

REALLY LISTENING
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A couple of days ago, after conducting a service, I noticed a young woman in her late twenties or early thirties and her grandfather sitting in the front row of the sanctuary. I didn't know them so I went over to introduce myself and to wish them a Happy New Year. I instinctively reached out to shake the woman's hand, looking down to her hand as I did so. Immediately, she withdrew it and said, "I don't shake men's hands." As she was withdrawing her hand and before I could welcome her grandfather, I was already drawing a conclusion about the woman's gesture and comment. It went something like this: "Wow! that is really a shame." And the impact of her refusal echoed within me as I went on to greet others.

On my way home I continued to reflect on that brief interaction. And, as I was reviewing it in my mind, I gradually came to the conclusion that I had made two mistakes during those few seconds together: my first mistake was to instinctively react, to emotionally recoil ... too hastily and on too little evidence. Should I have given it a bit more time to allow her to offer a follow-up sentence? Did I look her in the eye as she was making her reply to give her the chance to soften her comment with telling eye contact? That was my first mistake. My second mistake was to settle on a judgment, again

too quickly ... “Wow, that is really a shame.” I had not only rushed to a conclusion, I had rushed to judgment. In other words, I asserted *myself* ... reacting, following my instincts, judging ... without allowing her reaction to take further shape. In a word, I didn’t listen. Oh, I heard the words all right, but I didn’t temper my reaction and consider what might be behind her words, what ambivalence she might be feeling, how the hastiness of her own response might be resonating within her. I privileged my reaction even while she was talking.

I regard this micro encounter and my part in it as emblematic of an important idea: that listening, real listening, is hard. Now, at this point, I sense that many of you are disagreeing with me. “No,” you may be saying to yourselves, “actually, listening is the easy part. It requires just letting the other person speak, just taking in what the other is saying ... and then responding. It’s really making the *response* that is hard.”

So, now I am going to try to convince you that listening is actually very hard ... and much harder than speaking ... and for a very simple but usually unacknowledged reason: that we have an instinctive bias against listening. Let me explain. First, let us acknowledge that we bring to our conversations a great deal of personal history and experience. And this history and these experiences have played a mighty role in fashioning our

opinions, in shaping our convictions, and in crystallizing our predilections and our prejudices ... *and* in strengthening the strong emotions that accompany them. In addition, we mostly *cherish* those opinions and points of view ... they tell us who we are; they are at the core of our self-understanding. And when, in conversation with another, those opinions and convictions are directly or indirectly called into question, we feel threatened. And then we begin to feel the need for self-assertion, and the need to express who we *are*. This, I believe, is what happened to me in that encounter of a couple of days ago. Moreover, the higher the stakes, the closer the conversation comes to core instincts and convictions, the more the need for self-assertion. And so, during a conversation, while we are apparently listening, we often find ourselves silently backing away, losing focus on what the other person is saying, and prematurely forming our response ... all with the goal of reassuring ourselves and reminding ourselves about who we are. I have watched myself doing this very thing; perhaps you have, too. I watched myself, in the encounter with that young lady and through the hastiness of my response and my judgment, reasserting my convictions about propriety and manners ... and the importance of reaching out to the other person and warmly shaking hands. At that moment a core conviction of mine was at stake ... and, when challenged, I backed away and scowled

to myself. And, in that brief encounter, I hastily, if momentarily, faded out and turned my efforts to reassert my own beliefs to myself. Fading out is natural when something of consequence is at stake in our conversations. And so, often, during the time we are listening, we are really not listening ... not really listening at all. Rather, we are looking away or turning inward, focusing on ourselves, preparing our response. We think we already know what the other person is saying long before that person has finished saying it. And then we miss the nuance, the possible ambivalence behind it. In short, we miss the humanity. And it is here that the communication begins seriously to run aground.

I think a great deal about another kind of conversation we all have ... one that takes place in the process of reading. Reading, in fact, highlights the problem of listening. I especially face this problem, not only in my own reading, but when I try to teach young teenagers how to read. And so I want to tell you what I say to 13-year olds with whom I work in preparing them to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Central to this process is leading them through their preparation of a D'var Torah, a speech. The first thing I tell them is that I want them to experience first hand a relationship with the Torah by means of having a conversation with their particular Torah portion. I tell them about the listening-and-speaking nature of a conversation. And

then I press home the point. I begin by telling them about face-to-face conversations in which you speak and I listen; then I speak and you listen. And back and forth like this. Now, when two people face one another, it is possible, in the process of the actual give and take, to correct misunderstandings and clarify ambiguities.

But, I go on to tell them, a conversation with a book or a scroll ... with the Torah, for example ... offers a special challenge because the reader must mount both components of the conversation. And for a very simple reason: the author, the initial “speaker,” is not in the room when we read. And so the reader has to make a special effort, never completely successful, to put aside bias and personal conviction and “listen” carefully to the author’s view, to recreate the author’s ideas and values from the mute words on the page. In short, the first obligation of the reader is to become the author. And this is extremely hard. To be able to do this, the reader must quiet himself or herself, put aside all comfortable convictions and cherished opinions, and get inside the author’s skin. What is the author trying to say? What stands behind his conviction? These sorts of questions. Without this kind of move of heroic self-transcendence ... and that’s what it is ... the reader will never hear the author. And the result will be that, through

selective and self-affirming listening, the reader will do little more than reinforce his own biases.

This process is what I call “the ethics of reading.” The obligations of the reader. And I go on to tell my 13-year old, that only when the reader has given the author a real chance to be heard, does the reader earn the right to talk back, to offer her opinion, to take on the author, to assert herself. And this process is precisely *how* to earn the right to disagree. Now, to see just how hard this kind of thing really is, I suggest that we all engage in an experiment in the days ahead: to the liberals among us ... try to see the power and even the truth in the points of view of Fox News or The Wall Street Journal. And to the conservatives among us ... try to see the power and even the truth in the editorial page essays of The New York Times. Indeed, how many of us have even tried this? Now, I’m not suggesting that you agree with positions usually inimical to your own. Just that, before you get your hackles raised and assert your disagreement, you try to “see” and “really hear” the opinion of the other.

And this “ethics of reading” is simply a special case of “the ethics of listening.” And what I tell that 13-year old sitting in front of me is this: you have an absolute right to your opinion and we want to hear it in your D’var Torah. But you cannot really authentically tell us what you think about your

Torah portion before you know what the author is trying to tell us in his own terms. First, you must take the author seriously; then you can tell us what you think. Does your Torah portion deal with sacrifices? Then first try to discern what truths might be contained in this apparently altogether primitive ritual before you tell us what you think. Do you shrink back from G-d's commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son ... and Abraham's willingness to do so? And then leave it at that ... without trying to see what real power there is in that story? Are you bothered by the claim that G-d is angry? But before you harden your response, make the effort to see what the author might be driving at, what plausible, even compelling, ideas might be contained in these deeply puzzling, deeply disturbing passages. Listening ... deep listening ... comes first. And it is hard. Because, in reading as in speaking, we are always tempted to ignore what the author is saying and indulge in a self-serving interpretation or an all-too-easy dismissal. It is hard when we read and it is hard in a face-to-face conversation, when we feel that our deeply cherished positions or our settled instincts are being challenged ... when we sense a threat to who we are at our core. And when we feel the dissonance ... and I've experienced myself doing the following over and over again ... we fake listening and look for our interlocutor to inhale, ready to jump right in with our own words. Or worse, we start responding out

loud even before the other person has finished her thought. At this point, the conversation has ceased and the dialogue has become two monologues.

But I want go one step further and suggest that there are really two kinds of listening and therefore two kinds of effort that must be made. Yes, the words are important and we must pay attention to them. But more than this, we must try to listen to the import behind the words, not only what the person is saying, but what the person is *trying* to say ... often with great difficulty. And when the conversation is serious and when emotions are high, the words on our lips almost always fail to convey what we are trying to say ... fail to account for the stammerings of our hearts. The words are there, present, right in front of us, and hearing them is hard enough. But the import ... and often the urgency behind the words ... *that* is not so present because it is fraught with feeling. We all know what it is like to try to tell someone how we feel, how our heart aches, how confused we are; and how acutely we realize the utter inadequacy of our words to the task of conveying this. And if the *speaker* knows how much difficulty he or she is having trying to convey the chaos of our feelings, how much the more challenging will it be for the *listener* to discern what is meant, especially when the emotions are so high. And so, if we are really going to begin to understand the person standing next to us, we must listen with a different kind of

attention. An attention grounded in empathy, an attention that begins with *the deep desire* to understand ... and the willingness to make ourselves as vulnerable to the speaker as the speaker has made him- or herself vulnerable to us. The Talmud expresses this idea brilliantly: “If one translates a verse [or takes someone’s words literally], that person is a liar.” (*b. Kiddushin* 49a). The literal word, written or spoken, often conveys, but it often conceals, because of the insufficiency of words alone to convey the deepest, most human, most fraught, meanings. This is why we have poetry ... and tears.

I want to conclude by saying something about the rewards that come ... that *may* come ... from careful listening and deep attentiveness. First, by taking seriously what the other person is both saying and trying to say, we thereby accord dignity and weight to that person and that person’s opinions. And that person is likely to notice this and, in turn, be willing to make a similar gesture in our direction. Conferring dignity is often met with a reciprocal conferral. The gesture of validation is contagious and the relationship is strengthened. And, in the process, the conversation is also enlarged. Not that the disagreements disappear, not that self-assertion is overcome. But “in the exchange of words [truly heard], the thing meant

becomes more and more present” (Hans-Georg Gadamer). Perfection is beyond us, but improvement lies within reach.

Moreover, careful and thoughtful listening can lead to a more aware and thoughtful existence. We can become more open to the world around us, more aware of the glorious spectacle of human depth and variety.

I can’t help, at this point, thinking about the first two words of our most important communal affirmation, the Shema, which begins: “Hear, O Israel.” What does this mean? What kind of imperative is intended by these two pregnant words? Yes, of course, “listen, listen with your ears.” But listening is not enough and the author intends more. “Listen ... and heed, attend to the meaning, pay attention to the implications, focus, concentrate ... to the words of our tradition, to the words of those with whom we communicate, and to the larger world in which we live and have our being ... with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Amen.