

G'mar chatimah tovah

A number of years ago, my husband and I started seeing a couple's therapist. I admit that I went to that first session with the fantasy that if I simply pointed out the ways that I was right and that my husband was screwing up, the therapist would agree with me and fix him and everything would be better. On an intellectual level, of course, I didn't really think that that was how the therapy would unfold. But all the same, I went into therapy *feeling* this way, setting up a dichotomy of right and wrong with me on the winning side.

The therapist, as it turned out, wasn't interested in the whole idea of who won and who lost. She wanted us to get beyond that, to a place where we could listen to one another and really see one another's vulnerability, our suffering, and even, hopefully, our magnificence.

The therapy was a game-changing experience for me and my husband, mostly because it improved our mutual ability to listen better to one another. It made me realize how often I am not really attending to what my partner is saying but rather going through the motions of listening---while I am on my phone or looking at the newspaper. I also realized that when I call myself "listening," what I am often doing is staying quiet and formulating my response until I can talk again. We both learned that when we get defensive, we listen to the other in a perfunctory way, all the while clinging to our resentments and waiting for the "gotcha" moment, some statement from the other that we could twist in such a way to strengthen our point.

In therapy, we learned to practice a new kind of listening that slowed us down and helped us reach through our defensiveness and hurt. This kind of listening helped us foster a sense of curiosity and kindness toward each other.

During our session our therapist said one thing that our has stayed with me. She told us how rare it is for any of us to be listened to fully.

There was something about the way our therapist said this that struck me in my bones as being true. Full and careful listening takes enormous intention and energy. It means that you have to let go of your agenda and instead try to see the other person with a stance of

kindness and gentle curiosity. We listen all the time, but when you are the recipient of that kind of listening, it feels like a gift.

So here we are on Yom Kippur, in a time of seemingly unprecedented divisions and conflict, and listening feels even more fraught. The imperative to listen, the sh'ma, the central statement of our faith, contains the penetrating truth that when you are truly listening, you are engaging in the holiest of actions. But in the times that we are living through now, when we seem so far apart socially and politically, real listening seems impossible, and maybe sometimes, even foolhardy.

This past week, I noticed an article by George Stern in the Jewish Exponent about that week's Torah portion and listening. Day Two of Rosh Hashanah at Dorshei was infused by texts and ideas about listening. So today I'm going to continue this conversation about listening. I will be using a number of secular sources but I'm also going to focus on the Golden Calf and the events surrounding it, using Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg's commentary on the book of Leviticus entitled, The Hidden Order of Intimacy. I want to thank Rabbi Joshua Boettiger, a former RRC student and the current Rosh Yeshiva of the Center for Contemporary Mussar, who provided inspiration for my d'var with a drash that he gave on the Golden Calf, using sections of Aviva Zornberg's book. Zornberg, who looks at Jewish text through a psychoanalytic lens, centered her interpretations of Leviticus around the incident of the Golden Calf.

I was also inspired in my d'var today by David Teutsch, who in a d'var a few months ago, used the phrase Religious Triumphalism. That word, triumphalism, has been ringing in my head ever since. Triumphalism doesn't celebrate nuance and the grey areas; it only recognizes the joy of being right and being victorious. It also dictates that there is an "other," your opponent, perhaps even your marriage partner, who is wrong and in need of redemption. Let's face it: It feels GOOD to believe that you are right. And if being right feels that good individually, it's easy to imagine how the feeling just increases exponentially when you are part of a group.

The thing about triumphalism is that it gives you the illusion of control, of knowing what to expect. This brings me to our Torah and the stories surrounding the Golden Calf.

To recap the Torah story briefly, months after the people of Israel left Egypt, they assembled at Mount Sinai where they, in essence, listened to the voice of G'd. Soon afterward, when Moses left the Israelites to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites sinned by worshipping a golden calf. Moses came down the mountain and, enraged, broke the tablets. G'd was enraged as well, and some of the Israelites were even killed.

Moses ascended Mount Sinai again and begged G-d to forgive the people of Israel. Finally, full Divine favor was obtained. That day that Moses returned from the mountain, the 10th of Tishrei, came to be observed as the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur.

In Aviva Zornberg's retelling, the moment of Revelation at the foot of Mount Sinai was almost too much for the Israelites to bear. It was a moment of yirah, the Hebrew word for awe, what Jacob Staub talked about on Rosh HaShanah as a time of trembling.

Zornberg writes, *"The (moment at Sinai) comes with overwhelming force. It is experienced as impinging on the mind of the listener who, in the same gesture, both accepts and rejects...All that is being given is both desired and reflexively warded off."*

Zornberg focuses on the Israelites' response to the events at Mount Sinai, the phrase *na'aseh ve-nishma*, which is translated as "We will do and we will hear." These words are often interpreted as a moment of ultimate faith---the idea that while we don't even understand what we are agreeing to, in our great faith, we will obey. But Zornberg looks at an alternate interpretation of these words, from the Sefat Emet. (this on your handout):

In a powerful teaching (about Sinai), R. Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (known as the Sefat Emet) works against the grain of the usual understanding of na'aseh ve-nishma (We will do and we will hear.) He (suggests that) na'aseh ve-nishma conceals a reservation about the larger aspiration of listening. By putting obedience before listening, one may be reserving the

option of making do with mere performance...Even as one commits oneself in words that carry the vitality of aspiration, one is flinching from the radical demand of those very words...That flinching---that backward and forward movement—is, I suggest, inherent in the drama of Revelation...

The Israelites then, in the Sefat Emet's view, flinched from fully taking in what was communicated. When I think about how this flinching operates in my own life, I only have to go back to my stance before couple's therapy. It turns out that there are many reasons for not wanting to hear what is communicated in the moment. You might not want to hear something that undermines the way you like to see yourself or undermines a belief you've grown comfortable with. You might not want to hear something that makes you face your limitations. And, while this would need a whole d'var in itself to discuss, it feels important to add that trauma, and intergenerational trauma, is certainly something that shuts you down from hearing anything different at all.

Zornberg views the Golden Calf as the extreme flinching response. When Moses left the Israelites to receive the Ten Commandments, it seems like the Israelites were plunged into uncertainty. What was going to happen to them alone in the desert? What if Moses never returned? They needed something could help them cope with this not-knowing. Their response was to create the Golden Calf.

Zornberg quotes "the Ishbitzer," Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica from his best-known work, *Mei Hashiloach* who translates the word for calf, *egel*, as spiritual impatience. He contends that the Golden Calf represents a desire for an untroubled spiritual existence. Zornberg writes, *"The Golden Calf...erodes the impact of Sinai....it clips the wings of the imagination...The spiritual imagination is characterized by the experience of opening and newness... Calf worshippers (long for) for the stable and completed image...Even the expression, "a stiff-necked people," which makes its first biblical appearance in God's*

rejection of the Calf worshippers, conveys this willful, rigid quality of consciousness. In Rashi's paraphrase, it indicates an inability to turn one's head to hear something new."

So perhaps flinching is something that, at its most pronounced, is a way of describing triumphalism, a stance of digging in your heels and longing for certainty. But at the same time, there is a part of us that yearns to be open, to expand our spiritual imagination, to experience that other aspect of yirah which is a sense of wonder at the mystery that is surrounding us.

This movement then, between the desire to open up to the new, and the need to retreat into what you already know is, in fact, very relatable. And what's important here is that everyone moves back and forth---between the ability to hear more, and the need to retreat. This includes you and me and all the others we deal with. It may well be that when you are dealing with someone else, they have their own good reasons for being in a place of retreat at that moment.

So, on this Yom Kippur, I want to offer three ideas for how we might approach this reality of listening and flinching. I hope that these ideas help us be a little kinder to ourselves and be in a position where we might listen to one another more fully. The first of these is the idea of paying attention to where you pay attention. The second is, taking a page from Jacob Staub's d'var, slowing down. And the third idea is about widening your capacity for compassion and kindness.

First, I'm going to talk about attention and it's opposite, distraction. Distraction is a huge component in the way we resist listening fully. We can view the Golden Calf as the ultimate shiny distraction that helped the Israelites cope with their fear. In our daily lives, distracting ourselves can actually be a way to avoid dealing with the things that we say we want. In his wonderful book, 4000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals, Oliver Burkeman explains that "distractions" are the places we go to seek relief from the discomfort of confronting our limitations. He writes, "Something in us wants to be distracted, whether by our digital

devices or anything else---to not spend our lives on what we thought we cared about the most.”

I think about my ongoing realization that, instead of listening to my partner because my relationship with him is my highest priority, I take refuge in my phone. And speaking of phones, there are factors that supercharge our tendency to be distracted, even if we aren’t necessarily looking for distraction. The phenomenon has even been given a name: the attention economy.

In the second part of your handout, I attached a quote by Charlie Warzel, a writer for the New York Times. In an op-ed entitled *The Cassandra of the Internet Age*, Warzel introduces Michael Goldhaber a former theoretical physicist, who applied the term Attention Economy to our digital age and the constant vying for our attention. Warzel explained “Every single action we take — calling our grandparents, cleaning up the kitchen or, today, scrolling through our phones — is a transaction. We are taking what precious little attention we have and diverting it toward something. This is a zero-sum proposition, (Goldhaber) realized. When you pay attention to one thing, you ignore something else.”

Goldhaber added---and this is crucial--- that while our ability to pay attention is limited, we seem to have a bottomless need to *get* attention. Goldhaber said that, as a result, “The value of true modesty or humility is hard to sustain in an attention economy.”

Goldhaber’s main point was the impossibility of escaping from the attention economy. Instead of thinking that you are immune, he suggests, you need to figure out what you want to pay attention to in your waking hours.

Somehow, we need to find the space to ask ourselves the question of what deserves our attention, and also notice the ways we get distracted. It’s helpful to remember Goldhaber’s point that we all crave attention, and that others in our lives are enriched when we pay attention to them. Focusing our attention more skillfully helps us better listen to and see the other. As Mary Oliver once said, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

The second thing I want to talk about is slowing down. This goes hand in hand with taking back control of our attention. It seems like everything in our culture is geared toward speeding up, taking in more stimuli, and having more experiences. While speed and being inundated with stimuli can be exciting, it can also stress you out and make you react to things in ways that you don't intend.

In my Mussar practice, one middah or character trait that I return to again and again, is the middah of metinut, or pausing. The definition of Metinut from the text Cheshbon HaNefesh is as follows, *"Let not your heart be rash, nor your mouth be hasty. Rather, pause several times while speaking or acting so as to, deliberate and calm yourself."* Metinut is a wonderful way to practice slowing down, to find a place from which you can be more grounded.

Slowing down allows you to do less reacting and more responding. Oliver Burkeman in his book 4000 Weeks, describes slowing down as...*(t)he unfashionable notion of letting time use you, approaching life not as an opportunity to implement your predetermined plans for success but as a means to responding to the needs of your place and your moment in history.*

I recently learned about the writer Bayo Akomolafe, who was quoted as saying, "Things are urgent. We need to slow down." With these words, Akomolafe presents the idea of slowness as a radical act, an act of defiance in a culture that only urges us to speed up.

The third idea and last idea I want to talk about is compassion. When Moses went up the mountain for the second time and gained G'd's assurance of forgiveness, he was able to see G'd's back, which was communicated as 13 attributes of G'd, attributes that we repeat in our prayers during these Days of Awe. One of these attributes is compassion, something that we have an ongoing need to develop, both for ourselves and for others.

If we are paying attention, we know that everyone experiences moments of profound disappointment and loss. At these moments, we need to retreat. We need to forgive ourselves and others at these times, especially when we can't show up in the way we would most like to. We need to remember that the difficult times of retreat are what give us the strength to open up again. By recognizing the humanity of retreating and opening again, we can grow compassion for others we encounter in our lives as well as ourselves.

Over the summer, after the first presidential debate, I found myself in a state of despair and terror. I turned to the children's author, Kate DiCamillo, who I'd heard interviewed on Krista Tippett's podcast *On Being* and I borrowed her book, Flora and Ulysses from the library. Flora and Ulysses is the story of a young girl whose parents have separated. Ulysses is the squirrel superhero she befriends. At one point in the book, a neighbor of Flora's father, a wise old woman named Dr. Meescham, informs Flora that Flora's father has a capacious heart. She explains, "It means that (your father's heart) is large. It is capable of containing much joy and much sorrow."

A capacious heart is what grows when we practice compassion. It helps us be in a stance of receptivity that the Franciscan Priest, Richard Rohr calls "bright sadness". A capacious heart can hold both pleasure and sadness.

It may be that our movement away from, and striving toward, more openness is continual. However, understanding what drives our distractedness, being able to slow down and growing compassion can help us strengthen our ability to engage in that holy act of listening fully. We are confronted by so much today, but we know that connection is always healing. Our pledge to listen strengthens our connections, not just with our closest others, but hopefully in a way to create other bridges.

Today, I've been talking mostly about listening deeply as it enhances our individual relationships. But it also has implications of course on a wider societal level. Bayo Akomolafe writes movingly about how deep listening and turning toward the new impacts

social justice. In the following passage, he describes the potential impact of growing a wider spiritual imagination:

There are things we must do, sayings we must say, thoughts we must think, that look nothing like the images of success that have so thoroughly possessed our visions of justice....

May this decade bring more than just solutions, more than just a future---may it bring words we don't know yet, and temporalities we have not yet inhabited. May we be slower than speed could calculate, and swifter than the pull of the gravity of words can incarcerate.

In this new year, may we be enriched by listening to one another, learning to appreciate not only the vulnerability, but the magnificence in one another.

I want to end with a quote by Eudora Welty (the last quote on your handout):

My wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight.

Shabbat shalom