

A wife is concerned that her husband is losing his hearing. She decides to test him, but she doesn't want to hurt his feelings. One evening, while he is in the kitchen preparing dinner, she stands about 30 feet behind him in the living room and asks, "Honey, what are we having for dinner tonight?"

No answer.

She moves closer and asks again, a little louder, "Honey, what's for dinner tonight?"

Still no answer. She inches up even closer a few more times and now, right behind him, she asks, "Honey, what are we having for dinner tonight?"

He turns around, looks at her, and says, "For the fifth time, we're having chicken!"

That wife was me a few years back. I couldn't understand what was with people—why was everyone mumbling? I had a rough go of it for maybe nearly a year. I was living my life, annoyed with the world because I had undiagnosed hearing loss.

I finally admitted to my husband, Kyle, that I think I might have a hearing problem, and it was even longer until I did something about it. I am happy to say that, more than a decade later, with a hearing aid in my left ear, I am doing much better. My lack of hearing caused problems in my life, not because of the disability, but because I wasn't slowing down enough to compassionately notice, pay attention, and take the time to listen. And what's more, not only had I not slowed down to truly listen to you, I had not taken the time to listen to the still small voice inside me that would have alerted me that something was amiss. That- I could not hear very well. My hearing loss is what finally helped me slow down, pay attention, and listen.

Listening is not easy. Many of us actively avoid listening because, more often than not, we hear something we dislike or profoundly disagree with—and then our anger, fear, or stress rise. Listening takes effort. In a world flooded with painful news, not listening, not tuning in, can feel like self-preservation. But when we stop listening altogether, harmful voices go unchecked, polarization deepens, and our capacity to safeguard democracy erodes. Not listening is mostly not helping our world and ourselves, and it's dangerous.

Polarization and discord are high. All the more reason to listen—especially to friends and family, whether we agree with them or not—so the people closest to us feel heard and seen. When we stop listening to others, we are also more likely to not listen to our own inner, still small voice. Letting our inner voice surface means facing our fears and worries, and that's hard to do. When we don't listen inward, we do a disservice to ourselves and those we love. As the prophet Elijah teaches, God's presence is found in the *kol d'ma mah dakkah*—the still, small voice.¹

Listening is as difficult as it is necessary, and it is a sacred act. Sacred listening about paying attention with our entire being, mind, body, and heart, to the voices of another and the still small voice within.

Our Prophet Isaiah calls to us: "Listen that you may live. Incline your ear and come to [God]; listen, and you shall be revived!"² On this day of Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the new year, when creation of the world is celebrated, and when together we return to

God and to our best selves, the primary commandment of this day is to listen to the sound of the Shofar. The Shofar calls us to wake up! Pay attention, listen to the cries, the sounds, the beauty, the pain, and the joys of the world. The mitzvah isn't to sound or to blow the Shofar; The mitzvah, the primary commandment of this day, is to listen. We listen to the Shofar and we wake up!

The most famous six words in our tradition -- *Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohainu Adonai Echad*-- do not begin with "Believe," "Obey," or even "Love." They begins with Shema: "Listen Up! Hear, oh Israel! This Shema is not a passive hearing, but the command to be an active, attentive presence in this world! The word Shema comes from the word *lishmoa*, meaning 'listen and respond'. It's relational. It's covenantal. We do not listen to hear—As Jews, the purpose of our sacred listening is to act for goodness, and repair. The Shema is not about the biological act of hearing.

In 2011, Rabbi Darby Leigh, a rabbi who is deaf and leads a congregation in Concord, Massachusetts, created a series of videos in which he signs Hebrew prayers in American Sign Language. He says, "If you tell me that the Shema, the most fundamental prayer in Judaism, is about auditory perception, then you have excluded me from the tradition,... The vast majority of my career has been spent listening. My ears may be broken, but I'm a good listener."³

Listening lowers the temperature. Listening lets love get a word in edgewise.

Research on listening indicates that we spend 45 to 50% percent of our day listening to people, music, TV, radio, and sound bites.⁴ And, about 75 percent of that time, we are forgetful, preoccupied, or not paying attention. One of the factors influencing this statistic is that the average attention span for an adult in the United States is 22 seconds. It's no surprise, then, that the average length of Ads and social media posts is no more than 34 seconds.⁵

How many of us listen to our own family members while scrolling through social media or checking emails on our phones?

In today's climate of intense polarization, listening is hardly the norm. The great divide that exists in our country, where neither side of the aisle listens to the other, has trickled down to our families and our friendships, causing rifts of deep pain, worry, and angst. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Listening lies at the very heart of a relationship. It means that we are open to the other...that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if it means making ourselves vulnerable in the process. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to their workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those they are leading. Listening does not mean agreeing, but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow."⁶

The divide in this country is vast, and we've ceased listening. There is so much that we find objectionable. And this path of tuning out will, I fear, lead to ruin. We don't listen to

change our mind on command or to score points; we listen to show up with decency and to maintain our own sense of humanity, even if what we are hearing is distressing. And most of all, we listen so we can answer what we oppose responsibly—and bring repair. If we mute others or turn away, we also often mute our own inner voice.

In the Bible, in the Book of Kings, God appears in a dream to the young King Solomon, who has just succeeded his father, King David. In the dream, God asks him, what might he need in order to prosper in his new role of King of Israel? What did he need to succeed? Anything he wanted would be granted. Power? Riches? Land? Solomon responds: "Grant me a *Lev Shomea*," a "listening heart."⁷ God is surprised and taken with this request and responds: "Because you asked for this—you did not ask for long life, you did not ask for riches, you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for ... a wise and listening heart, I now do as you have spoken."⁸ King Solomon's request that he be granted a *Lev Shomea*, a listening heart, is a strong invitation to us to tune in to our listening and discerning heart. To engage in sacred listening with another human being is the highest gift to humanity. And it takes practice and skill.

A few years ago, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality offered a course called the Shema Project—led by my friend Rabbi Myriam Klotz. She taught a three-part practice of sacred listening: *Shemi'ah*, receptive listening, *Shmirah*, pausing to allow for silence, and *Asiyah*, responding. We open to listening, we pause, we respond. *Listen. Pause. Respond.* This practice helps us meet one another in our fullest humanity.

Ideally, we listen to engage in dialogue. But listening is a partnership. When the other person isn't willing to engage in civil discourse, or when what we hear feels too hard to take in or bear, we can pause, maybe we respond with an acknowledgment: "I hear you." Then, listening to our own inner voice, we can choose the next step. In the pause, we can let our listening heart guide us. And should we hear words of hate, we listen so we can name it, resist it, and protect each other.

Additionally, when we practice listening, pausing, and responding, we become more attuned to our own voice and humanity. Perhaps, like Solomon and his request for a *lev shomea*, with a listening heart, we, too, might be led to bring wisdom and goodness into the world.

In the Unetaneh Tokef poem, which we read this morning, we proclaim, 'The great shofar is sounded, and the still, small voice is heard.' Real power isn't in volume but in paying attention. Sacred listening means we're not loading a rebuttal or waiting for our turn; we're attending—fully—to what is being said. We listen to take in.

We listen because if we ignore what is being said, ultimately, we are the ones who lose. Listen. Pause. Respond. This is how we begin the work of repair.

Sacred listening is a skill, and like any skill, it takes practice. I'd like you to join me in the practice of sacred listening. On your way out of the sanctuary this morning/afternoon, the ushers will be handing out a 'listening practice card'. It's a business-size card with the first line of the Shema prayer on one side and the listening practice on the other side. If you

are on Zoom and you want a card, please email me or Carol in our office. We will also have extras at the synagogue. I keep my listening practice card in my wallet and on my desk as a reminder to listen. As a Beth Am family, we'll return to this listening practice in many ways throughout the year. Listening and paying attention: It isn't easy, but it's holy work—and it's critical to do. And if we don't practice it now, when? If not now, when will we listen and seek repair?

Listening to those we love ultimately leads to fewer escalations.

Listening across differences won't make us agree, but it can help us recognize each other's humanity—or at the very least, motivate us to mend the brokenness we are witnesses to in this world. Listening to the still, small voice within directs the heart toward our own self-care and love—and opens us to the holiness within and around us.

May the One who listens to all—*Shomea Tefillah*—help us receive a listening heart that will guide us all towards healing, blessing, and repair. *Shanah tovah u'metukah*.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be True.

Sermon Anthem: If Not Now, When, Carrie Newcomer

¹ I Kings 19:12

² Isaiah 55:3

³ <https://www.jewishboston.com/read/paying-attention-the-inspiring-rabbi-darby-leigh/>

⁴ <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/50293>

⁵ 8 Ways School Leaders Can Practice Empathy in Listening - Valerie Brown. <https://valeriebrown.us/blog/8-ways-school-leaders-can-practice-empathy-listening/>

⁶ <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/eikev/the-spirituality-of-listening/>

⁷ I Kings 3:9

⁸ I Kings 3:11-12