

President's Message – November/December Temple Topics

Jen Cole

The Art & Importance of Listening: Shhh...Mmmm...Ahhh...

As an adjunct professor whose Introductory Psychology class is comprised largely of freshmen, I often get approached by students for guidance on how to select a major. For students with a defined career goal in mind, this is a relatively simple task, but others struggle, as their visions of the future are far less clear. And then there are those, like my 18-year-old self, who feel certain what they want...but ultimately come to find it wasn't quite what they expected. When I applied to Muhlenberg, I intended to travel the pre-med path, but quickly found myself seeking something different. I can still recall telling my parents that it was no longer my ambition to become a doctor (at least not a *real doctor*, as my kids like to tease) and that I was switching to psychology/religion. When dad asked what I planned to do with this newfound combo degree, I admittedly didn't have great answers. I wish I could share with him now how well my education has served me, both professionally as a clinical psychologist and avocationally as synagogue president.

One of the tasks involved in the later stages of the rabbinic search was to call references for candidates under consideration. It turned out to be an interesting task, as it connected me to lay leaders at communities all over the country and several outside the US. Some of these calls were perfunctory and involved a simple Q & A exchange, but other times we wound up talking to each other about our respective congregations, sharing a bit of our backgrounds, passions, ideas and challenges. One particular chat stands out in my mind. A past president inquired if I had any special training that informed my presidency, and I jokingly told him that I may have actually majored in it! He responded that he too, had a unique talent that often came in handy, namely that he was "*deaf in one ear.*"

All kidding aside, I am fortunate to work with a wonderful team of staff and lay leaders at BHSS and the congregation has been incredibly supportive of my efforts. Even when complaints or issues have come up, our congregants have been respectful and willing to engage in constructive conversation. As such, I have rarely experienced the urge to turn a deaf ear. At least not at BHSS, that is.

Unfortunately, amidst the broader cultural backdrop of unmatched political divisiveness, listening hasn't been easy. As a practitioner whose main job description involves creating a space in which people can express and process their thoughts and feelings, listening shouldn't be so hard, but beyond the walls of our synagogue and outside the confines of my office, there is SO MUCH NOISE these days. Recent headlines and news cycles, not to mention the inevitable aftermath of social media response, have been difficult for me to digest. While I try to listen to folks who see the world through very different lenses, it sometimes feels easier to keep quiet, walk away, or simply "unfriend" them.

I know in my heart, though, that taking the time to listen to others is what is very much needed.

I also know that it is equally important to find time to turn down the noise and make space for a reprieve.

It turns out that Judaism has an answer in the *Shema*. Our best known prayer, its message is considered foundational to Jewish practice. It begins with the imperative: **Listen!** The kind of listening the *Shema* demands is more than simply allowing sound waves to enter our ears. Rather, it involves paying attention and opening our hearts so that we may be changed by what we are hearing. Philosopher Martin Buber describes listening as "*something we do with our full selves by sensing and feeling what another is trying to convey...My deepest certainties may be shaken by entering into the mind of one who thinks quite differently about the world. But it is essential to our humanity.*"

The *Shema* continues "...*The Lord is one,*" reminding us that despite our differences, there is connection that unites us all. As Rabbi Adina Allen describes, "*Beginning with listening and ending with oneness, the Shema invites us to deepen our capacity to listen - to ourselves, to the Divine, and to those around us...Its daily recitation reminds us to build bridges rather than barriers.*"

When things seem particularly loud and the barriers especially impermeable, breaking it down like this can help:

Shhhh: It involves intention and quieting our own voice.

MMMmm: It involves deep thought, understanding and vulnerability.

Ahhhh: It involves acceptance and action.

I invite you all to join me in my quest to be a better listener in 5779 and thank you all for being part of a community which celebrates diversity while at the same time supporting oneness and promoting sacred community wherein each and every voice can be expressed and truly heard.

