House of Representatives that had proportional representation and a Senate with equal representation. If Roger Sherman had not listened enough to hear the validity in both positions, our country might be very different. Now, I am not suggesting that we should compromise, our very fundamental values. Nor can everything we believe be a fundamental value.

There is a book, Reflections of the Maggid, written by Rabbi Paysach Krohn in which he collects true stories from around the world that reflect ethical ways of being in the world. One of the stories takes place in Argentina in a kosher slaughter complex comprised of several buildings. The entire area was surrounded by a tall chain link fence and everyone entered through an iron gate in the front, near the parking lot. The owner, Izzy Nachmal, was a workaholic. He was the first one in every morning and the last one out every evening. He made it a point to know every worker. The guard at the front gate, Domingo, knew that when Izzy left in the evening, he could lock the gate and go home. One evening as Izzy was leaving, he called out to the guard "Good night, Domingo, you can lock up and go." "No," Domingo called back,

“not everyone has left yet.” “What are you talking about?” Izzy said. “Everyone left two hours ago”. “It is not so. One of the butchers Rabbi Berkowitz hasn’t left yet.” “But he goes home every day with the other butchers. Maybe you just didn’t see him.” “Believe me, I am positive he didn’t leave yet.” The guard insisted **they** better go look for him. Izzy knew that Domingo was reliable and conscientious. He decided not to argue.

They searched the dressing room, ran to where the animals were slaughtered, searched the truck dock, the packing house, going from room to room. Finally they came to the huge walk-in refrigerated room where the large slabs of meat were kept frozen. They opened the door and to their shock and horror, they saw Rabbi Berkowitz rolling on the floor, trying desperately to keep himself warm. They ran over to him, lifted him off the floor, helped him out of the refrigerated room, wrapped blankets around him, and made sure he was warm and comfortable. Finally Izzy turned to Domingo and asked, “How did you know that Rabbi Berkowitz hadn’t left? There are over two hundred workers here every day. Don’t tell me you know the coming and goings of every one of them?” “Every morning,” Domingo answered, “when that rabbi comes in, he greets me and says, ‘Hello.’ He makes me feel like a person. And every single night when he leaves he tells me, ‘Have a pleasant night.’ He never misses a night. To tell you the truth, I wait for his kind words. Dozens and dozens of workers pass me every day-morning and night, and they don’t say a word to me. To them, I am nothing. To him, I am somebody.”

Rabbi Berkowitz listened to Domingo’s need to be treated as a human being with dignity and respect. Domingo heard and paid attention to Rabbi Berkowitz’s silence. What would we hear if we chose to heed the priest’s plea to listen, if we chose to pay attention to the unity found in the harmony we all share? In a moment we will rise for the silent *Amidah* found on pp. 740-774 or the alternative meditations on pp. 1-20. This evening as we begin our Yom Kippur marathon, please take some time to listen.

To listen in this time of transition to ourselves and each other not with the intent to score points or convince another, but rather to learn, build bridges and grow as a person, congregation and *b’ezrat Hashem*, a country. *Shema Yisrael*, Listen/pay attention/hear o Israel, for we truly are made in Gd’s image with the ability to be one unified, harmonious diverse community if only we choose to be. Please rise.