



“THE MOST POWERFUL CONNECTION”

Two stories to begin...actually a joke and a story:

One day an old man was walking along a country lane with his dog and his donkey. Suddenly, a speeding pick up truck careened around the corner, knocking the man, his dog and the donkey into a ditch.

After a long hospital stay, the old man decided to sue the driver of the truck. In the courtroom, the old man on the stand, the counsel for the defense demanded “I want a yes or no to the following question: Did you or did you not say at the time of the accident that you were “perfectly fine?”

The man said, “Well, me and my dog and my donkey were walking along the road.” The attorney stopped him, “A yes or no is all I asked. Were you “perfectly fine” at the time of the incident?”

“Well me, and my dog and my donkey were walking and...” The attorney appealed to the judge. “Your honor,” he said, “he is not answering my question. Please insist that he answer with a yes or no.” The judge, inclining toward the old man, “Well, I think he’s got something else to say. Let him speak.”

“Thank you your honor,” said the old man “Well, me and my dog and my donkey were walking along the road and this truck came around the corner way too fast, knocked us into the ditch. The driver, he stopped and got of his truck. When he saw that my dog was so bad off, he went back and got his rifle and shot my dog. Then he saw that my donkey had broken her leg, so he shot her too. Then he said, “how are you old man?” So I said, “Perfectly fine. I’m Perfectly fine.”

The second from a great Ted Talk I saw:

Economic development expert Ernesto Sirolli spent 1971 to 1977 in Africa working for an Italian NGO. His first project, in Zambia, was teaching the Zambian people how to grow tomatoes, zucchini and other Italian favorites.

Sirolli and his fellow aid workers were thrilled to see how well the crops grew. A tomato that would grow to this size in Italy, would be like this in Zambia. The land was so fertile, they could not believe that it had taken them to come in and teach the Zambians how to grow in it. They said, “Thank God we’re here.”

As harvest time approached, Sirolli and his crew were ecstatic. And then one morning, they watched in horror as 200 hippos stormed out of a nearby river and ate everything in sight. Suddenly, Sirolli understood why the locals had not been interested in growing food. When the Italian team asked the locals why they had not told them about the hippos, they said simply, “you didn’t ask.”

In the joke, just listening to the whole story brings clarity and the objective truth of the situation emerges. In the story, a lack of listening, in fact, not even bothering to ask a question, elicits a waste of time, energy, and resources. In both, understanding and progress depend on listening.

When I think about many of the very boisterous Jewish gatherings I’ve attended in my 46 years of life – seders, break-fasts and the like, I might conclude that listening is not nearly as important a Jewish value as talking.

But consider this – the central statement of our religion, the words that tradition teaches should be the first on our lips as we awaken and the last as we go to sleep; the words that are written on parchment, encased in the mezuzah on the doorposts of our houses are these: Shema Yisrael - Listen Jewish people, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad – Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. And in our service today, Cantor Solomon sang the heartfelt plea, Shema Koleinu “Listen to our call, Adonai our God.” We are taught to listen and we pray that God will listen to us. That would seem to suggest that listening does carry some weight in our tradition.

But if we Jews tend, culturally, to talk more than we listen, we are certainly not alone. We only need to reflect on the two presidential and one vice-presidential debate we’ve just witnessed. From both sides of the political spectrum, it would seem that scoring points by saying things is far more important than listening (or even politely allowing the other to speak, even if you’re not listening).

The website of the International Listening Association, lists these statistics demonstrating how bad we all are at listening:

- Most of us are distracted or preoccupied about 75% of the time when we should be listening.
- Immediately after we listen to someone, we only recall about 50% of what they said.
- Long-term, we only remember about 20% of what we hear.

Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist and author, has noted: “It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood. Listen to all the conversations of the world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf”

But Stephen Covey famously said what most of us know to be true, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”

So, we go around barely listening 75% of the time and only remember 20% of what is said when we are actually listening, because we’re really mostly thinking about how to reply – even though it is a deep human need to be heard and understood.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief Rabbi of England writes, “There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been heard. They have not been listened to. We have not “heard their pain”. There has

been a failure of empathy. That is why the use of force - or for that matter, boycotts - to resolve conflict is so profoundly self-defeating. It may suppress it for a while, but it will return, often more intense than before."

I want to admit that I am a work in progress when it comes to listening (though I'd say I've got the talking thing down pretty well) But recently I experienced the deep value in truly listening, in "hearing another's pain" as Rabbi Sacks says.

About a month ago, I had coffee with JC Faulk. JC is a skilled organizer and facilitator who has created a program called Circles of Voices. In essence, Circles of Voices is an opportunity for listening across difference. I can imagine many applications for the process, but right now, it is directed toward greater understanding among people of different skin color.

We hosted Circles of Voices this past year and more than a hundred people - BHC and non-BHC members, black, white, Jewish and non-Jewish people came together for an evening to talk to each other, and to listen to each other. It was a powerful evening.

So, at Starbucks last month, JC and I met to catch up. He told me that he had gotten the opportunity to bring Circles of Voices to a top management group at Walmart. When I asked what he would be doing with them, he said something fascinating, something I had never thought about and likely would have passed right over if I hadn't been working hard to listen. He said that one of the questions he would pose to the Walmart management group is "Have you been to the home of someone of a skin color other than your own? Have you sat on their couch, eaten a meal, and if you have was it more than once?"

As I sat there, I could only recall one time that Missy and I went to a party in the home of a co-worker of hers who was black. That revelation struck me as quite profound. How can we possibly begin to understand one another, to have a society that is diverse in more than a surface way when we literally have never been in the home of someone outside our own skin-color group?

Our conversation then took another turn that was harder to listen to. If you're like me, as I tell you, you will probably start thinking about how to negate what he said, how to push it away. If that happens, don't worry; you can just remind yourself to listen. JC told me that one narrative about Blacks and Jews within his community goes like this: Black men fought and died in World War II to save Jews from destruction. Those who were able to return from the war walked back into a deeply racist society. Though they were promised all kinds of things for their service, they were actually able to access very few of them.

The GI Bill paid for veteran's education, but most white colleges admitted very few black students and the historical black colleges were far too small to accommodate the numbers of returning vets. Low interest loans enabled white veterans to buy homes in the newly established suburbs, but black veterans were red lined, no bank would give the loan. Jewish people on the whole steadily rose in socio-economic status during those post war years, while many blacks did not. So, JC told me, the narrative is this - we laid down our lives for you. Then when you were safe, you were able to come here and get ahead, and we could not, even though we fought and died for you.

Wow. I had to sit back in my chair to let that sink in. And there was plenty of chatter in my brain - many ways to reply and disprove what he was saying because it made me feel so uncomfortable.

But I didn't, and here's the real revelation I experienced. Because I worked hard to sit and listen for a bit, I think I created a space that allowed JC to listen when I told him something that was hard for him to hear.

Later in the conversation, I told him how sad and troubled I was this summer when I read the Black Lives Matter platform because it includes the accusation that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians. I told JC that even though I disagree with the Israeli policy of occupation, to call Israel genocidal is simply wrong and frankly inflammatory. I told him that Israel's behavior throughout the Palestinian-Israeli struggle is not even close to genocide, defined as the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnic group or nation.

And here's the remarkable thing - he listened. We talked for several hours that day and the next day I got an email saying, in part, "Elissa, I also thought about our conversation throughout the day. I deeply appreciated the flow and honesty. In fact, I was up late last night checking sources related to genocide, and it appears that Palestine has one of the fastest growing populations on the planet."

So, one conversation in Starbucks is clearly not going to save the world or fix a society that is out of balance. But that conversation and the ones that have followed have profoundly changed me and I feel confident they have changed him too. I haven't asked him yet, but I would be surprised if JC hasn't shared that conversation with at least one other black person, and I'm sharing it with you. So the impact of simple (yet tremendously difficult) listening spreads like ripples through water.

In 2011, Oprah Winfrey hosted her final show after 25 years of interviewing guests. She said this "I've talked to nearly 30,000 people on this show... If I could reach through this television and sit on your sofa or on a stool in your kitchen right now, I would tell you that every single person you will ever meet shares [that] a common desire. They want to know: "Do you see me? Do you hear me? Does what I say mean anything to you?"

Race is only one realm in which deeper listening could potentially bring healing to a suffering world - in our personal relationships, in our public dialogue, in our families and communities. As Rabbi Sacks says, "it is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know.

I don't expect us all to grab someone on the street, look them in the eye and say "tell me, I'm listening." But in this New Year, perhaps we can consider who needs a little more of our listening and commit to a small change. Maybe give it a try at this evening's Break Fast - to listen a little more to whomever we share our meal with, especially if we disagree, especially if we don't know them, especially if we share that bagel with someone whose skin color is different, whose abilities are different, whose religion, even, is different.

Shema Yisrael, Listen Jewish people, Listen to how Adonai is one and we can be too. One nation, one society, one human family doing the thing that other human being desperately need - listening with empathy and respect.

As the physician and author Rachel Naomi Remen wrote, "The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention."

I wish you a meaningful fast. Amen.