

The Blockhouse and Fort McHenry

How to Listen to and Talk with Each Otherⁱ

A Sermon for First Day of Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778

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L'Shanah Tovah.

I want to ask you a question of particular interest to anyone who lives near Baltimore. Who won the War of 1812?

If you've ever been to Fort McHenry, or if you remember your American history, you "know" America did. England was the aggressor, the war one of survival for our young nation, begun in self-defense after Britain repeatedly attacked our merchant ships and impressed our young men, forcing them to serve the British Navy.

Would you be surprised to learn that Canadians give a very different answer? My husband David and I discovered that they do when we visited Blockhouse National Historic Site in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada just across from Maine. The blockhouse, a small fort, was built to protect the city from the Americans. The interpretive sign explains how the Canadians, then part of the British Empire, won the War of 1812, retaining their independence – from us!

The discrepancy between how we and our Canadian friends see the War of 1812 made me think about our tendency to see things, to understand and believe things, from our own perspective. Even the same facts can add up very differently, depending on one's own experience and viewpoint.

There seems to be a widening gulf of different perspectives today. So many people talk past each other without really stopping to hear another side. Maybe that is part of the reason why so much viciousness dominates our political discourse. But it is not just in politics. So many congregants tell me they dread family get togethers. They speak with real pain about their emotional exhaustion and distress. Some don't even talk with relatives anymore. Some refuse to attend family gatherings.

My friends, I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that *not* talking with those with whom we disagree does little to relieve tension or build the kind of courtesy, cooperation, and kindness that lies at the heart of civility in our families, our communities and our nation.

The good news is that there is something we can do to improve how we talk with each other so we can maintain, and maybe even heal, some of the strain in our personal and civic relationships. Last night I spoke about 10 steps to building a happy life. This morning I want to share with you four steps to improving how we listen to and talk with each other.ⁱⁱ

Step One: Ask good questions.

You may know the story Jewish Nobel prize-winning physicist Isidore Rabi tells of how his mother taught him to be a scientist. "Every other child would come back from school and be

asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask, instead, ‘Izzy, did you ask a good question today?’”

What makes a good question? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that a good question is determined by the attitude of the questioner: the genuine willingness to learn, not doubt, ridicule, dismiss, or reject; the humility to accept the limits of one’s knowledge and to understand that one’s experiences shape one’s perspective.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some of you may remember David Nathan of blessed memory. He regularly walked me to synagogue Friday nights so I wouldn’t have to walk alone in the dark. His politics were the polar opposite of mine, which made our walks very interesting. He raised facts, shared articles, and asked good questions. I cherished our discussions. I even shifted some of my views, as did he. The best was when one of us would say, “Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

The enthusiasm to see something from a different perspective lies at the heart of all Jewish learning, the goal of which is to gather the most comprehensive understanding of an issue possible in order to come to the best solution together to do good in God’s world.

Did you ever wonder why, at the end of our silent reading of the Amidah, our holy standing prayer, we take three steps back and then bow to the left and then the right as we say the words, *Oseh shalom bimramav*, God who makes peace on high, *hu yaaesh shalom*, may You make peace *aleinu*, for us, *val kol yisrael* and for all Israel?

Rabbi Aryeh Wolbe suggests we take three steps back to remind ourselves that in order to make peace, we must first step back from a situation to see if our biases are distorting reality. Then, we are to look this way and that to remind ourselves to consider other peoples’ point of view and try to see other ways to navigate solutions.^{iv}

That is what David Nathan and I did when walking to services. By asking good questions and sincerely listening to each other’s different answers, we shared our very real concerns for our People, our nation and our world as we learned, and grew, together. (By the way, you can call the office if you would like to walk me to services. You get to choose what we talk about!)

Step Two: Listen with Empathy.

According to psychologist Dr. Michael Nichols, “Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood.”^v When we are in distress, we want someone to “get it,” to understand our distress and acknowledge it.

Listening with empathy does not mean agreeing, accepting or acquiescing. It means acknowledging the pain, experiences and concerns we hear from others. Sometimes that simple acknowledgement is enough to open up the possibility for relationship and healing. As our Sages taught, “Words that come out of one person’s heart can penetrate another person’s heart.”^{vi}

During one of our many interfaith programs, I met a woman wearing a hijab and a beautifully embroidered Bedouin dress. I complimented her on her dress and we got to talking. She was a Palestinian pediatrician, the grandmother of two little boys, one of whom was playing on the beach when he was hit and killed by an Israeli rocket during the Gaza War a few years ago.

She stood stiffly before me, clearly bitter and angry. My heart broke for her. How could it not? I opened my hands, palms up, inviting her to take them. She did. We took a step toward each other; two mothers sharing tragic news. I looked into her eyes and said truthfully, deeply, that I was so sorry; losing a child, a grandchild, is the worst thing that can happen to anyone; what a tragedy it is that we haven’t found a way for both Israelis and Palestinians to live in their own states in peace.

Her stance softened, sadness replaced the anger I first had seen. She looked at me, gauging me, and I, her. I acknowledged how I could not compare my experience to hers and began to share how Hamas rockets had rained down on me and the families with me when we were in Israel in the days leading up to the Gaza War. I asked her if perhaps we could work together for all our children's sake. She squeezed my hands, gave a small nod, and said, "You are a good Jew." I replied, "There are many." We returned together to the program.

I doubt I changed this woman's attitude about Israel at all. But perhaps next time she meets a Jew she won't automatically see an enemy.

Our interaction was full of empathy, so different from the interactions between our two founding mothers, Sarah and Hagar, about whom we read in this morning's Torah reading.

Hagar has had a hard life. She is given as a slave to Sarah by Pharaoh and torn from everything and everyone she knows when Sarah and Abraham return to Canaan. No wonder Hagar is so angry. Sarah never acknowledges how hard all this must have been for her. And, though Sarah is in her legal rights to offer Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate mother, she never confers or commiserates with Hagar.

However, Hagar is not the innocent here. When Hagar conceives, she is derisive of Sarah and jockeys to replace her. Hagar has no concern for how Sarah must feel at having to share her husband and not becoming pregnant herself. Their relationship continues to deteriorate and is handed down to the next generation as Hagar's son, Ishmael, threatens Sarah's son Isaac. The story ends with the two women's separation, with Hagar's and Ishmael's banishment from the camp. Only God seems to show compassion to each. God tells Abraham he must follow all that Sarah tells him to do, ensuring Isaac is Abraham's heir. God promises Hagar that Ishmael, too, will become a mighty nation.

I wonder how different our Torah reading this morning would be, how different history would be, if either Hagar or Sarah had just listened to and spoken with each other with empathy.

Of course, there are some opinions, some actions that do not deserve understanding or empathy. Just the opposite: violence against others, hate speech, and the kind of stereotyping, half-truths and lies that enable both. But perhaps, more often than we might think, fear and anger can be transformed into mutual understanding and compassion by asking good questions and listening with empathy.

Step Three: Be Quick to Listen and Slow to Fix.

You may think of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a civil rights leader, as a man of action. One day, Rabbi Heschel learned of the death of a dear friend's sister. He immediately told his student, then rabbi-to-be Jack Reimer, "We have to go." They rushed to the airport, flew to Boston, and grabbed a cab to the friend's house. Rabbi Heschel walked in, hugged his friend, and sat beside him. He did not mumble one cliché. "How old was she?" "Time will heal." "I know how you feel." He just sat there in silence for an hour and listened, because that is what his friend needed.^{vii}

The biblical book of Ecclesiastes puts it this way, *There is a time for silence and a time for speaking.*^{viii}

It is hard not to try to fix something that troubles someone we love. According to author Becky Harling, our desire to fix things is well meaning. We just don't want others to suffer. But we may not have all the facts, let alone all the answers.^{ix} And by jumping in, we may also undermine others' ability to learn how to discover their own answers. It is like the little boy who saw a butterfly struggling from its chrysalis. He carefully opened the chrysalis to free the

butterfly. But the butterfly soon died because, without having to struggle to free itself from the chrysalis, the butterfly's wings never developed enough strength to fly.

Sometimes we absolutely need to intervene, as Rabbi Heschel knew from having witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany before escaping to the US. But, as Rabbi Heschel also knew, more often than not, we need to be quicker to listen and slower to fix.

Step Four: Be Present

Woody Allen once said, "Showing up is 80% of life." But the reality is it is not enough to show up if we are not also present.

Perhaps you know the story of the little girl who comes home from school, eager to show her mother a drawing. "Mommy, guess what?" she shouts as she runs into the kitchen. Her mother responds, "What?" without looking up from what she is doing. "Mommy, you're not listening," the little girl insists. Not shifting her focus, the mother says, "Sweetie, I am." "But Mommy," the little girl replies, "you're not listening with your eyes!"^x

All too often we don't listen with our eyes. There are so many distractions, work and chores, smartphones and tablets that help but also hinder our ability to connect with each other. I think that is why our ancient Sages decreed that we close our eyes when we recite our most important prayer, the *Shema (Hear O Israel)*. God knows we can't always pay attention. But we need to be totally present, totally attentive, to listen without distraction when it counts.

Kids do know when we are not really paying attention to them. It is healthy for them to know the world does not revolve around them. But if every time they come to us, they find we are not listening with our eyes, they may start coming to us less and less and even stop coming to us, particularly when they need us most.

What is true for our kids, is true for all our relationships. Are we really that busy that we can't stop what we are doing for a few minutes to look our spouse, our parent, our co-worker, or our neighbor in the eye and really listen without distraction?

Eighty percent of life is *not* just showing up. It is about being present.

Next week on Yom Kippur we will ask God for forgiveness for our sins. The majority of the lists we recite describe how we fail to talk with each other in ways that honor the image of God in each other. These prayers will remind us that our words have undermined our personal, familial, professional, and communal relationships. We will pledge to do better in the coming year. But the process of repentance and renewal begins now, on Rosh Hashanah, with the opportunity provided by the new year to change for the better. How we listen to each other, how we talk with each other, will help determine how successfully we actualize this incredible opportunity for healing and growth.

So here are four steps we can take to help us improve how we listen to each other and talk with each other: *Ask good questions; listen with empathy; be quick to listen and slow to fix; and be present.*

Listening is not the be all and end all of changing our relationships, our communities, our nation and our world. But it is a good place to start, especially when it is part of building a mutual, two-way relationship in which we do not just actively and attentively listen, but we also share.

There are a lot of people in pain right now. And a lot of people with whom we may not agree.

I wonder how it might ease tensions in our families, if we used these holy days to try to begin to listen differently to and speak differently with our loved ones. Asking good questions

instead of making firm statements. Listening with an open heart and refraining from offering solutions. Looking them in the eye and perhaps taking their hand.

I wonder how the discourse in our country might change if we reached out to someone who thinks differently than we do and begin asking good questions, listening with empathy, restraining the fixer within us, and quieting our inner and external distractions so we can be fully present.

As I found out this summer, America and Canada interpret the same War of 1812 very differently due to our different national perspectives and experiences. None of us has the whole truth or sees the whole picture. Our Sages teach that the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, is made up of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet to teach us that it takes looking at the entire picture, the beginning, the middle and the end, to be able to discern the truth. We have a better chance of discerning more of the truth if we put our heads together with others to try to do so.

It is true we can't talk with everyone. Our ancient Sages also teach that we shouldn't try to talk with people who we absolutely know cannot hear us and certainly not with those who may want or will try to hurt us. But perhaps we can listen to and talk with more people than we think we can.

In the year to come, may God give us the courage to reach out, the wisdom to ask good questions, the compassion to listen with an open heart, the faith to silence our inner fixer, and the patience to be present for our loved ones, for each other, and for a world so desperately in need of courtesy, cooperation, and kindness. And let us say, Amen.

ⁱ ©Copyright. Rabbi Susan Grossman, 2017.

ⁱⁱ These four steps were adapted from several good books on how to listen, particularly, Becky Harling, *How to Listen so People Will Talk* and Dr. Michael Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Haggadah*, (Maggid Books, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, Spring 2013).

^{iv} *Pearlson's Pearls 5778*.

^v Nichols, 9.

^{vi} There seems to be some debate about the source of this saying. Rabbi Eliyahu Zoaretz of Ashdod cites *Ayin Yaakov* to Berachot 6b in a teshuvah, available at http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pagefeed/hebrewbooks_org_36564_304.pdf. (Accessed September 13, 2017.)

^{vii} Recounted by Rabbi Jack Reimer in Ron Wolfson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement*, 205.

^{viii} Ecclesiastes 3:7.

^{ix} Harling, 58.

^x My appreciation to R. Dan Moskowitz for this story.