

Shabbat Shalom!

This week we read Parshat Vaetchanan, which is just full of amazing stuff! The parsha begins with Moses recounting how he pleaded with God to be allowed into Israel but was refused. The parsha also includes two iconic passages- Shema and V'ahavta and the Ten Commandments. Today is also Shabbat Nachamu, the shabbat of comfort after Tisha B'Av. And yesterday was Tu B'Av- the Jewish Day of Love! My plan is to tie all those elements together in this drash, plus tell a joke.

I will start with the Shema- the prayer that we say twice a day, plus a third time before we go to bed. I said the Shema before bedtime with my kids when they were little for years- now the younger one is about to leave for college!

Shema Yisrael: Hear O Israel. Putting aside the question of what we're supposed to hear, this is already a very tall request whether it is coming from Moses or God or Us. When we say it, we're asking a bunch of Jews to stop talking for a minute and listen. In all seriousness, listening, really listening, is hard to do. But we can't connect with one another or understand each other unless we can listen to one another.

There is a special term for saying the Shema- it's called Kriat Shema. That can be translated as "Reading the Shema." But Kriah has another meaning that is appropriate to the Shema. It also means calling, calling out. We call to someone when we want to connect to them, when we want them to listen and to respond, if only by being with us and making us feel heard.

There's a story about Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really listened to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to experiment. To each person who passed down the line, he murmured, "I murdered my aunt this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous!," "Keep up the good work," "We are proud of you," "G-d bless you, sir." Only at the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, were his words finally heard. Unflinching, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Midrash Rabah says that the Shema was first recited on Sinai as a prelude to the Ten Commandments. Before God began the Ten Commandments, God said "Shema Yisrael" and Bnei Yisrael answered "Hashem Eloheinu Hashem Echad/The Lord our

God the Lord is One.” It’s as if, before God entered into a covenant with us, before we sealed the deal between us that we would be together forever, God called to us, wanting to be heard and to know that we were listening. And Bnei Yisrael’s response was to say Yes, we hear you, you are the only One for us. Like a declaration of love you might make on Tu B’Av! Only then did God begin the Ten Commandments.

Ironically, the Torah tells us that Bnei Yisrael were not able to listen to the Ten Commandments. Bnei Yisrael say to Moshe (Ex 20:16) *“Daber Imanu v’nishma’ah v’al ydaber imanu Elohim pen namut./You speak to us and we will hear, and let Hashem not speak to us lest we die.”*

On the one hand, this was a special case, when they were trying to listen to God speaking from a burning mountain wreathed in fire and smoke. It was really scary! On the other hand, really listening to something difficult someone close to us is asking of us can be really scary, too. Maybe in some ways, listening to hard truths and hearing a very different perspective can be as overwhelming and transformative as Sinai.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rymanov, a Hasidic Rabbi who lived in Poland in the second half of the eighteenth century, teaches that when we stood at Sinai (and we read in today’s parshah that we all stood at Sinai, not just our ancestors), all that we heard from God was the first letter of the commandments, the aleph of the word anokhi, “I am.” The aleph is a letter that makes no sound without vowelization, so maybe we heard only silence, a whisper, the kol d’mamah dakah. Or perhaps we heard the “Ah” of “Anochi” like God’s breath, the breath that gives us life. Whichever it was, that experience of being spoken to, and of receiving that message, of really listening and experiencing a connection with God, was overwhelming.

When it comes to listening, we can learn a lot from Moshe Rabeynu, both in terms of the importance of listening and also how hard it is to do. At the beginning of Moshe’s mission, at the burning bush, Moshe worried that no one would listen to him (Ex 4:1): *“Lo yishm’u b’koli/They will not listen to my voice.”* As a fellow youngest child, I can relate to this feeling. But Moshe also had trouble listening sometimes, especially when he got angry. I can relate to this too, and I wonder if Moshe might have been better off if he had joined the Kaiser anger management group I participated in last year.

Our parsha begins with Moshe pleading with God to allow him to cross over into Israel. Moshe understands that God is refusing his request, but he doesn't seem to really understand why. In two different places (Num 20:12, Deut 32:51-52), God gives the reason Moshe is forbidden to enter Israel: because at the waters of Meriva, when the people asked for water, Moshe did not make God holy in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael. You may know the story- Moshe was asked to speak to the rock and make it bring forth water. Instead he was carried away by his anger: he yelled at the people, calling them rebels, and struck the rock. Reminds me of some of my bad days as a parent- I lost my temper, yelled at my kids, and hit whatever inanimate object was handy.

Surprisingly, Moshe gives an entirely different explanation for his punishment in last week's parsha, connecting it to the incident of the spies. He retells the story of how the people were afraid to enter Israel, sure that they would be defeated by the giants who lived there. And then he says "*Gam bi hitanaf Hashem biglalchem lemor: gam atah lo tavo sham.* Because of you Hashem was incensed with me too, and said: You shall not enter it either." (Deut 1:37)

Why does Moshe say this? God tells him twice that the reason for his punishment was because of what he did at Meribah, not because of the incident with the spies. Was Moshe unable to hear what God was saying to him? You could argue that Moshe doesn't explicitly say that he was punished because of what happened with the spies. And maybe he wanted to make a point about how terrible it was for the people to not have faith that God would help them conquer Israel so that this new generation wouldn't repeat the same mistake.

But at the same time it seems like Moshe couldn't hear what God was saying to him because he was so caught up in his own anger, and in the intensity of his emotions. The people wouldn't listen to him when he told them that God would help them conquer the Land. He must have felt like a failure- the people he was supposed to lead into Israel were all doomed to die in the wilderness. And if that's what he was telling himself, maybe that's what he heard God say to him too: Moshe, you are a failure. You have failed the people. You have failed in your mission. You will die with them in the wilderness.

But that's not what Hashem said. Hashem didn't keep Moshe out of Israel because of what happened with the spies. Hashem kept him out because, when the people

asked for water, Moshe didn't take the opportunity to show them how holy and special Hashem was, how deserving of their respect, awe, love, and faith. Hashem wanted a stronger relationship with the Israelites, but Moshe's anger drove them further apart. And he never did teshuva for that anger. Moshe, the one with whom God spoke face to face, who received the Torah and passed it on to us, the listener and communicator par excellence, couldn't listen well enough to hear this one fundamental message about what God wanted.

It's appropriate that Vaetchanan, And I pleaded, is a verb in the reflexive grammatical form, a form that applies to actions one does to oneself. Because Moshe couldn't hear what God was saying to him, he lost the opportunity for connection and dialogue. In some sense he was praying to and pleading with himself.

That feeling that we are talking to ourselves is one we are all familiar with. Sometimes it feels like we are alone, like no one will listen to us and no one can understand us. That can make us feel terribly sad and angry. Next time I feel that way, I'm going to try saying the Shema, reminding myself to open up and listen to the world outside me. Maybe I'll hear a *kol d'mamah dakah*, a whisper that says "*Nachamu nachamu*- be comforted."