

Listen
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The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
Yom Kippur Evening – September 15, 2021

- A Hey, can you talk?
- B I have a minute or two. Is this about my email from yesterday?
- A What?...no. I had a really rough day. I got chewed out at work for something I didn't even do.
- B I had a terrible day at work too. My boss made me work late. It was the worst.
- A Yeah...well, I was really upset. And I just didn't know how to handle it.
- B One second...just checking a text. What did you say?
- A I was really upset.
- B Why don't you go for a run? That always helps me.
- A I don't want to go for a run.
- B What do you have against running?
- A I have nothing against running. I was just looking for...
- B (*interrupts*) You need to calm down. It can't have been all that bad. Don't get so upset.
- A Okay.
- B Well I have to go. Go for a run! That's the best solution.

In the Zoom world that dominated the last year and a half, only one person could talk at a time. Sometimes that meant only one person did all the talking, and everyone else did the listening. I imagine we all know the maxim, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." That was supposedly said by the Greek Philosopher Epictetus. Or maybe Diogenes. Or Onassis. Or maybe Zeno. That's the problem with good maxims. No one knows their true origin.

During this time of incredible stress and isolation, a listening ear is essential. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect [them], that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. 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 lead]. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow."¹

Yet listening is one of those skills that we aren't always so good at. For example, how many of you noticed I earlier included Aristotle Onassis as a Greek

¹ <https://rabbisacks.org/eikev-5776/>

philosopher? When we are engaged in conversation, we often turn it into a dueling match, parrying the words of the other with our own, readying ourselves to deflect or attack their next statement. We try to solve the other's problems instead of just letting them share – and perhaps find their own solutions. Or we don't even pay that much attention, daydreaming or multitasking instead of engaging the other fully. Ernest Hemingway, not a Greek philosopher, said, "When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."

Effective listening is sometimes called Active listening. Or Mindful or Empathic listening. The opening dialogue between Cantor and me is exactly what not to do when listening to someone else. We've all been frustrated when our child, parent, family, friend, co-worker, boss, customer service rep, or anyone else doesn't truly hear us. It's time to listen more.

"Active listening is the key to genuine communication. Active listening is defined as suspending internal judgment and commentary while focusing entirely on the speaker." This might include making eye contact, offering verbal clues, asking for clarification, and being there in the moment.²

Listening, authentic listening, should not include planning your response while they are talking but focusing exclusively on the other person. Often people feel the need to one-up the person speaking, sharing an even more dramatic and bigger story than the one they were just told. If your first response to someone's sharing is a statement that starts with "I," you might not be listening but speaking back at them.

We interrupt instead of waiting. "Friends are those rare people who ask how we are and then wait to hear the answer." That was said by Ed Cunningham, who was also not a Greek Philosopher but a former football player and analyst.

As Jews, we are constantly reminded of the importance of listening. The first prayer our Kindergartners are taught is the Shema, which means "Listen" or "Hear." From Deuteronomy 6:4, it is shared at every prayer service. It is traditionally said upon rising and going to sleep. It is the last phrase said by a dying person. The core of Judaism states we should listen.

The act of listening "is the key to unlocking bounty and blessing in Judaism. In Deuteronomy, as the Israelites wind down their wandering in the wilderness and prepare to enter the land of Israel, Moses instructs them emphatically using this same

² <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/judaism/active-listening-351878>

word twice — *shema*. ‘If you listen, truly listen,’ Moses says, all will be good. If not, curses will follow.’³

As much as Judaism stresses good listening, The Bible is filled with moments where things would have gone better if people had just paid better attention and asked confirming questions. What really did God say to Abraham in telling him to sacrifice Isaac at the Akkedah? Maybe Jonah should have paid a little more attention to God’s instructions? Abraham didn’t hear the pain in Sarah’s cries about Ishmael. Isaac didn’t listen to his wife or either of his sons for their struggles. Jacob never listened to the suffering in the voices of Leah and Rebekah or later in Joseph. Maybe things would have gone a little smoother in the wilderness if the Israelites immediate reaction to the laws of Exodus wasn’t to say, “*Na’aseh v’nishmah* – We will do, and then we will listen” (Exodus 24:7). Maybe if they had listened before doing, we wouldn’t have had to wait almost 2000 years for the Mishnah and the Talmud to fill in the gaps.

Jews are known for talking. Yet we really should be a people of listening. Last week, the primary commandment on Rosh Hashanah was to *hear* the shofar. Often, we just let the notes flow by us, noting the quality of the blowing this year, the length of the *t’kiyah g’dolah*. Instead, we need to truly hear the cries of the shofar as the alarm clock to change our lives for the better. Doing a better job of listening to others would be an excellent first step.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “If you’re lost, you feel afraid, and you don’t know what to say, then listen, listen to our God.” Okay, that was Heraclitus but actually Reform Jewish composer Doug Cotler. Listening to God is hard because we don’t necessarily hear any words. Listening to each other can also be challenging. When you truly are there for another person, hearing their pain, providing them a source of strength, love, and compassion, then you are listening to God by connecting with their soul.

If you haven’t been listening up to know, here’s the summary. “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” And truly listen.

A Hey, can you talk?

B Sure. Why don’t we go over here where it’s quiet. Tell me what happened?

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-shema-how-listening-leads-to-oneness/>

- A I had a really rough day. I got chewed out at work for something I didn't even do.
- B You were reprimanded for something you didn't do?
- A Yes. He just yelled at me.
- B How did it make you feel?
- A I'm still so upset.
- B How did you leave it with your boss?
- A I didn't say anything.
- B Wow that must have been frustrating.
- A It was. I just needed to share it with someone. Thanks for letting me vent. You're a good friend.