

Sermon Shavuot 5766
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I have to be honest; I don't really enjoy attending school performances. I love watching my child do his or her thing but I get little out of the other children's performances. I know that sounds terrible but I spend the entire time watching my child and if they are not placed front and center, I spend a great deal of energy trying to get a glimpse of them. I love when I catch their eye and they smile in great pride. I even enjoy watching them when they are not paying any attention either to me or anyone else and they are just up there on stage.

However, every so often I attend a performance and there will be another child simply stealing the show. This child will be singing their heart out; they know every word and are just in a zone. While singing at the top of their lungs, they have no idea there is anyone performing along side them. As much as I enjoy my own child, that child is the best. Their voice will be louder and they may even do a little dance move – sometimes you can even see the veins in their neck bulging. They are just into it and it is infectious. I'm sure you can picture that child in your mind. For that child the event is completely different. In fact, every child standing there is participating in the same ceremony but each one is experiencing it differently. Some can't wait until it is over - they hated the preparation, they hate performing and they are only thinking about the sheet cake to follow. Some worked really hard and are proud of themselves, even if they didn't get all the words right. Some had perfect execution but put forth minimal effort, therefore it didn't mean a lot. How these children internalize and how they understood the experience will determine how they remember the event.

Some will immediately forget about it while others will spend the next few days recalling all their flaws. Some will walk away with a glow showing their certificate, book or trophy to anyone who will listen and then recall every note they sang, while others will remember their performance because of the pride they felt. Some will remember embarrassment when they made a blunder that was either unmistakable or barely noticeable. Other children can't wait to bolt and others need to illicit a response from everyone in the audience. And so the clichés abound:

- ✓ Two people can participate in the exact same event and have two completely difference experiences.
- ✓ Two people can listen to the exact same thing and hear two completely different things.
- ✓ Two people can read the exact same book or the same phrase and understand it to mean something totally different.

If this is true for children, then it is equally true for adults. Hopefully we have learned how to handle our reactions better. For example, we may have a “flight reaction” to a certain circumstance but we don't run away. We can make choices about how we are going to react in that moment and we can decide how we are going to interpret the events of our lives. We get to decide which events will become markers, standards or affirmations of something we believe about ourselves and others - while we can choose to discard other events, quickly forgetting or dismissing them as irrelevant or as an anomaly. If it is true for us as individuals then it is also true of us as a nation.

For the Jew, the seminal moment is the moment we met God at Mt. Sinai. However, the problem is the Torah offers us nothing about what happened there. As the text said, there was thunder and lightening but the message came from a still, small voice. The Torah also said the people gathered around but were not permitted to touch the mountain. They clearly witnessed the presence of God, but were not permitted to see God directly. At best, we are given the opportunity to imagine the event however we like, but at worst we can imagine the event as we see it, sometimes believing the event never took place.

The holiday, which we celebrate today, Shavuot, has one phrase which generates an essential discussion about its relevance. What the Rabbis do with this phrase speaks to the extraordinary power we have to reinterpret text and generate relevancy for ourselves.

“These words the Lord spoke to all who assembled at the mount - out of the midst of the fire, the clouds, and the thick darkness - with a great voice which was not heard again. He wrote these words on two tablets of stone, and delivered them to me.” (Deuteronomy 5:19) It is such a strange phrase. It seems to suggest that God never spoke this way again. Or alternatively, there was nothing additional added to what God said at that time. The plain meaning of the verse indicates that the type and depth of revelation that occurred at that moment will not be replicated.

The problem is that it is a stifling reading leaving us with a sense of disenfranchisement. If God spoke once and God’s voice is no longer heard, then we are just not as connected. If we are no longer able to access God’s voice directly, then God is transformed from a personal imminent God to a transcendent and, by definition, a distant being. For me that is untenable. That is why the Rabbis rely on a reading by Onkelos, one of the earliest Aramaic translations of the Torah.

This reads the texts conversely; instead of reading “the voice was not heard again,” they choose to read it as “the voice did not cease.” Therefore, it suggests there is no end to the sound and then, expanded through the Midrash and Rashi, it goes on to explain there is no end to the application of the message. God’s voice continues to be heard throughout every generation. When Ramban recalls the verse from Jeremiah (48:33) to show that the root *yud, somech, fey* can mean “do not stop,” he recalls the joy and gladness that is taken from a plentiful field. Ramban, through Jeremiah, is really saying we must hold onto joyful times but we must also extend that joy to other times in our lives. Happiness sustains us and gives us the capacity to weather difficult times.

We have a choice to make. How are we going to read this verse and what are we going to make of Judaism and religion in general?

Are we going to choose the reading that says the voice of God is no longer heard, or are we going to continue to listen carefully for the reverberation of God’s message in our lives? Are the events of Sinai representative of ongoing participation in a relationship with God and our people or an isolated event?

For some, Sinai, is irrelevant, for some it is the very core of the Jewish experience. For others what was given at Sinai was the entirety of the Jewish sacred library and for some it was merely the spark that began the fire. For some the experience was thunder and lightening and for others it was a still, small voice. For some it was a solitary occurrence and for others it was a national episode. And finally, for some Judaism is a primitive culture and for others it is has an eternal

message.

Like every event in our lives, we must evaluate what we hold on to and what we let go. The arguments we have leave indelible imprints. How we move forward is critical. Do we carry every disagreement with us or do we let go? Pirkei Avot teaches us there are four types of people

נוח לכעוס ונוח לרצות.

קשה לכעוס וקשה לרצות.

קשה לכעוס ונוח לרצות

נוח לכעוס וקשה לרצות

1. Those who are easily provoked and easy to appease
2. Those who are difficult to provoke and difficult to appease
3. Those who are difficult to provoke and easy to appease
4. Those who are easy to provoke and difficult to appease.

We must identify which personality type we are and then evaluate the events of our lives accordingly. We must always make conscious, thoughtful decisions about our relationships and the memories we hold onto in order to preserve and protect ourselves. We must also make the same thoughtful decisions of those we are willing to let go.

Now we recite yizkor at this hour. In the next few moments we will recall loved ones and shared times together. We hear their voice and we sense their touch. Today is a day of memory, not just of Sinai as in instructive moment in our lives but also of the people who sought to show us a way of life.