

Sermon Parashat Yitro 5767
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Some preachers like to begin their sermons with a joke to loosen up the crowd. I like to begin with a confession to loosen me up. When I was an assistant Rabbi in Chicago I would watch the senior Rabbi, a master mega shul rabbi, and wonder. He could create a process, execute it and move people to where he believed they needed to be. They didn't always like it but they got there. He always said trust the process. I knew that is what he meant. It's just a different skill set for the big shul than it is for the smaller shul.

Boy, did he have it. I watched intently for five years, picking up habits and inclinations, strategies and techniques. In fact, I still call him for advice, but while I was there, at times he would drive me nuts. For the first two years he insisted on reading every sermon I was going to deliver two weeks in advance and then he would correct them. He would take a red pen and mark them up until you couldn't even figure out where the original sermon was, but I learned. It was frustrating at times, especially when he didn't take his own advice.

In any case, I would watch and learn but, honestly, I would also listen for mistakes. Each week he would get up to deliver his sermon and I would wait for a mistake, a mispronunciation, or a mistaken word. I knew it would be rare because, as he taught me to do and I still do today, he wrote out every word. But I would sit right behind him as he delivered his weekly message and I would try and catch the mistake. I would listen to him charge the bar mitzvah week in and week out and listen for the blunder, I would go with him to funerals and listen carefully for the slip-up but it never happened. I couldn't help sticking my foot in my mouth but he never did. He is so calculating, so careful, but then it happened. He was officiating at a wedding and called the bride by the wrong name, and not only was I listening but so was everyone. Finally he made the mistake I was waiting for, hoping for, listening for.

“*Schadenfreude* - satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune.” The truth is the mistake he made was much worse than just calling the bride by the wrong name, but for me to really tell the story was to give me so much pleasure that I would be transgressing more than one of the Ten Commandments. You see “*lo tahmod*,” envy, is one thing, but to publicly embarrass someone, rabbis say, is equivalent to killing them. I am okay with a little envy, after all it is just the last of the ten commandments, in fact, if you count the commandments differently maybe it isn't even one of the top ten. However, killing is clearly wrong.

I can't believe the rabbis made such a big deal out of the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20) I'm sure you've heard that today most people actually view the Ten Commandments as ten suggestions. The last one teaches us what we are supposed to think. Don't you think that's a little unreasonable? Usually, by the time I'm done talking, most people have stopped listening. Maybe the Torah knew this to be true and that is why “*lo tahmod*,” “You shall not covet was placed last.” It couldn't be that serious. If it were, maybe it should have gone a little higher on the list. Our modern attention span is short. Who could be blamed if they didn't get through the entire list? All kidding aside, I believe we have lost our ability to listen. Therefore, the most significant statement made in this week's reading is closely

related to the tenth commandment, but is probably the opening of the reading when the text teaches, *v'yoshma yitro* and Jethro heard. (Exodus 18:1) Like envy, listening comes from within. It is about what motivates and what animates. That is precisely the concern of the last commandment. Behavior is born of the union of thought and life. What gets us to act can be something negative or it can be something positive - and of that we must be careful. Envy, unquestionably compels us and the result is sometimes positive. A positive result and/or accomplishment is more likely if we act consciously, if we realize why we are doing what we do and if we are mindful of what we are listening for.

We can listen for the mistakes in order to bring others down. Or we can listen for the opportunity to boost someone up. We can listen to the leaders of our country waiting for them and offer a sound bite that will be recorded and then replayed over and over. Or we can listen to how they are trying to lead. *Havei lichol adam likaf zechut*. Give people the benefit of the doubt. But we don't always know. It's not so simple. Communication is hard. We so often get in the way of what we want to say. That is why when the Torah says that, "Yitro heard all that God had done for the Israelites when they left Egypt," Rashi Ibn Ezra and ultimately Rabbeinu Bahya all ask "What did he really hear?" Like the wife surprised by her husband's expression of affections asks, "What did you say?" Our rabbis ask, "What was he witness to?"

Bahya offers the greatest insight when he remarks that there are conflicting opinions about what he heard. Some say he heard about the defeat of Amalek, some say he heard about the parting of the sea, some say he heard about the exodus from Egypt and the defeat of the Egyptians. *Elu velu yeish lahem al mah she'yismochu*. They all have merit and, I add, it depends on what you are listening for. If you want to hear about God's miracles in this world, then you'll see babies born and sunrises. If you want to hear about redemption and triumph, then you'll hear about the acts of courage and the defenders of the rights of those who cannot stand for themselves. If you want to hear of the defeat of the enemy, the downfall of your adversary, then that is what you'll hear. It's all about what you are listening for.

The story concludes with Yitro offering advice to Moses. The Torah tells us eloquently that "*V'yishma Moshe l'kol hotno*." (Exodus 18:24) Moses heard his father in law. Moses didn't think that he was above the others and he couldn't accept the advice of others. He hears him. How powerful are those words in our own lives. How often have the words, "I hear you brought some solace, some comfort." If we could just learn to listen to others and learn to listen to ourselves.

Salieri, a magnificent composer in his own right, was so envious of Mozart that he couldn't even hear the beauty of his own music. This is so true. We become so involved in other's lives, and what they have, that we lose sight of what we have.

I speak all the time about the choices we have. We get to choose what we are listening for. To the person who sits in the back of the sanctuary and complains that he can't hear, I say get up and change your seat. To the person who is tired of hearing the complaints of their friends, I say get up and change your seat. To the person worn out from the negativity that

pervades their life, I say get up and change your seat. It's not always about the content of the discussion - sometimes it's about the context.

There is a heated discussion in our society right now, the debate between faith and reason. There are those, like Sam Harris, who argue in his book, "End of Faith," that violence in the world today is born of irrational faith. He makes a pretty persuasive argument for faith as a compelling force. So much so, that people will strap bombs to themselves and blow up non-combatants. We know this example all too well. However, it is Reza Aslan in his book, "No god but God," who explains that violence has been used in the name of any ideology and then justified by that ideology. Whether it is Stalinism, Communism or Socialism, it isn't the ideology but the social context that produces errant behavior. Ideology cannot be evaluated in a vacuum. Even within the context of religion there are choices to be made. What is the voice that is heard?

At the beginning of a climactic moment of revelation, there is a magnificent light and sound show. Thunder and lightening engulfed the mountain of Sinai and the earth trembled. Then the Torah says, "God spoke in the thunder." The moment of revelation at Sinai, takes place at an almost deafening volume. While a similar scene is reported later with Elijah in which the text teaches us "There was a great and mighty wind, splitting the mountain and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord, but God was not in the wind and after the wind there was an earthquake but God was not in the earthquake and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire, but *b'kol dimmam dakasin* a still small voice." (I Kings 19:12) Sometimes we have to wait until the smoke clears to hear God. Sometimes we have to listen a little more carefully to hear God. Sometimes we have to know what we are listening for. So let me give you a hint. If God is telling you to blow yourself up, you aren't listening carefully. If God is telling you to be divisive, you are not listening carefully.

When my brothers and I were much smaller we would play pretty rough and oftentimes someone would get hurt. If we were playing softball in the street someone would get scraped up. If we were playing basketball in the driveway, someone would sprain an ankle and if we were riding our bikes someone might even break something. When the survivors would go to get my father his response was always the same. He would always come running yelling. He would always say the same thing, why can't you be more careful. We were never afraid to tell him out of fear of what he would say, because I think we knew he wasn't really yelling at us, in fact I don't think we thought he was actually angry at all. It was just how he responded to one of his children getting hurt. Just like when we all got the chicken pox and he got into bed with us and said, "Oh, how I wish I could have this instead of you." and then he got them. He may have been yelling but what we heard was "I love you." What we were listening for was, "You are going to be alright." Because we knew the minute he stopped yelling something was really wrong, like the time my brother got hit in the middle of his forehead with a metal bat but that is another story.

Maybe another time I will share it with you, if you're willing to listen. Shabbat Shalom.