Shema Yisrael: Can You Hear Me?
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When he was a young man, our forefather, Jacob, ran away from home.
He escaped his brother's murderous vengance, his father's judgment, his mother's manipulation, and ran into the wilderness. When nightfall came, he lay down to sleep, taking a stone for a pillow.
What kind of man sleeps on a stone? A man who took nothing with him. A man with nothing to cover himself, no protection. A man who is totally alone in the darkness, with nothing between him and the cold, hard, harsh realities of the world. Then he had a dream. A ladder stretching from earth to heaven, angels ascending and descending, and God standing beside him. Jacob awoke from the dream and exclaimed, **אָכֵן֙ יֵ֣שׁ יְהוָ֔ה בַּמָּק֥וֹם הַזֶּ֖ה וְאָנֹכִ֑י לֹ֥א יָדָֽעְתִּי** "God is in this place, and I didn't know it."

There is something strange about that sentence. The Bible is typically so careful in doling out words, but there is an extra word in that sentence, a word that doesn't belong. The word, **אָנֹכִי,** the formal form of "I" or "I am." **אָנֹכִי** isn't needed. The next phrase **לֹ֥א יָדָֽעְתִּי** expresses the same meaning the perfect clarity. What is this word doing there? Why **אָנֹכִי?**

Alone in the dark, terrified by the solitude, by the cold mystery of life, Jacob cries into the night, **אָנֹכִי** – I am! Does anyone know that I am? Does it matter to anyone that I am? And he receives an answer, "I am the God of your fathers. I am with you. I will always be with you. You have a great destiny; you will be a blessing to the families of the earth."

This is what every human being desires most in life: To be recognized, acknowledged, valued. To know that we are not alone in our journey. In religious language, we call this redemption: The deep inner security that comes with knowing, I matter, I count. I'm needed. **אָנֹכִי** I am.

The psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz, had a patient who phoned him in the middle of the night to tell him, calmly, that she was about to commit suicide. He kept her on the phone for two hours, giving her every conceivable reason to live. Eventually she said that she had changed her mind and would not end her life. When he next saw the woman he asked her which of his many reasons had persuaded her to change her mind. "None," she replied. "Why then did you decide not to commit suicide?" She replied that the fact that someone was prepared to listen to her for two hours in the middle of the night convinced that she was valued, her that life was worth living after all.

Wrote philosopher Martin Buber: What do we expect when we are in despair and go to someone for help? Surely a *presence* that lets us know that, whatever happens to us, life still has meaning and worth.

The holiest prayer of the Jewish liturgy is actually no prayer at all, but an imperative – *Shema Yisrael*. Listen, Israel.

A people with such a special relationship with God should be instructed to Speak, not to listen: Proclaim your faith, Declare your truth, Spread your teaching. But the core imperative is *Shema Yisrael*, Listen, Israel. And so important is this imperative, it is the first sacred word we learn, and the last one we recite before death. It is repeated morning and night, wrapped around on our bodies in our tefillin, attached to every doorway in a mezuzah. Because redemption begins in listening – but a special kind of listening.

On these High Holidays we are commanded – *Lishmoa Kol Shofar* to listen to the sound of the Shofar. Asks the Talmud – Suppose you're walking past a synagogue at the exact moment the Shofar is blown, and you hear the Shofar, does that count? Or suppose you hear someone practicing the Shofar, does that count? And the Mishna

answers: *Im key-vayn libo, yatza.* If one turns and listens with *kavanah*, with intention, with intensity, if one listens deeply, the mitzvah is fulfilled. But if one hears only casually, overhearing without turning to listen, the mitzvah is not fulfilled. If one hears with the ears alone, the obligation is not fulfilled. But if one hears with the heart, the obligation is fulfilled.

Hearing the Shofar on the holidays is a form of training. We learn to listen deeply to the jarring cry of a ram's horn, so that we can hear the cry of a lonely soul. We learn to listen to the trumpet blast of the shofar so we can be attentive to the joyful shout of a child. We learn to listen to the broken notes of the shofar so we will be alert to the quiet sigh of a broken heart. This is what the Sh'ma demands of us: *Sh'ma Yisrael!* Listen! Listen deeply.

This is a mitzvah, a sacred imperative, a spiritual demand: In listening to the soul of another human being in the deepest way, we hear the voice of God. In turning to another, listening deeply, we communicate with one another what God promised Jacob: You are not alone, not abandoned, not forgotten. You matter. You are a blessing. In turning to one another, we share redemption. Taught Martin Buber: "Every moment of life is full of call, and response. Religion belongs to all moments. It is simply living all moments open to the possibility of connection."

Ever meet someone like that? Someone who really knew how to listen? A teacher who knew what you needed to learn before you even had a clue? Or a friend who knew you had strength inside, even when you were ready to give up? Or a mentor who believed in you, even when you lost belief in yourself? Ever encounter a person whose ability to listen left you feeling affirmed, respected, elevated?

Winston Churchill wrote that his mother, when she was a young woman, was invited to a state dinner and was seated next to William Gladstone, the great statesman. She came away that evening convinced that Gladstone was the cleverest person in England. Sometime later, she was invited to another dinner, and this time found herself seated beside Gladstone's rival, Benjamin Disraeli. She came away that evening convinced that *she* was the cleverest person in England. There are such people. Possessed of a kind of inverse charisma, they make us feel heard, understood and valued. Wrote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "Crowds are moved by great speakers. But lives are changed by great listeners."

We'd like to think of ourselves as great listeners. But according to the research, we grossly overestimate our listening abilities. Strangers engaged in a conversation can accurately interpret what the other person is thinking and feeling only about 20% of the time. For family and friends, it rises, but only to 35% of the time. For married people, it's a little higher. But not much. In a poll by the Associated Press, a third of married women in the U.S. said their pets are better listeners than their husbands.

The business consulting firm McKinsey recently studied the "Great Resignation." Those who left their jobs after the pandemic. They asked supervisors, why do you suppose these people left your firm? The supervisors answer: They left to make more money elsewhere. Then they asked those who left. And they answered: My manager doesn't recognize me.

We came by this honestly. Evolution did not equip us to be good listeners. Humans evolved in small bands, in clans and tribes, where it was necessary to carefully guard our social standing. To survive in that environment, we evolved an acute ability to scan a social landscape for cues that our social well-being might be threatened. When we're in conversation, our natural inclination directs us to think about ourselves, to be concerned that the other has the right impression of us. Our evolution instructs us, not to listen for the feelings and needs of the other, but to ready strategies for raising the other's estimation of us.

Our recent social history amplifies this.

Once upon a time, we came to the family dinner table to be heard and acknowledged. Once upon a time, we belonged to a community that recognized us and celebrated us. Once, we adhered to a faith that offered a

promise of divine love and redemption. But over the past generation, all that changed. Today, only about 30% of families regularly eat dinner together, down 33% over the past 20 years. The average American eats only 3 meals a week with their family. For the first three quarters of the 20th century, Americans were big joiners. Civic clubs, political organizations, social groups all blossomed through the 1970's. And then began a sharp decline. Over the past generation, membership in PTA nationwide declined by two-thirds; the Freemasons, Kiwanis, and Elk have lost half their membership. And religion? For most of the 20th century, more than 70% of Americans belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. Since 2000, that has fallen precipitously. Today, less than half of Americans belong. Mainline Protestant denominations in the US draw less than half as many adherents as they did a generation ago. The fastest growing religious identity in America are the "Nones." Those, when asked, what is your current religion, checked the box labeled, None.

The late chief rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, devoted his very last book to what he called, "cultural climate change" – the shift from a culture of "we" to a culture of "I." Where once people worshiped the gods of Olympus, or the God of the Bible, or the nation or the state, today, we worship the self. We have put the self at the center. We have developed a new sacred literature of self-help; a new sacred vocabulary, phrased that never existed before – self esteem, self respect, self actualization, self worth, self awareness, self love; and of course, our newest sacred ritual, the selfie.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt was called to Washington to testify before Congress on the pernicious effects of social media on young people. He was particularly interested in the performative quality of media that tells kids – to be someone, to be significant, to be real, you've got to be noticed, you've got to be seen. In the middle of his testimony he realized that none of the Senators were listening to him. They were all busy tweeting their own images and clever comments to their followers.

All this has profound social consequences.

In 2023, Surgeon General, Dr Vivik Murthy surveyed the latest data to determine what was the most serious threat to public health in the United States. He assumed that would be cancer, or heart disease, diabetes, obesity, addiction. Instead, he discovered that the most serious public health problem is loneliness. In a national study, 36% of Americans reported persistent feelings of loneliness. 54% of Americans say no one knows them well. 40% report "they lack companionship," that their "relationships aren't meaningful" and that they feel "isolated from others." The number of adults without a romantic partner is up by a third. 27% of Americans are estranged from their immediate family. Loneliness, concludes Murthy, is as bad for you physically as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.

Psychologically, it is even more devastating, especially among young people.
The same national study found that 61% of young adults report feeling lonely almost all the time.
Depression among young adults in the US has risen 73% since 2007.
Percentage of students suffering from anxiety disorder has doubled since 2008.
Teenage suicide attempts have risen sharply.
When asked: Do you find yourself feeling persistently hopeless and despondent? Ten years ago 28% of high school students responded yes. Pre-COVID, it was 36%, now it's 45%.

Despite all our means of communication, so many in our culture simply feel unheard.
People of color feel they're not understood by whites.
Rural people feel that coastal elites don't acknowledge them.
People on the political left and people on the political right find each other incomprehensible.
Women feel perpetually disregarded and disrespected by men.
Young people feel that no one listens to them at all.

This manifests in a national crisis of mistrust. When asked, a generation ago, Do you trust your neighbors? 60% of Americans said yes, now it's 30%, and among millennials it's only 19%. 73% of adults under 30 believe

"most of the time people just look out for themselves," according to a Pew Study. 71% of those young people say that "most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance."

Alienation leads to sadness, which leads to anger. Not being heard feels like an injustice which leaves us wounded. When everyone comes to the table carrying a grievance, it's not much of a holiday dinner. When everyone comes to Congress filled with rage, our democracy hasn't much of a future. When we look across the divide, we don't see family members, neighbors, fellow citizens. We see rivals, enemies, traitors. We can't discuss or deliberate or compromise, we only shout past one another.

Every social body – a family, a community, a society, a nation – is ultimately based upon bonds of trust, cooperation, empathy, sharing, mutuality. When we lose the art of listening, we lose what binds us together.

We have reached a critical moment in social history: The challenges of this moment of our social evolution exceed the capacity of our social skills.

This isn't going to be fixed by government. This isn't going to be fixed by Facebook or Twitter, by social media or any media. This isn't going to be fixed by the marketplace, by business. Because they are all fueled and fed by our not-listening, by the rage and sadness and desperation of people who feel no one no one hears or understands or appreciates them. If my generation learned anything, it's that the political must begin in the personal. We must <u>be</u> the change we advocate.

The biologists tell us that each human cell contains the entire history of human genetic evolution. The Jewish mystics taught that each human soul contains all the secrets of redemption. The tikkun, the repair begins with each one of us. It begins in our own families, our own circles of friends, our own community. It begins with a full recognition that Shema Yisrael is a mitzvah. *B'chal levuv'cha, u'v'chal naf'shecha, u'v'chal me'odecha,* "with heart, and soul and might."

Each year, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schnairson would receive thousands of letters – questions of faith, requests for blessings, pleas for help from people all over the world. And he made it a point to answer each one. Once he received a letter from a desperate soul. The letter said,

"I need the Rebbe's help. I'm so deeply depressed. I can't find my way in life. I find no joy in family. I find no fulfillment in work. I feel no satisfaction in life. I pray and fulfill the commandments. I can find no peace. I can hardly go on living. I need the Rebbe's help."

Before he was the Rebbe, Rabbi Schairson was a publisher, and he learned editorial marks. He sent the most brilliant reply, without using a single word. He simply circled the first word in each sentence. The first word in every sentence was "I."

Buber captured the paradox best: We only realize our full and authentic selves in relationship. Only in meeting a Thou do we become an I. Only in submerging the self, do we become a self. No one can see their own face unaided. And no one can see their own soul. But in looking into the eyes of another, and sharing ourselves with another, do we come to know the dimensions, the capacities, the quality of our own soul. This is the greatest human truth, taught Buber. It is the greatest religious truth.

The most significant moment in the religious history of our people took place at Mt Sinai about three millennia ago. Strange thing is, no one is certain what exactly happened there. There are five different accounts of the event just in the Bible itself. And in the midrash, the later tradition, there are many, many more. We are told that God came to meet the Israelite people. In some accounts, all the commandments were spoken at that moment – the entire corpus of our religious tradition. In other accounts, just the Ten Commandments, just the essential words. And again, in other accounts, just the first commandment – I am the Lord Your God who took you out of Egypt. But the most interesting tradition came from the 18th century Hasidic master, Rabbi Mendel Torum of Rymanov, who taught that at Sinai, God revealed just the first letter of the first commandment…..which is an Aleph…which any Hebrew school kid can tell you is a silent letter.

God entered our world. Not to speak commandments, or dogma, or faith. God entered the world to give us the gift of true inner silence, receptivity, readiness to listen. God entered the world to teach us to listen – listen to one another; listen to the song of the world; listen as God whispers truth into our hearts.

And when that divine silence filled them, the Israelites responded, *na'aseh v'nishma.* We will do all that God commands, we will listen. We will become a people who listens, a people who teaches the world to listen. Shma Yisrael.

The young man sleeping on a stone, alone in the dark and filled with fear, grew to become our patriarch, our namesake. At that liminal, life-changing moment, he met the God of his ancestors. And when he had reached the end of his life, and stood at the threshold of death, he met his God once again. Laying on his deathbed, Father Jacob looked into the face of his twelve sons, and began to tremble. He remembered how he and his brother had spent years and years in a murderous envy and rivalry. And how his father and his brother had been estranged from one another. And how his grandfather was alienated from his own family. He looked up at these twelve and wondered – would they too go on to live as adversaries, rivals, enemies, fueled by grievance, envy and bitterness.

When his sons saw the worry on his face, they divined what troubled him. So together they said:
Shma Yisrael. Listen, our Father Jacob.
Adonai Eloheynu. The God who turned to you on that cold, lonely night so long ago, and heard you cry, אָנֹכִי
The God who who protected you, and filled you with the power to bring blessing to all the world, that God taught us to turn to one another, to hear one another, to feel one another's pain, to share one another's joy, and to protect one another
Adonai Ehad. We are one. And God given us the duty to teach the world to to turn to one another, to hear one another, to feel one another's pain, to share one another's joy, and to protect one another.

May we have the wisdom to fulfill our responsibility.