

Respectful Listening

Today's Torah portion is from Genesis 18, and it tells the story of three strangers who appear at the tent of Abraham and Sarah with a remarkable prediction to make. They bring the news that Sarah who is childless and an old woman will nonetheless bear a child within a year. Jonathan Kirsch titled one of his books, "The Woman who Laughed at God" based on Sarah's completely understandable reaction to this astonishing claim.

One of the most interesting things for me in reading the stories of the Torah is the variety of themes available to interpret. There are so many launching points to make these ancient stories relevant to the 21st century. The section of Genesis 18 I just read is a fitting example. It is often pointed to for understanding the value of "hachnassat orechim" or welcoming guests. Abraham and Sarah offer a place of respite, shade from the heat of the day, and a small meal to three strangers. As a theme for the new year, reaching out to those who may be strangers and welcoming them into our community is an important aspiration. Finding common purpose with those who may be relegated to the status of "other" can result in the creation of new friendships, the forging of new relationships and the important task of achieving understanding.

Another point of this story is an appreciation and acceptance of the absurdities that so often characterize our lives. The sometimes surreal nature of reality should give us pause as those moments stand in stark contradistinction to the ordinary. They need not be beyond our understanding in the moment but can be appreciated for what they are. Whether awe-inspiring or downright confounding, the extraordinary and exceptional need to be recognized. For Sarah, who is an old woman past her child-bearing years in the story, the idea that she was to have a child provokes laughter. It is a ridiculous idea that defies expectations or understanding, yet it comes to pass. We do not occupy the space of absurdity as a regular course of events, nor could we as it is the extremes of existence. Yet since we last gathered in this room, each of our lives surely has had these moments. Collectively the surreal became oh-so real as I simply must refer to the Cubs' world championship last November, coming after 108 years, a 17 minute rain delay in the seventh game of an incredible World Series. The impossible became possible. Sarah laughed indeed! And only last month, we experienced a total eclipse of the sun, an extraordinary natural phenomenon that science predicted with pinpoint accuracy. It was simply breathtaking and awe-inspiring in the natural world. In our tradition though, the Talmud found a solar eclipse to be a bad omen

due to several delineated unusual sins. We, as Sarah, can only laugh at such an explanation as we marvel at the memory.

But we come to the point in Genesis 18 I want to more deeply explore with you this morning. It is but a single word in verse 10 that led to her bemusement and laughter. Sarah “sho-ma-at” or “heard.” She heard the discussion in the tent door. “To hear” and its partner “to listen” are such powerful verbs. They are relational and cannot operate without another’s involvement. Just as listening is relational, so is forgiveness. It has been said that repentance is an internal monologue; forgiveness becomes an external dialogue. But first we must listen. Listening is hearing with intention. As such it demands attention be paid; mindfulness be heeded; due consideration be given. Karl Menninger said, "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand." Hearing is so foundational to what makes us human that it is thought to be the last sense to fail at the end of life.

Why is listening entitled to elevated prominence over our other senses? From the earliest foundations of our collective history, listening and hearing have been central. Our reasons for ascribing importance to listening may be different than our ancient ancestors but the idea that listening is

something to activate is unchanged. “Hear O Israel” our ancient counterparts were commanded in Deut. 6. In Lev. 23:23 and Num. 29:1, this very day is the day the shofar is sounded with the concomitant imperative to hear it. In another vein, in its complicated history with the visual arts, our tradition has too often frowned upon imagery, favoring sounds instead. In his book Beyond the Graven Image, Lionel Kochan tries to explain the rationale behind the exclusion of images in ancient times. He writes, “There is both a general and a particular answer. The former must emphasize the priority given to ear over eye in their respective capacities as media of instruction, enlightenment and the construction of perception; [or] conversely, as the media of deception, illusion and abuse.” He goes on to point out that in Israelite culture, “the ear, on the whole, is the seat and the means of enlightenment and not of self-destruction or self-deception, to such a degree that in exceptional circumstances the ear can function as an eye and apprehend with visual intensity.” It was the elevation of the aural or auditory over the visual that distinguished the religion of biblical Israel, and indeed continued thereafter. The very idea of an oral tradition reveals the prejudice in its favor and against a visual one. Judaism was secured by telling and re-telling, not by repeated viewing. It is what Sarah heard, not what she saw, that the biblical writer made essential to the story.

When we look, when we see, it need not involve the acknowledgement of another. A fleeting glance may be all we can muster or a distraction that causes us to look away may occur. Moreover, the visual is subject to different perspectives or angles each affecting what we perceive. We can be misled or fooled. We all know of optical illusions that create an image that may or may not be accurate, or even there at all.

But listening is different. When it is at its best, listening is a gift: a gift of one's time to another to be heard; a gift of space to allow another the room needed to express oneself; and a gift of understanding shown perhaps by a nod of the head. It is the response to a child's plaintive cry for undivided attention. It is the acknowledgment of the important relationships in our lives. It is even as Simon & Garfunkel sang, the "sound of silence," where we allow ourselves to truly hear another even if the silence or pauses make us uncomfortable. If the visual can be unreliable, hearing too is not infallible. I for instance am notorious for "hearing" the wrong lyrics to way too many songs, much to the chagrin and amusement of my family. But we know there is an accurate, reliable version to be heard. The need to hone our listening skills has never been more pressing. Our civil discourse is more commonly characterized by talking past each other. Our refusal to hear what others are expressing precludes meaningful dialogue and reconciliation. It

forecloses forgiveness. No matter how difficult the subject, the conversations must be had. But a conversation requires the predicate of listening.

Listening, real listening, is radically different than awaiting one's turn to speak. Indeed especially in the current political climate, it may be a radical idea to suggest refining the skill of listening to the level of cultivating mutual understanding, even if that means risking discomfort. We must listen to possible words of pain, words of wounds, and words of distress, particularly at our new year when we engage in efforts to make amends. The words of the Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh are particularly apt. "Compassionate listening is to help the other side suffer less. If we realize that other people are the same people as we are, we are no longer angry at them." Listening with important modifiers should be our aim – "respectful" listening; "active" listening; "compassionate" listening. These forms of listening are fundamental to the creation of what Martin Buber called "I-Thou" relationships, those relationships that give meaning to our lives. It involves a conscious effort with a sustained focus on another. We set aside our egos when we listen; we forgo judgment; we implicitly say to another, "you are important to me." Active or respectful listening is by definition, non-judgmental. It is in the moment. It amplifies our own

empathy, bringing to the fore that which makes us the most human. What we may hear may be the absurdities of life. It may make us laugh like Sarah; or it may move us to tears. It will most certainly bring us closer to one another and we will be rewarded by the effort. As I conclude, I thank you for listening.