

*Listening for Truth*  
*September 7, 2021 – 1 Tishrei 5782*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

A few years ago, I went to see an audiologist at WestMed. I checked in at one of the big desks and then hung around the waiting room on my cell phone trying to connect to their wifi which, if you're a WestMed patient you know, never really works. Finally, a nurse came out and brought me to an exam room with a couple of chairs, a sound proof booth and a machine with some headphones attached. The audiologist arrived and asked why I had come in.

“What?” I joked. She grinned at me. “How many times a day do you get that one?”

Smiling, she responded, “More than a few.”

“I'm here,” I said, “because I'm worried about my hearing. The person who has really noticed it the most is my wife, Jen.” The audiologist looked up from her notepad. “Several times a day Jen says something to me and I simply do not hear it.”

“Uh huh,” said the audiologist with a knowing look. “Let's run some tests and see what's going on.”

I entered that soundproof booth, put on the headphones and then raised my hands for various beeps for the next seven or eight minutes. When I emerged from the booth the audiologist said, “Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that your hearing is perfect.”

“That's great. What could be bad?”

“The bad news is that you're apparently not listening to your wife!”

While occasionally failing to listen to our loved ones is a problem as old as the institution of marriage, our society is experiencing a failure to listen that is threatening the fabric of our country. It used to be that everyone, regardless of party, read the same community newspapers. It used to be that we gathered with people in community who had wide ranging political views. Our voting patterns did not determine our bowling leagues or our softball team. While national politics may have brought out ideological differences, we could talk about them with one another.

Today, that is no longer the case. We seek newspapers whose editorial page agrees with our politics. We find friends who share our views. We simply do not discuss politics at Thanksgiving. We click on the articles that we agree with on our social media feeds thanks to an algorithm designed for selling ads. The regular redistricting of congressional seats rewards candidates that run far to the left or the right. And when we hear their campaign messages, they usually demonize the other side rather than offer their own nuanced thoughts on policy or ideology. This overlays a political system based on two parties that has trained us to think that

every issue has only two sides rather than the truth: that most issues stretch across a continuum of nuance and grays.

This polarization – of not only politics but communities, friendships and families – means that we fail to expose ourselves to a variety of ideas, perspectives, philosophies and ideologies. This makes our intellectual life poorer. This allows us to become sloppy with our own thoughts and positions. If we only hear from people we agree with, we cannot consider and reconsider our positions. We do not need to examine new evidence and information. We lose nuance and simply look to see what our favorite columnist has to say and then we know what we think. This laziness has an impact that goes far beyond sloppy thinking. This laziness makes entire portions of our country disappear. Or, worse, it makes entire portions of our country into the enemy. If we do not engage with people with whom we disagree, they become the other, the great boogeyman that we can blame for all our problems. When we do not engage with people with whom we disagree we begin to assume the worst about them. We make guesses about their tribe based on their accent, clothing style, car, tattoos, gender, dress, job, music or taste in food. We lump them in with the worst stereotypes of whomever we assume to be on the other side. There are, undoubtedly, some terrible people on “the other side.” But most people do not fall exclusively into one stereotype. Most people that I know hold a nuanced, complex range of views informed by interesting life experience, reflection on the events of our day, engagement in the world of ideas, and a sincere desire to make the society better for everyone. As much as I would not want someone to stereotype me into a paranoid version of northeast-woke-progressive, I probably should not stereotype others as intolerant-fundamentalist-conservatives.

The only way to address this is to start listening. And, I am fully aware that I’m saying this to an audience of Jews, a people known for talking over one another and stepping on the ends of each other’s sentences rather than carefully listening. Still, our central prayer, the first one most Jews learn, the one that we nail to the doors of our homes, our central prayer is Shema. Listen! Hear! Harken! Pay Attention! Perhaps because we are so bad at listening, we affirm – in the most religious ways possible – the need for us to listen. We affirm that listening is the path to seek truth, to know the world around us, to be good people. Shema, listen!

This prayer, this commandment to listen, comes from the Torah. We like the idea of Torah as a book of truth, listen to it and learn how to live a good life. That seductive idea, unfortunately, fails us as soon as we open the book and start reading. Instead of offering clarity, the Torah offers terse narrative, enigmatic poetry, vague laws, endless genealogies, and a deity that veers from caring, benevolent creator to angry perpetrator of punishment to aloof transcendent power on-high. So, we read Torah with commentaries, we listen to the thoughts of great rabbis and scholars who can help us make sense of it. Their commentaries, of course, often disagree with one another, and so after listening to them we discuss it with a chavruta, a study partner, and listen to what they have to say. In the end, after listening to so many perspectives, we are left with multiple versions of the truth.

“How can the rabbi talk about more than one version of the truth?! Next is he going to tell us that there are alternative facts?” No. I won’t do that. Alternative facts are not a thing. But truth has many faces. Indeed, the ancient rabbis taught that there are 70 faces of Torah.<sup>1</sup> 70 ways to

---

<sup>1</sup> Bemidbar Rabbah 13:16

understand and interpret and find meaning and seek perspective. If we only read the plain text by ourselves, we have only one of those 70 faces, the one that first occurs to us, 1/70th. But when we listen to a commentary we gain an additional perspective, 2/70ths. When we talk to a friend about it and hear her thoughts, we gain another perspective, another truth, 3/70ths. And so on. Unless we listen to others, we cannot hope to grasp more than 1/70<sup>th</sup> of Torah. If that's true for a book, how much more so is that true for the world around us. When we fail to listen to others, especially those with whom we disagree, we can only hope to have a limited, stunted understanding of our world, of our nation, of our politics, of our communities.

Listening does not always mean agreeing. Listening can, and should, mean debating. Rabbi Yochanan said of his chavruta, his debate partner and dear friend Reish Lakish, "In my discussions with Reish Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the matter itself would become broadened and clarified."<sup>2</sup> This from the man who was one of the greatest scholars and jurists of his day! Even an intellect as great as Reb Yochanan needed to listen to the other sides, the different perspectives, the problems with his logic, the alternative possibilities. Indeed, after the death of Reish Lakish, Reb Yochanan rejected a new chevruata, a new study partner, who simply agreed with him rather than vigorously debated him. None of us have the towering intellect of Reb Yochanan. Are we so arrogant to think that we should only listen to people who agree with us?

Who is your Reish Lakish? Who do you debate with, listen to, consider? Who do you allow to challenge your beliefs and perspectives and arguments? A short time before COVID set in, I sat with one of our congregants at Starbucks. She is someone that I like very much. She is smart and accomplished and kind. And, she has very different politics from me. I asked her what I might do to better understand a broader range of perspectives, views that went beyond my steady diet of NPR, New York Times editorials, and my fellow liberal Reform rabbinic colleagues. We had a great conversation. She suggested some news sources and editorial pages that would reasonably present other perspectives. And, while most of my views still hue left of center, I have a new appreciation of alternative perspectives. I've had to reconsider some of my positions or, at the very least, the stridency with which I speak about certain ideas. In other words, by listening, I became a bit more humble about my views, a bit more open to other ideas. I am in her debt.

The humility piece of listening connects to a broader and, perhaps, more critical benefit of listening. When we listen, we affirm the humanity of one another. Our tradition insists that we are each created *בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים*, in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> Should someone created in the image of God be utterly dismissed? Should we imagine that someone created in the image of God has nothing to offer? This is not about accepting what someone says whole cloth. We can continue to disagree, but as my teacher Daniel Taub taught me, our Jewish obligation is to seek something of value in the statements of others.<sup>4</sup> If we hear someone speak and disagree with 95% of what they say, we still gain new insights and ideas from the 5% that we find worthwhile. Not only that, but

---

<sup>2</sup> Baba Metzia 84a

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>4</sup> Taub, Daniel. "Dealing with Difference – Effectively, Honestly, Jewishly: Lessons from an Israeli Diplomat and Negotiator" Shalom Hartman Rabbinic Torah Seminar. Summer 2021. I owe Ambassador Taub a debt of gratitude for not only this idea; this sermon was inspired by this lecture and our follow up email exchange.

once we have listened and understood their perspective, it is very likely that they will be open to listening to us, to hearing our ideas, to hearing our stories. When we become humble enough to listen, we will find others ready to listen to us, as well.

Of course, sometimes listening to those with whom we disagree can aggravate us. Just ask teenagers about their most recent curfew conversation with their parents. The great Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, was known as endlessly patient, so much so that a couple of friends made a bet. One friend bet the other 400 zuzim, a huge sum of money, that he could not make Hillel lose his temper. And so, the man followed Hillel around the marketplace asking him one question after another. Hillel did not lose his temper. He later found Hillel at the bathhouse. The Talmud recounts “that man said to him: ‘I have many more questions to ask, but I am afraid lest you get angry.’ Hillel wrapped himself and sat before him, and he said to him: ‘All of the questions that you have to ask, ask them.’”<sup>5</sup> Why would Hillel humor this man? Think about it. This was one of the most important men in ancient Israel. People came from near and far to learn from him, to ask his advice, to seek his rulings on legal matters. Why would someone so important be willing to do the ancient equivalent of turning off his phone to listen to the man’s questions? Because listening matters. Hillel knew that even this annoying man was worth listening to. We ignore people at our peril. When we listen, we open up new worlds, new possibilities, perhaps another 70<sup>th</sup> of the truth.

That said, listening is not only about truth, it is also about relationships and remembering the humanity of one another. How important this is in our hyper-polarized country! Talking is about us. Listening is about the other person. When people feel listened to, they know they are valued, they know they are cared for. When people feel like that, they lower their defenses. They are willing to be vulnerable. They are then much more likely to fully listen to what we have to say. The late, great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that, “Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners.”<sup>6</sup>

Truth reveals itself not only when we listen to ideas, but also when we listen to stories. In our debates with others, so often we walk down an ever-narrowing canyon of the intellect. As we get deeper and deeper into those narrow spaces of ideas and logic, the light of context begins to fade. An idea devoid of context loses humanity and its moral force, its reasons for being in the first place. And so, as we remain true to our arguments and rigorous in our logic, we should always strive to listen to one another’s stories. At first blush, we may reject an idea we hear. But the personal stories of people who have that idea may allow us to imagine a context in which we may agree with a part of the idea. When we listen to the stories that go along with someone’s perspective, we can, perhaps, find an element of the idea that we can incorporate into our own thinking even if we reject the broader premise.

The rabbis teach that there are 70 faces of Torah, 70 faces of truth. That means that the 71<sup>st</sup> or 72<sup>nd</sup> may, indeed, be false or evil or bad or hurtful. Not everything that we hear will give us entrée to the truth. Not everything we hear will add meaningfully to our perspective or challenge our pre-conceived notions. But as Jews, our responsibility is to shema, to listen, before we decide that a particular perspective is totally wrong. As Jews it is our responsibility to seek even the

---

<sup>5</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

<sup>6</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/eikev-5776/>

smallest slivers of truth in the most unexpected places, from the most unexpected people. Doing so may help us gain a bit more wisdom, a bit more kindness, a bit more holiness in our lives. Doing so will not only benefit us, it may help us start a movement of listening in this country, a movement which I pray will show that we are not as different as we imagine. If we start to listen to one another, we will quickly realize the beauty of the 70 faces of truth. Listening, together, we can reject those who preach falsehood. And then we can then come together, come together with our diversity of views, our great debates, our loud and enthusiastic disagreements, and together we can seek truth, the truth that when we really listen to one another we can accomplish anything.

כן יהי רצון

May this be God's will