LISTENING WITH YOUR EYES
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
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A little girl comes home from Hebrew school, eager to show her mother a drawing. Her mother is washing dishes.

"Mommy, guess what?" she squeals, waving the drawing.

Without looking up, her mother responds, "What?"

"***Guess*** what?" repeats the little girl.

Again the mother asks, "What?"

"Mommy, you're not listening."

Still not shifting her focus from the dishes, she says, "Sweetie, yes, I am,".

"But Mommy, you're not listening with your **eyes**."

My message for this New Year is simple: we are failing in the art of listening. We are so engrossed in our labors, so head down and task oriented, that that we not only forget to listen with our eyes, we fail to open our ears. Our community, our congregation, our families, this very sanctuary is filled with souls that yearn to be heard, stories that speak about who we are and how much we have in common, but we can't find anyone… to listen.

In this New Year we must heed the commandment that stems from the one Hebrew prayer everyone in this room knows by heart.

Our tradition commands us "Shema" – we translate it as Hear O' Israel, its root and meaning is not "to hear," rather the higher value, the greater mitzvah – we are commanded to ***listen***. Shema appears again as the first word on the scroll of a Mezzuzah, where we are commanded again to ***listen*** because what follows is important, so important that we nail it to the doors of our homes.

Hearing simply happens – ***Listening***, however, is a conscious choice. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes ***meaning***. Listening leads to understanding. Listening requires not only your ears, but your eyes, your heart, your mind – indeed *L'shma nefesh* – we must listen with our soul, our complete being.

Most people are not "hard of hearing" rather they are, "hard of listening". How about you, are you hard of listening? I know I can be.

This morning we read the disturbing story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son. Every year we read it and every year I am taken by the stark power of the commandment from God and the acquiescence of Abraham to abide by God's wishes.

But what if it was all a misunderstanding by Abraham, that God did not really want Abraham to sacrifice his son – Abraham just wasn't ***listening***.

God said, "Abraham."

"Hineni– Here I am," replied Abraham.

"Take now, your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac and go to the Land of Moriah and *v'ahaleihu* / sacrifice him there as a burnt offering."

But the Hebrew could be translated differently because the Hebrew word for sacrifice him - *v'ahaleihu* – has the same letters as the idea of "raise him up", like an Aliyah; so, MAYBE God simply meant bring him up to the mountain."

Maybe God wanted him to raise him high above his head and present him as his heir, like Simba in the Lion King, with Elton John singing "Circle of Life" in the background?

Rashi, the great Medieval commentator reads it the same way -- OK without the Lion King reference -- but he adds that in the next moment, God said, "Now take him down."

Perhaps, just perhaps, when Abraham said Hineni– he was like the Mom washing dishes: he heard what God said, but he wasn't really ***listening***.

Another example that Abraham wasn't listening- when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, knife raised, ready to do the unthinkable, the angel of God calls out twice, "Abraham, … Abraham!" and again he says, "Hineni– Here I am." "Literally, for God's sake, don't do it!" cries the angel. But why does the angel have to say Abraham's name twice? Was he not listening?

"Dan…. **Dan**!" When someone has to say my name a second time, I have failed at listening. When Abraham said, Hineni– Here I am – he wasn't really ***there***.

Do you say Hineni, "Here I am" when really your mind is somewhere else? When your children are talking and you're on the internet? When your spouse is talking and you're watching TV?

Ashamti, "I've done that". Have you?

Listening **is about being *present***, being in the room and while there being fully present you listen with your whole being.

A student was visiting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as the great scholar of Jewish thought got word that a friend's sister had just died. Heschel announced, "We have to go." They drove to Boston, an hour away, and went to the house. Heschel walked in, hugged his friend, and sat beside him on the sofa for an hour. He didn't mumble a single word, not one cliché, not, "How old was she?" Not, "Time will heal." Not even, "I know how you feel." He sat there in silence for an hour and listened, and when his friend was done talking and crying and storytelling he got up, hugged his friend again, and left.

On the ride back the student asked Rabbi Heschel, "did you know her well, the sister of your friend who died?" Heschel responded, "I'd never met her."

The student was puzzled. "Why did we drive an hour to just sit on his sofa?" The great rabbi responded, "because that's what he needed."

Can we be like Heschel? Can we be a community, a congregation that shows up for each other?

The Talmud explains the commandment to hear the sound of the shofar. Our rabbis teach that if a person blows the shofar in a well, those that hear it do not fulfill the commandment of hearing the shofar, because being outside the pit they are not able to distinguish between the sound of the shofar and its echo.

To truly listen you have to be present, not only emotionally, but also physically. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, you have to be ***proximate***.

Stevenson is the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative. He explains, "When we get close, we hear things that can't be heard from afar. We see things that can't be seen. And sometimes that makes the difference between acting justly and unjustly."

If you are not proximate, you might hear only the echo. That's why Heschel had to go to his friend. He had to be in his presence so as not be misguided or confused by an echo.

Listening isn't knowing answers. **Acknowledging another human being is not about giving advice; it is about giving *attention.***

Ever hear a magician say *Abra Kadabra?* It's Aramaic. It means *I create as I speak*. People's words are their most personal creations, coming straight from their minds and going directly into the listener's ears, yearning to find a home in our heart. When one truly listens, he or she gives more than can be imagined, for the listener holds sacred a piece of the speaker's soul. What an honour it is to listen!

A 19th Century Hassidic rabbi once said, "Human beings are God's language." The way we speak says something about us, but the way we listen says everything about us. Rabbi Harold Kushner added, "When we call out to God in our distress, God answers us by sending us people. Any path is easier to travel when you have somebody's hand to hold." Can you imagine putting out your hand for help and no one takes it?

[HOLD OUT HAND FORLORNLY AND HOLD THE POSE FOR A MOMENT]

Can you recall a time when you really needed to talk, but everyone was busy? All you needed was the presence of a trusted friend, lover, parent or colleague – but they weren't there or far worse they were there but not fully ***present*** – an empty shell.

We all have limitations, but something each one of us is uniquely empowered to do is to be a friend, to be a healing force, to **be present**. Woody Allen famously said, that 98% of life is just showing up. Hineni– Here I am. Hineinu – here we are!

And so Temple Sholom in this New Year I want to challenge us to say **Hineni** – here I am, to show up and to listen for and to each other.

When Rosh Hashanah ends you are going to get an email from me announcing a listening campaign for our congregation. From Sukkot to Chanukah, roughly 2 ½ months we are going to challenge ourselves to have 500 conversations in our congregation.

The email will invite you to sign up to participate, to host and or to help facilitate conversations amongst small groups of 10 people in our Temple Sholom family.

The goal is simple, it is to break down the walls and assumptions that separate us, to get to know each other, each other's stories and to talk and listen about what unites us, our Jewish journeys, our temple, our dreams for our future together.

But the conversations are only the beginning.

In this New Year let us to commit to being a community; like Heschel, a community that shows up for each other.

Do this by going to shiva minyanim so that when someone in this room loses a loved one, they are not alone, they have the comfort of our presence.

Will you say **Hineni/Here I am** and sit with them as they tell stories about the most precious people in the world to them?

We have about 25 B'nai Mitzvahs this year. Children that will become the next generation of Jews who will join temples and shape and lead communities? Will you say **Hineni** and commit to attending one of those services, listen to our students *layn Torah* and share their teaching on the *parasha*?

Will you say **Hineni** and pledge as you did last year $2 for every bar and bat mitzvah student in our congregation to send them to Poland & Israel on the March of the Living letting them know that we hear their struggles with Jewish identity in the 21st century and we are listening and acting.

In the New Year we will celebrate Cornelia Oberlander, one of our founding members and a true national hero for her work in creating sustainable living in urban environments. Will you say **Hineni**, here I am, and show up for her and our community as we celebrate and learn from her for all she has done for our environment?

Will you join our Caring Community that reaches out to the sick and the homebound; our Award Winning Sisterhood, our rejuvenated Men's Club, our 60 Plus group, our morning minyan and say **Hineni**, here I am, and get to really know the men and women of our congregation, so that no one sits alone in a sanctuary filled with people?

My friends, there is deep pain in our world and right here in this room as well, it's the pain of isolation and loneliness.

We can soften some of that pain. We can show up, like Heschel. We can say **Hineni**, like Abraham, and listen with intention and empathy, we can become a more caring community.

Let's return to that mother in her kitchen with her daughter. The mother was now ***listening*** to her daughter. She put down her dishes and lifted up her eyes, she leaned down, got close to see the creation in the child's hand. The child was saying *Abra Kadabra*, I create as I speak!

The mother focused on her words, she ***listened*** with her eyes and her ears and her heart and her soul whispered ***– Heneni – Here I am!***

We, too, can listen, we can care, we can be present.

If you agree then say it with me, **Heneni**, Here I am!