

Rosh HaShanah 5768 – *Sh'ma, Yisrael!*

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G *ut yontef and shana tovah.* As the Days of Awe begin, we imagine God examining our deeds, opening the Book of Life, and deciding whether to inscribe us for health and wealth, or wear and tear. Let's envision God with pen in hand, thinking, wondering... Did David deserve the good fortune I'll grant him? What will Rachel's fate be this year? The last thing we want is for God to make a snap judgment: this is not a time for the divine knee-jerk reaction. Decision-wise, if God lacks anything, it is a companion with which to talk, discuss, and debate how to make these unique decisions when you're *melech malchei ha'm'lachim*, the King of the King of Kings.

As mere mortals, this might be the one advantage we have over God—we have each other to talk to and learn from. Yet in this last year, have we used this gift to its best advantage? Have we been listening, have we been rationally dis-cussing—or has bickering and infighting become our stock-in-trade?

In America, the war on terror has wrenched our hearts, gripped our minds, and cost hundreds of billions of dollars. It's been noisy, as shrill, discordant rhetoric explodes from nearly every corner, including the Jewish community. Two thousand years ago, when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the rabbis taught it wasn't military weakness or lack of faith that led to defeat—it was *sinat chinam*—baseless bickering between Jews—that caused our downfall and exile. In 2007, with America's honor and young soldiers' lives in the balance, there's never been a better time to pause and consider all the options, but instead we've been shouting 24/7; on TV, through the web, across the

aisles in Congress, and face-to-face—sometimes, in temple and at home.

To disagree—that's an American right and for Jews, sometimes an intellectual delight. Yet, it's the way—the manner in which we debate that creates a *makhloket l'sheim shemayim*, an argument for God's sake—or *sinat chinam*, a return to baseless bickering. Leaving behind a year packed with endless proclamations and insufficient reflection, we have to ask: are we approaching the death of civil discourse? If this is how we behave in our community, is this how we treat colleagues? Is this how we speak to family and friends?

It doesn't have to be. Ben and Jack are cousins. Ben is older, settled and successful; Jack, in his mid-thirties, still struggles mightily, not knowing what he wants to be. Neither has siblings, both come from tiny families; in a sense, they are all they've got. These guys had a great relationship until suddenly Jack became verbally abusive towards his beloved cousin. On the phone, in the store, at Grandma's place—Jack's tirades were just too much to take. After a particularly nasty incident, Ben hung up the phone, and two cousins who live a mile apart didn't speak for three years. Fortunately, in the meantime Jack evolved; he realized, even though he and his older cousin don't have much in common, Ben is all the family he's got—and that counts. He called Ben and asked to meet, and for two hours these cousins talked—but more than that—they listened. Jack's eyes glistened with tears when Ben told him he would not tolerate abuse in his life and as a result, hadn't missed Jack's presence at all. Ben was surprised as Jack confided he sometimes felt patronized by him and that in recent years, Jack was

overwhelmed with stress, foolishly feeling he had to compete with his big cousin while literally living on his last dollar. Both men listened; both men heard each other. As reconciliation was made, with it came a new willingness to be more open, more aware—and more respectful.

In this complex world, modern-day competition often tempts us to stop listening, to stop thinking about opinions other than our own, to stop long enough to realize that the “right way” may not be “my way or the highway.” As technology forces us to blink, think, to decide on a dime, Democrats and Republicans, Orthodox and Reform Jews, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and husbands and wives turn up the rhetorical heat so hot that global warming seems to pale in comparison.

Yet, with all of what challenges us . . . consider our ancient homeland. During last year’s war, thousands of missiles fell upon Israel, but even as we banded together in Los Angeles to raise funds for reconstruction, another bitter battle raged—here, in the pages of the Jewish Journal. Week after week after week, Republican Jewish Coalition ads trumpeted choice phrases by this or that Democrat designed to denigrate liberal views, declaring the only way to support Israel is the so-called “right” way. This was countered by a weekly fusillade from Democrats for Israel-Los Angeles, their ads equally defensive and aggressive in tone. Who could win such a battle? Why was it fought and what good did it do? At the end of the day, the only victor was the newspaper’s bank account. A war between Jews in the press does not change or illuminate Israel’s challenge and it certainly does not strengthen us in a time when we need all the solidarity we can get.

The Journal’s editor, Rob Eshman, suggested,¹ “...The most insidious effect [of this behavior] is the message it sends to the majority of Jews and non-Jews who support Israel but don’t always agree with its policies. That message is: there’s only one way to show you care for the Jewish state—our way. Given that choice, the silent majority of Jews drift away, and the mainstream organizations then bemoan the fact that most Jews, especially Jewish youth, aren’t involved on behalf of Israel.” He concludes, “It’s very hard to sell smart people on the idea that the best way to support the strongest democracy in the Middle East is to shut up.” I would say, rather than “shut up,” we need to listen—to listen and respectfully take into account all the opinions of our people.

And, it is listening that is at the heart of Judaism and the core of our experience in these Days of Awe. Tonight we prayed to God, *Sh’makoleinu*, “Listen to our voice.” If we ask God to listen to us, is it too much to ask for us to listen to each other? In the Talmud,² “There was a dispute for three years between the schools of Shammai and Hillel, as Shammai said, ‘The law is in agreement with our view,’ while Hillel repeated Shammai’s argument and then responded, ‘The law is in agreement with our view.’ Suddenly, a heavenly voice entered the room and proclaimed, *Eilu v’Eilu divrei Elohim chayim*, ‘Both this view and that view are in fact, the words of God.’” Opposite viewpoints: both valid in the eyes of the Divine. Who won? Talmud recounts, “The law is in agreement with the rulings of Hillel.” And why? Because rather than beginning with his view, Hillel respected Shammai by stating his

¹ Rob Eshman, “Shutting Jewish Mouths,” *Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*, 2.16.2007

² Eruvin 13b

colleague's opinion before presenting his own.

Listening.

Humility.

Respect.

Tonight we prayed, *Sh'ma koleinu*—"Listen to our voice." There is nothing we say more powerfully or proudly than *Sh'ma*—"Listen!" *Sh'ma Yisrael*—"Listen, all you Israelites!"—*Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad!*³—Adonai is our God, and God is One!" This command does not come FROM God; this command comes from US—TO us: to listen—to listen to each other. To listen, you and me, she and he, right and left, each and every one of us. *Sh'ma Yisrael*—Listen, all Jews. Listen—to each other.

Look up, ten stories to the stars: The "Sh'ma" crowns this very sanctuary. No statement is more fundamental to everyone who sat in these seats for nearly eighty years.

Listening.

Humility.

Respect.

Listening can change lives: it has for Barbie and Dave. Married for decades, they and their kids were the picture-perfect Jewish family until Barbie went through a mid-life crisis. Small issues became huge, tempers flared, substance abuse kicked in, and a beautiful family went into meltdown. Dave moved out, unwilling to subject himself to all the ugliness—and he took the kids with him. It was the proverbial bottom of the ninth, two outs, and a 3-2 pitch to Barbie to pull it together—or call the whole thing off.

What happened? Barbie listened; not just to her husband and kids but also to her self, to that divine inner voice we all have. Barbie went into rehab, began regular therapy, and stabilized her life. Now, she

hears Dave without anger and self-righteousness; now, Dave is willing to listen to his wife's story of past pain and current growth—and the kids feel their Mom is coming back. This tale isn't over; it's much more about the path than a goalpost—but constant work at listening with respect has taken this family from the brink of disaster to a place of healing and rebuilding.

Like Barbie and Dave and Ben and Jack, we all stand at the beginning of this sacred time, these Days of Awe: ten days to pay attention, reflect, and repent. Ten days to hear the hard truths, ten days to admit the mistakes, ten days to listen with uncommon care, humility, and respect.

Last year was challenging in many ways, yet the New Year holds questions of unprecedented complexity and subtlety: a Presidential election crucial to American and Israeli security, the continuing quandary of the peace process as well as a pernicious increase in anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions in academia, corporations, religious institutions, and governments around the world. Now more than ever, we need to be strengthened by our debates, enlightened by our diversity; illuminated not so much by what we say, but by how we hear each other. This year, let us resolve to grow as a people, through listening, through humility, through respect, for as with Hillel and Shammai 2,000 years ago, *Eilu v'Eilu divrei Elohim chaiyim*—both this view and that view are in fact, the words of God.

³ Deuteronomy 6:4