

How to Become a Better Listener

Yom Kippur, Yizkor 5773

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If I were to ask what Judaism's most important prayer is, you might very well answer, the *Shema*. After all, it is the first piece of liturgy we teach our children. But if you did, you are wrong. The *Shema* is not a *tefillah* (prayer); the *Shema* is made up of verses of Torah in which God speaks to us. The first two words of the *Shema* are *Shema Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel). God is telling us to listen up and hear what he has to say before speaking to him through our *tefillot* (prayers).

And what should we be hearing as we recite the *Shema*? Essentially we should hear God telling us that in order to build a relationship with him we need to observe His commandments. Now, for whatever reason, when people think of religious observance they think of ritual observance such as, for example, kashrut, *Mitzvot Ben Adom L'Makom* (between man and God), while giving short shrift to *Mitzvot Ben Adom L'Chavaro* (between man and his fellow). But if we give short shrift to *Mitzvot Ben Adom L'Chavero* we are failing to hear God's opening message as enunciated in *Sefer Bereshit* (the Book of Genesis), which we will be reading again soon.

Genesis spends very little time addressing matters of ritual observance, but a lot of time focusing on interpersonal relationships. In particular, we see what can go wrong when one fails to listen. It's ironic. Jacob's name was changed to *Yisrael* (Israel). However, despite the fact that Yaakov's (Jacob's) descendants, who also become known as Israel, are commanded to listen, "Hear, O Israel," Israel (Jacob) himself was not able to listen. This inability to listen caused tremendous suffering to him and his family.

His first wife Leah names her first born Reuven, which is derived from the Hebrew *Raah* - see. While naming her son, Leah declares, "Because the Lord has seen my humiliation, for now my husband will love me." Leah named her second son Shimon, which is derived from the Hebrew *Shama* - listen. As she names Shimon she proclaims, "Because the Lord has heard that I am unloved." Leah named her third son Levi, which is derived from the Hebrew *Lava* - attached. As she names Levi she declares, "Now my husband will be attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.

Clearly there is a problem in this relationship and the Torah tells us what it is. "God saw that Leah was hated [by her husband] and opened up her womb while her sister and co-wife Rachel remained barren." But did Jacob hate Leah? After marrying Rachel, we are told that Jacob loved "Rachael more than Leah." The commentator the Radak explains that the fact the Leah was not loved as much as her sister made her feel unloved. God states, that

Leah is “hated” not because her husband actually hated her, but because God is showing that he hears her pain. Unfortunately, Jacob never did. Not only was Jacob tone deaf to the plight of Leah, he was tone deaf to the plight of Leah’s children who resented the preferential treatment Rachel’s sons received. Jacob did not understand that part of having a good relationship with God means having a good relationship with God’s other children.

Just because the original Israel was tone deaf to the feelings of others doesn’t mean that we, *Bnei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel), have to be. On this day of *Yizkor* (remembrances) we can make our father in heaven, Jacob, proud by showing him that we have learned from his mistakes. Parents always get *naches* joy from seeing their children surpass them. Besides, improving our listening skills will help us excel at *Mitzvot* (commandments) involving human interaction, and it’s not as hard as you think.

Dr. Gary Chapman, in his book, *The 5 Love Languages*, relates that he had been counseling Patrick, whose wife had left him. Patrick explained that his wife would come home and complain about her job. Patrick told her that she had to confront her problems head on and speak to her supervisor. She would come home the next day with the same complaints and Patrick would again give her the same advice. After a few days of this, Patrick finally told his wife not to expect his sympathy if she was not going to follow his advice. Belatedly, Patrick realized that his wife did not want his advice; she wanted his support and understanding.

Listening to people does not necessarily mean you have to solve their problems. People who work in customer service will tell you that a big part of diffusing an angry customer simply is conveying the feeling that you have heard and understand their grievance. In other words, giving people the opportunity to, “get it out of their system.”

The ability to listen and convey that you understand what you have heard can even help you succeed professionally. You are probably saying to yourself, “Come on Rabbi Saks, give me a break, you don’t get ahead professionally by listening. You get ahead by bossing people around and being the loudest. Well, if you don’t believe me I have two words for you; Bill Clinton. Remember lines such as, “It’s the economy stupid” and “I feel your pain,” from the 1992 presidential campaign. What message was Bill Clinton conveying to the American public? The message was, unlike my opponent, President Bush, I hear your anxieties and understand your suffering. Clinton’s ability to make people feel as though he heard and understood them was a crucial factor in his victory.

Whether you like Bill Clinton or not you have to give him credit for being a master of communications. But how do we, convey the sense that we have heard and understood. Before we cry out to God in the *Shema Kolenue* (Hear Our Voice) prayer that he hears our supplications allow me to share three suggestions that will help us in hearing the voices of God’s other children:

1. Listen for feelings. Ask yourself, what emotion is this person attempting to convey? When you think you have the answer, confirm. For instance, “It sounds like you are disappointed because you have not been given the opportunity to utilize your talents fully.” Those being said, wait until the speaker finishes before confirming. Research shows that the average person only waits seventeen seconds before interrupting and interjecting their own ideas. Let’s not make the same mistake Patrick made.
2. Observe body language such as clenched hands and shaking fists. These postures can often speak louder than words.
3. We have been taught as children to look at others in the eye when we speak to them. But what about when we are on the phone? Even when we can’t see others we can often tell when we do not have their full attention. If you want to give someone your undivided attention, avoid multitasking when you are on the phone. A teacher of mine, George, told me once that he was on the phone with a friend and decided to read an email while he was on the phone. George’s friend realized that George was distracted and asked him, “George are you multi-tasking while you are speaking to me?” George hesitated for a moment and his friend exclaimed, “Aha, that’s what I thought, you are” and hung up the phone on him. George

said to me, “In retrospect I deserved that.” If you are too busy to provide the person with your full attention you can simply say, “I’m interested in what they have to say, but would like to be able to give you my full attention. Can we speak after I finish what I am doing?”

I would now like to take this opportunity to compliment two men for their listening skills; and they are the two presidents I have been privileged to work with since my arrival here five years ago, Mark Wagman and Ron Makar. It is no secret that the Adas Kodesch faces significant challenges. Mark and Ron have done a wonderful job of listening to your concerns and soliciting your suggestions as to how we should proceed.

I am also listening and this is what I hear. I hear that you consider our Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth community to be a family and though families experience difficulties, they work hard in an attempt to remain united. And let me tell you, you are very wise in your desire to remain united, for Judaism certainly values *Achdut* (unity). According to the *Midrash* (rabbinic lore), as Jacob rested on his death bed he was concerned that his sons would assimilate into Egyptian society. His sons, who would blossom into the twelve tribes, reassured him they would not by proclaiming, “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokenue, Hashem Echad*” (Hear O Israel, the Lord is God the Lord is one). In other words, they were telling Jacob (Israel) that they would remain united as a family in the

service of the God of Israel. And just as in those ancient days, the demographics here today in Wilmington are not favorable, as is the case in much of the U.S. Now please listen to me carefully. In order to survive, in order to thrive we must remain united!

As we have said, listening is important and sometimes it is sufficient simply to show the other that you understand their feelings, but not in this case. Hard decisions will have to be made, not decisions that will drive us apart, not decisions that comprise our spiritual identity, but nevertheless they will be hard decisions. Ron, our executive Vice president, is acting as president until the position is filled. He has done a wonderful job, but it is now time for another to step up and partner with the board and me to ensure that Adas Kodesch thrives. My friends, we may not have the answers yet, but when I look out I am strengthened with the confidence that together we will come up with solutions and our future will be bright.