

Can You Hear Me Now?"

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by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

The story is told of a little boy who sat with his grandfather in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. The grandfather was not certain that the child was reciting his prayers properly, and he turned to him and in a rather stern manner said in Yiddish, "Hecher, hecher" "Louder, louder." At that point the little boy looked up and said, "Am I talking to you?"

At least he was talking to someone. That is more than can be said for too many of us.

The single most common complaint that brings people to the rabbi's study during the course of a year is one or another variation on: "Rabbi, you talk to him, I can't." Husbands and wives struggle to talk to each other, parents and children, friends, you name the relationship and lack of communication is at the heart of much of what ails us.

A judge was interviewing a woman on her pending divorce: "What are the grounds for your divorce?" The woman replies "About four acres and a nice little home in the middle with a stream running by." "No," he said, "I mean what is the foundation of this case." "It is made of concrete, brick and mortar." she replied. He decided to try a different tack: "What are your relations like?" "I have an aunt and uncle and many cousins." "Does your husband beat you up?" "No" replied the woman, "I get up before him every morning..." The judge tries again, "Do you have a grudge?" "Yes, she replied - it holds two cars..." Finally in frustration the judge asks, "Lady, why do you want a divorce?" "Oh, I don't, it's my husband, he claims he can't communicate with me!"

OK, that's worth a chuckle - but the real breakdown in communication that confronts too many husbands and wives, parents and children is not funny, not funny at all. There is so much that needs to be said, and for some reason we don't seem to be able to say it.

One of the core issues that is raised by these High Holy Days is the issue of communication. The prayers we recite, the scripture we read - they are filled with stories of people reaching out to one another. And the matter of who hears whom... and who does not, is a fascinating subplot of these entire Days of Awe. I spoke yesterday of the moment when God called out to Abraham, and his response, hineini. God calls and Abraham responds - good for him, he gets an A+. But this same Abraham doesn't do so well in another incident that is also a part of the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah. When Isaac is born, Sarah is jealous and asks that her maid Hagar and the child she had bore Abraham, Ishmael, be sent away. Abraham reluctantly agrees and the reading contains the poignant description of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment into the wilderness. They wandered around, and soon run out of water and Hagar cries out - and here it is interesting to note who hears her cries and who does not. Abraham does not. Abraham does not respond. D- (I gave him a passing grade because I had to allow for the

possibility that he did not hear their cries - that his lack of response may not have completely been his fault - maybe) But God does hear, and God does respond. A+.

The God of Rosh Hashanah is depicted as a God who listens, a God who responds, a God who cares. If only we could learn to listen, to respond and to care.

Lawrence F. Kaplan, the senior editor of *The New Republic* recently wrote a cover article where he bemoaned that, "Four years after 9/11 we're still bowling alone." He was referring to a book entitled "Bowling Alone" that some of you may remember, I spoke about in a previous High Holy Day sermon some 10 years ago when Robert D. Putnam a professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University first coined the term. It was Prof. Putnam's contention then, that we were witnessing a disintegration of communal life here in America that was unprecedented. He cited many examples from the decline in voting participation, to the decline in church affiliation. And the most whimsical bit of evidence that Prof. Putnam offered for his thesis was the fact that more Americans were bowling than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues had plummeted. It was ten years ago, when Prof. Putnam first declared, "We are bowling by ourselves!" And "bowling alone" became symbolic of the breakdown in social intercourse amongst Americans.

Now, some of us thought that the tragedy of 9/11 was going to change this. I mean if any good was going to come out of that terrible day, it would certainly be a sense of interconnectedness, a reuniting of all Americans in a common sense of purpose. Shortly after 9/11, columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote that "this land of 'bowling alone' of Internet introversion, of factious multi-culturalism developed an extraordinary solidarity...." Krauthammer celebrated, that in the face of this real crisis, which 9/11 presented, "the decadence and flabbiness of America would be shown to be just summer wear, thrown off immediately in the face of a real challenge!" Certainly after 9/11 we would become a people who listened, responded - a nation that cared about each other. But, alas, the transformation of American culture never materialized, and, here we are four years after 9/11 and ten years after Prof. Putnam first published his thesis, and Lawrence Kaplan in his cover article for *The New Republic* felt the need to point out that as a nation, we are still bowling alone, as a people we still don't seem to care - not in the real and meaningful ways that we should.

God called and Abraham responded. Hagar cried out and God listened. The angel demanded from Abraham to stop and Abraham heard the voice and did not offer his son as a sacrifice. The torah reading for these sacred days is filled with those who listen and respond and care – but 4000 years later, we are part of a people and a culture that does not listen - enough, that does not respond - enough, that does not care - enough.

Do you think I am exaggerating this problem?

Turn on your television and although they are called "talk shows" they are more about political theater than any meaningful exchange or dialogue. Everything is reduced to left versus right, black versus white. There are two teams, each with its own politicians, think

tanks, special interest groups, media outfits and TV personalities. If one side proposes an idea - the other side attacks it. The last presidential election revealed how truly sorry is the state we are in. Once upon a time there was such a thing as presidential debates - now it is all theater - there is no conversation - no dialogue across the divide. Once upon a time the other candidate was referred to as, "my worthy opponent" - today in the era of "swift boat politics" - slash and burn is the methodology - political campaigns are no longer for the weak of heart.

And the trouble with this is that progress on any major problem on a national or international level like the deficit, Social Security, health care - will require compromise from both sides. Difficult foreign policy issues await our attention - crafting solutions to Iraq, Iran, the Palestinians, North Korea - all require long term strategies that demand support from both sides - but such bi-partisanship is highly unlikely in the current atmosphere.

Once upon a time Presidents of the United States were great communicators. FDR could declare that "we have nothing to fear but fear itself..." and he comforted a nation, JFK declared: "Ask not what your country can do for you..." and he inspired a generation. Ronald Reagan who was called the "great communicator" spoke of a vision of America as "a shining city on a hill." How appropriate to my thesis that our current president has truly become a symbol for our times. An please don't make this political - whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, whether you admire this president or dislike him - I think we can agree that public speaking is not his forte. Yes, our president has become a symbol for our times, not by anything in particular he has said - but by his inability to say almost anything - unless it is carefully crafted by his handlers and even then don't bet on it.

And on a personal level - the challenges that confront husbands and wives, friends - how can any problem be solved when people don't talk to each other anymore - we shout, we scream, we protest - we demand our say - but no one seems to be listening, no one seems to care. Now couples by pass the rabbis study altogether and head straight for the attorney's office as soon as things get tough. One couple did come to my office seeking my help and guidance regarding a significant marital problem, they were contemplating divorce. I listened patiently as each shared their complaints and gripes regarding the other. I then said that what the two of you need to do is go home and argue. "Argue?! The husband protested - Rabbi have you not heard a word we have said? All we have been doing is arguing!" "No," I tried to point out, "You have not been arguing - you have been shouting at each other. And while one shouts the other one is not listening but taking a breather and preparing for his or her turn to start shouting again. To argue means to listen and to respond, to care about what the other is saying - you haven't gotten close to an argument."

A high school class in music appreciation was asked the difference between listening and hearing. Finally a hand went up, and a youngster offered this wise definition: "Listening is wanting to hear."

Listening is wanting to hear.

What is the essential mitzvah of this Rosh Hashanah day? It is the shofar - that is sounded throughout these services - meah kolot - one hundred notes - make up the shofar service of Rosh Hashanah. But what exactly is the nature of this most intriguing of mitzvot? Look at the blessing, look at the bracha that is recited: baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech haolom ...lismoah kol shofar. Praised are you, Lord our God who has commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar!

In most other instances the mitzvah involves the doing - on Friday night the mitzvah is to kindle the lights, to eat the hallah, to drink the wine. But on Rosh Hashanah we are not asked to sound the shofar - we are merely asked to hear it, we are commanded to listen.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates a divine-human dialogue, one that is the fulfillment of the promise that God made to his prophet Isaiah in a celebrated verse: "Lechu na v'nivachecha, yomar ha-shem - Come now, let us reason together; let us talk to each other: even if your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow."

The goal of these sacred days is to seek cleansing for our sins and the methodology is dialogue - we are urged on every page of our Mahzor to avail ourselves of the opportunity to speak to God, a God who cares, and then to listen to the still small voice that responds.

As we confront the perversion of language, we understand why the lines of authentic communication between God and us and between us and our fellow man grow weak, falter and break down. In every waking moment, the sound waves are filled with words to convince, to excite, and to entertain. The mass media bombard our senses with words to persuade, to sell, and to stimulate. What inflation can do to currency, can happen to language as well. It can become devalued.

We talk when we have nothing to say, and when we have something to say, we find words inadequate to express our thoughts and feelings. A torrent of language flows over us constantly. We have notes of explanation, memos of discussion, letters of understanding, announcements of information, but somehow the things that really need to be said go unspoken.

We know that deep within us the need to communicate is intense and urgent. This failure of communication is one of the most disturbing problems we face in our shared lives - in our homes, with our friends, at work, in our country and around the world.

This breakdown presents us with an irony both bitter and poignant, because one of the greatest achievements of modern technology has been the revolution in communications. "Can you hear me now?" We can be in contact with the most remote places of the world.

One of the more amusing moments during our trip to Israel this summer came in the middle of our hike up Masada. If you have been there you can picture the place. There are few spots more desolate and isolated than that. Here we were 6000 miles from home, halfway up our climb, in the middle of the desert, when the cell phone of one of our travelers rang - it was a family member back here in Roslyn who was having a problem getting the garage door to work - could he offer some advice? Such is the world we live in. Pictures can be transmitted instantly by satellite from the site of a tragedy like hurricane Katrina, to television sets all over the world - but if our leaders are not watching, what good is it? We have assumed that because a person can speak in New York and be heard instantly around the world that we have solved, once and for all, the problem of communication. We have not, because every day we discover that although we can transcend the barriers of physical space and geographical distance, there are great barriers of the spirit that still divide us.

Can you hear me now?

I fear not. What we meant to say was not understood; what others wanted to tell us, we failed to perceive.

In 1977 the Voyager spacecraft was launched containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. It contained pictures of a man, a woman, mathematical symbols, and a diagram of the earth and our position in our solar system. It was intended for any intelligent extraterrestrial life form that may find it. And what do we wish to say to them, if we are successful in finding someone with whom to communicate? It is estimated that it will take some 40,000 years before Voyager comes close to the nearest star - and then any response would require at least another 40,000 years - since it was 28 years since it was launched - that's $80,000 - 28 = 79,972$ years left for us to come up with something worthwhile to say - when they make contact. We better get to work.

But my real objection to this enterprise is my frustration over all the talent, money and expertise that is going into communicating with extraterrestrials when we are not doing so well communicating with the person sitting next to us in shul, the people whom we see every day.

Real dialogue involves a meeting of the minds. It means making one's self understood to another human being, achieving rapport with one's fellow man and woman, breaking down the walls that separate one person from another. People did not die in New Orleans because we could not see them or did not hear them. People are dying as we speak in the Sudan - and not because we cannot see them or do not hear them.

People are hurting in this very sanctuary - and it is not because we do not see them and cannot hear them.

A contemporary author once pointed out an illusion that has been created by our technical advances in the field of communication. She said the more people are reached by mass communication, the less they communicate with each other. The proliferation of one-way messages - whether text messages or whatever, seems to have increased rather than lessened the alienation of the individual. With some sarcasm, she writes that friendly, gregarious America is full of intensely lonely people - we are indeed, "Bowling alone!"

When dialogue ceases, love dies and resentment and hatred are formed.

So how do we fix what is broken? How do we cure what ails us? How do we revitalize the process of dialogue? When Abraham responded to God's call - what was his secret? Inquiring minds want to know. When God heard Hagar's cries - what was His secret? Inquiring minds need to know!

The first principle is the most difficult: each of us is unique. If you wish to reach me, you must make the effort to understand me in all my unique individuality. Step one is not to tell me what you think - but to listen to what I have to say. Abraham stopped talking long enough to hear God's call. God was listening - and therefore able to hear Hagar's cries. We too need to stop and listen, to be quiet long enough so that we are able to recognize, appreciate, and accept the sorrow and the pride, the hope and the fear, which form the substance of any true dialogue. Just listen. Don't assume I am you. Don't make me over in your image. Listen.

And when you speak to me, I'll listen, but only if you address the real me, the one who is unique. Know who I am. Know where I live.

How does God speak to us? How does God speak to a person? How is the conversation recorded in the Bible of a divine revelation? God speaks in a still small voice - to each of us privately. God speaks one by one, out of our individual conscience and our special situation, to our particular need. God begins by calling our name: God says, "Avraham", God says, "Moshe." God begins with the individual - dialogue begins when the person addressed is taken seriously. As husband to wife, it is not enough to say, "I love you." Although even that we do not say nearly enough. We must learn to say, "I love you Edy!" What a difference in those two statements - and in that difference lies the secret to true dialogue.

Principle #2 is that dialogue requires sincerity. There was no artifice between God and Abraham and Hagar's cries came honestly from a broken heart and was heard by a sympathetic God. Today it is all artifice. An actor was being tutored by a mentor in the secrets of their art. "The most important thing to being a successful actor" - said the wizened senior, "is sincerity. Once you learn to fake that, the rest is easy." But the truth is

that sincerity is the one thing that cannot be faked. And it is only sincerity and truthfulness that can repair the broken lines between God and us and between you and me. The Hebrew proverb puts it this way, "d'varim ha-yotzeim min haleyv, nichnasim el ha leyv. —Words that come from the heart enter the heart."

What is sincerity? It is the opposite of hypocrisy, deceit, and pretense. To speak sincerely means to speak for truth and right and justice as we see them because they are true and right and not because of the advantage that accrues to us by saying them. Tell me what you see when you turn on your TV? Reality TV indeed! Tell me which words most accurately describe too much of what passes for politics in our day? Sincerity? Or hypocrisy, deceit and pretense. "Once you learn to fake sincerity - the rest is easy..." If faking sincerity is the key to acting, it is the key to politics as well. But alas - how often are we all called upon to play the politician - how often is the rabbi expected to be the politician? We live in a world where too many of us don't want to really hear the truth - we want to be told what we already believe - and too many of us are quick to oblige. And once we learn to fake sincerity - the rest really is all too easy.

And finally - true dialogue means not only to speak honestly but to learn how to listen sincerely - with empathy. When we listen carefully, when we listen attentively, we listen with our whole being. The rabbi was talking to Mrs. Goldberg at the kiddush as he asked her how she was feeling. As she began to reply with her litany of complaints - the rabbi was already glancing at where the shul president was and several other's he had to touch base with before they left - meanwhile Mrs. Goldberg spoke of her aching joints, her angina, her emphysema, her inability to sleep and her fear that she was developing dementia - the rabbi finally turning his glance back to Mrs. Goldberg, pats her on the back and ends the exchange by saying, "Well, as long as you have your health!"

Can you hear me now? God, if we only could. On this sacred Rosh Hashanah day, God says to each of us, "Come, let us talk to one another." If I seek to hear the word of God, I must come before Him in sincerity and in truth saying, "Not my will be done, but Thy will be done." If I seek to hear the words of my wife or my children or my friend - or my congregants, I must say, "Not my will be done - but your will be done." If we can each learn to say this than maybe we can restore the relationship of trust and confidence both in our public and in our private lives, our words will not be a source of sin but of moral excellence. Our words will not divide us, but they will unite us. They will bind us together as one people, sharing a common dream, moved by a common faith.

The Bible tells us, "The word is not in heaven that we should ask, 'Who will go up there on our behalf and bring it down?' Nor is it across the sea so that it requires a special voyage to retrieve and return it to us, but the word is very close in our hearts and in our mouths."

In speaking and listening with sincerity and truth, with honesty and care, we can make the miracle of dialogue happen here - today - Can you hear me now?