

Hearing God's call

Yom Kippur 5772

An elderly lady was concerned about her husband's hearing. It seemed that every time she would call him, he wouldn't respond. The lady went to the doctor to ask his advice.

The doctor said to her, "When you go home, tell your husband to stand at the end of the hallway, and you should stand at the other end. Ask him what he wants for dinner. Continue to move closer toward him until he responds to your question, so you know exactly how far away he is from you when he can finally hear you."

She thought this sounded like a great idea. So when she got home, she placed her husband at the end of the hallway and yelled, "Herbert, what do you want for dinner?"

There was no response. She moved 10 feet closer and yelled it again.

"Herbert, what do you want for dinner?"

Still no response. She moved another 15 feet closer and was now practically face to face with her husband. She yelled ever louder this time.

"HERBERT, WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR DINNER?!!"

Herbert yelled back at her, "For the THIRD time, I want chicken!!!"

Sometimes, when it feels like someone isn't listening to you, perhaps it's worth checking to make sure you're hearing them.

In moments when we might feel like God isn't hearing us, we have to ask ourselves a tough question: Are we listening to God's call? Atem nitzavim hayom... Today, in the Torah portion we'll hear in a few moments, all of us—indeed all Jews everywhere in the world, stand together, to hear God's command.

This profound Torah text, from the book of Devarim, from Deuteronomy, is more than just a command to be here, although being here is great—it's great to see you all! Tradition says there are two moments when all of the Jewish people in the world stood together—once, at Mount Sinai, to hear God's first covenantal call to the Jewish people, and here in our Torah portion this morning, at Mt. Nebo, when God, through Moses, calls the people to personal responsibility. So here we are together again—it's good that you came, but showing up isn't all that God is calling us to. We've come because this is what Jews have always done, because this is what our parents and grandparents did, and what we were taught to do as kids. But although remembering the past and honoring family tradition is important, Judaism is more than an obligation to remember and reenact the past. That's just not the whole story.

Hear the call of our Torah portion:

You stand commanded this day all of you before Adonai Your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, your officers, with all the people of Israel, your little ones, your spouses, and your stranger who is in your midst, from the cutter of your wood to the drawer of your water; that you should enter into covenant with Adonai your God, and into God's oath, which Adonai makes with you today.

The text goes on to name the idea that all the Jews who ever **were** or ever **would be**, stood together that day to hear Moshe proclaim God's call to us. So I ask you, on this Day of Awe, in which something called you to be here rather than anyplace else in the world: Do you feel commanded? It's a difficult question for us liberal Jews with a small "I." We tend to prefer suggestions and guidelines rather than commandments. We tend to want total individual religious autonomy rather than communal obligation, no less divine obligation. But here we stand: commanded. We may wonder whether God is listening to us today as we pray to be sealed for blessing in the book of life. But an equally important question with which I must challenge us all, myself included, is: As these words make our eardrums involuntarily vibrate, we can't help but listen to them. But are we truly hearing God's call to us? And how will we each, and collectively, respond to that call?

Because there's no excuse—because all of you are here today, all of us will listen to the command. I can't tell you how you should respond, but you will respond. As a Jew, you are commanded. You can debate who is the commander. Is God the commander? Is it the call of your people—the people of Israel? Or is it the call of the human conscience for meaning and purpose? For the purpose of this moment, it doesn't matter to me who you think is commanding you—God, your faith community, or your conscience. The fact is, by standing here today, by being a part of the Jewish people, by being a human being, you are commanded. All that matters to me is how you will respond. And here you thought that when you wanted High Holiday tickets, all you needed to commit to was paying dues!

The good thing is that we have different models we can consider as we decide how to respond to that call. Over these High Holidays, we reconnect with five people who know they are commanded— though they each respond in different ways.

Last night I spoke of Jonah, the prophet whose story we'll read this afternoon. *If you feel cynical about the world*—if the temporary nature of life and happiness makes you wonder if life is worth it, then Jonah is your man. He runs from God's command—first in the opposite direction, then to the bottom of the sea. Each time, the call gets louder and more compelling. Jonah longs for death because he'd rather die than deal with the uncertainties of the life. If, when I ask you if you feel commanded, your gut answer is, "no, not me, I'm looking out for myself and my family—I can't fix the world," then you've got a spiritual ancestor in Jonah.

When Jonah tries to run away, of course, he finds that he can't. As Jews, Jonah reminds us that our faith tears off our blinders every time we try to put them on. We can't NOT see the inequity, the prejudice, the extremism, the brokenness in our world and be moved to action, how ever small or fleeting. When Jonah tries to deny the call, he finds that God, and his conscience, follow him to the depths and call him, commanding him to choose life. If you find yourself running away from this call, will you stop and listen, if only today? Perhaps, like Jonah, you'll hear a call to life, renewed.

Now, if you're a skeptic, either professionally or avocationally, I'd like to introduce you to your spiritual ancestor-- Sarah, wife of Abraham. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we heard the call to Sarah once again. You might call her the first Jewish skeptic, and who can blame her? In the text, she hears God's call—she's told that she'll be a mother at age 90, after a lifetime of barrenness. And what does she do when she hears God's call? *Vatitzchok Sarah b'kirbah*-- She laughs a belly laugh! And when God challenges her, she becomes afraid, fearful that she's been too irreverent. And then God, teaches her the greatest lesson of the story, perhaps. God says, *ki tzachaked*. it's okay that you laughed. From Sarah's response to her call, we learned that skepticism and a sense of humor are not only permissible

in our tradition, but they are necessary. The human condition is filled with both joy and sorrow, meaning and senselessness. When Sarah hears God's call, she responds with laughter. If you are feeling skeptical of Deuteronomy's call today, know that you're not alone. And, too, know, that skepticism does not equal a rejection of the call. You can hear this call like Sarah, and maintain your sense of humor, all at the same time.

The Haftarah on the first morning of Rosh Hashanah, tells the story of Hannah—another barren woman who persists in her faith despite her plight, and despite the derision and skepticism of those around her. For us, Hannah presents a different model of hearing the call. She continues to pray fervently and almost soundlessly even when, perhaps especially when, she doesn't hear God's voice responding. Some people say to me, I'd pray, but I don't hear God answering. Hannah, for the rabbis of our tradition, and us as well, models that sometimes the call must go out from us to God, from us to the world; that we must maintain our hope even against a messy world, that we must pray even when we're not sure God is listening, and that **when we do**, we might just hear God's call in return.

Perhaps you feel resistant to hearing God's call because you know, as I do, that too many people have used a call from God as an excuse to destroy worlds. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we were reminded of God's call to Abraham. When God first calls Avram, God promises that his descendants will be like the stars in the sky, and the grains of sand on the shores of the sea. We don't initially know why God chooses this simple shepherd. If from Jonah we learned that even if we run away from God's command, God patiently waits for us to turn back and hearken to the call, then from Abraham, we learn the importance of running towards God's commands. When God calls Abraham, our ancestor gets up early in the morning to do what God wants. But Abraham stands up to God at Sodom and Gomorrah, defending humanity against what surely seems an unjust call to destruction by God. And when Abraham stands ready to sacrifice his own son, God calls to him again, saying: Abraham, Abraham! Don't lift up your hand against the boy. Abraham's is a cautionary tale: his response to God's call teaches that blind faith is insufficient. One who believes that God has called them to destroy a mosque or destroy the world should argue, question, and doubt that call. Rail against that interpretation of God's call, and all who proclaim that to be the one true understanding. Abraham, a lonely man of faith, models for us both faith and moderation. The God of Justice, whatever you call God, does not want human sacrifice. You can feel commanded, and yet not be blinded by the commandments or the commander. Abraham's narrative teaches that we can hear God's call today, and still argue against extremism in Judaism, and wherever we find it.

We have all been called here today—literally. We all felt moved by the spirit and ritual of Yom Kippur to prayer, to ritual, to fasting, to public, communal acts of repentance. And that is extraordinary. By being here today, you have heard this call. But is that sufficient? This morning, the prophetic Haftarah reading will be from Isaiah, a man who prophesied for 64 years, spanning the lifetimes of 4 Kings of Israel. Oh, Isaiah—so much of what you say inspires us as Reform Jews. But today, on Yom Kippur, as our stomachs grumble with hunger, even now you challenge us. Ritual life, alone, you say, won't suffice. Being righteous Jews in shul, saying all the right prayers and fasting until an hour after sunset is insufficient. It's only ritual that leads to righteous **action** in the world that matters. "You say you're religious?" asks Isaiah? "Do you pay your workers on time? Do you stand up for those who don't have enough, or do you think only of yourself? Answer those questions," Isaiah says, "and I'll tell you whether you've heard God's call or not." From Isaiah, we learn about both urgency and persistence on the **one** hand, and patience and practicality on the **other**. We learn that being holy through ritual in the shul, but then acting tomorrow like *vildas chaya*, like wild animals in the world, is not truly hearing all of God's call to

us. Isaiah reminds us that it is only ritual and learning that leads us to righteous **action** that can help us truly live out God's command to us—today and every day.

So who will be your model today, on this most awesome of days? Will you like Jonah try to run from obligation? Will you be the skeptic, like Sarah one who hears the call with a sense of humor? Will you respond to the call, as Hannah did, with fervent and quiet prayer as our hearts are filled with prayers today? Will you join Abraham in questioning and doubting and challenging your commandedness? Will you respond to the call by speaking truth to power no matter what the cost, as did Isaiah? These prophets of our tradition offer us a spectrum of varied and, at times, contradictory ways to respond to being commanded by God. All of them heard God's call, as **we** will once again this morning. Each, in their various ways, truly listened, and responded, as we must.

These prophets of ours weren't perfect—hardly. They didn't always get it right, and they didn't always respond in ways we'd consider heroic. Jonah ran away again and again before he finally heeded God's call. God gave Sarah a gift, but then she was cruel and jealous of Hagar. Abraham stood up for Sodom and Gomorrah but then, was ready to give up his wife and son if it served him well. They made mistakes, just as we all do. Responding to commandedness, to the call of faith, isn't easy, and we don't always get it right. **SLOW...** But what these prophets—Jonah and Sarah, Hannah and Abraham and Isaiah-- teach us above all is not to make perfect the enemy of the good.

No, we can't do it all. No, we don't always get it right. But we assert and reaffirm today that we feel commanded, that we are called to aspire to something greater. Just as we recognize the world as it is, broken and, at times, deeply depressing, we are commanded to imagine the world as it should be.

The world as it is—we understand and experience it every day. We live in the greatest country in the world, yet it is deeply divided in many ways and has many flaws. That's how it is. We live in the tri-state area and can hardly imagine a greater community on this green earth. Yet we know our towns have lost too many friends to the economic downturn; we don't need to travel very far to see how the recession has wrangled Bergen and Rockland Counties. That's how it is. We sit here in the sanctuary with friends and family who enrich this Holy Day by their presence. Still, we feel powerfully the absence of those who are not with us. That's how it is. We tend to obsess over small things because we feel there is only so much about the big things we have the power to change. That *is* how it is.

But that is not how it should be. *How it should be* is what brings us together on these High Holy Days. *How it should be* is our prayer, "*Katveinu b'sefer chayim tovim*, Write us into that Good Book" for long and healthy and prosperous and rewarding and meaningful life. That's how it should be. We know we have sins, shortcomings, flaws: that's how it is. How should it be? *U'tshuvah u'tefilah u'tzedakah ma-avarin et roa hagazera*: through honest acts of repentance, through worship that focuses us on the people we want to become, and through deeds of *tzedakah*, of justice, that seek to restore the balance of our world, we can change *how we are* into *how we should be*. Because in these days, as we celebrate the opportunity to begin again, we are afforded the rebirth of our character. The hard work of our high days of holiness is confronting *how it is* and trying to figure out how, with the gift of this new year, we can bring it ever closer to *how it should be*.

That work is the work we Jews are called by God to do. This is how it has been for the Jewish people since the very beginning of our people's story, as I shared last night, our Rabbis teach in a legend from two thousand years ago—a parable of God's palace in flames. When Abraham, our father, asks why the palace is in flames, that is the moment when God calls him to be the father of the Jewish people.

This parable of the palace paints Abraham—progenitor of the Jewish people-- as one whose eyes are open, as one who sees *how it is* and—importantly—also wonders why it isn't *how it should be*. That is why Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, explains, “Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that sacred discontent that [the Jewish] journey begins.” The parable of the burning palace teaches that an elemental **awareness**, and then a commensurate **dissatisfaction** with *how it is* gave birth to the Jewish people.

At this season, we celebrate the birthday of the world *as it was created*; today marks the opportunity to continue our journey towards the Promised Land for which Abraham and Sarah set forth centuries ago: the Promised Land of the world *as it ought to be*. To douse the flames, to hear God's command to us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy people, we have to move from listening to hearing those *mitzvot*.

The question our tradition asks of us, demands an answer to is, how will we respond to that command. Those who stood here before us all heard a call from something bigger than themselves, and they each provided models for how we might respond: Proclaim it. Argue with it. Struggle with it. Run away from it. Laugh about it. Run towards it. But you can't ignore it. You can't avoid it. And you can't deny it. You're here today. You've heard the call.

I believe that God hears our cries, our pleas, and our praise, and I hope that God truly listens. Whether you agree or not with that theological stance, what is clear is that we cannot help but hear a sacred call today. In order to go forward into 5772 as Jews, renewed in life, we must take the time to truly listen to the way that call speaks to our souls. Let us begin now, today, in this moment. *G'mar chatimah tova. May you be sealed for blessing in the Book of Life.*