LISTEN TO ME
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A psychologist was asked by a friend, “Tell me, how can you listen hour after hour, day after day, week after week, to people who pour out their frustrations and tales of woe from your couch?”

To which the psychologist shrugs his shoulders and says, “Who listens?”

This week’s Torah portion from the book of Genesis, which Jacob will read and teach us about tomorrow opens with the death of Sarah and with Abraham’s efforts to acquire a burial plot for her in the land of the Hittites. Abraham is a stranger in the land and has no property there so he must enter into negotiations with the local people, the Hittites, so as to acquire a plot of land in which to inter Sarah.

A close read of the text reveals the complexity of Abraham's damaged relationship with Sarah and his son Isaac. Sarah dies separated from Abraham; seven years after he took Isaac in the dead of night and nearly sacrificed him at G-d's command. There is no mention of where Isaac is living. Abraham, he travels without him to Hebron to bury his estranged wife.

The Torah is very terse in reporting Abraham's emotional expressions regarding his loss; but it goes into great detail recording the in's-and-outs of the negotiation for the purchase of the burial plot.

What is the point of relating all the details of this business transaction?

Our rabbis teach that we might derive some insight by paying attention to at least one of those details.

After Abraham starts the conversation by asking to buy a burial plot, the Hittites respond: “Listen to us, master…” (Gen. 23:6) By themselves these words are unremarkable. But they set up a recurring motif in the discussion. Abraham’s response includes: “Listen to me…” (v. 8) Then Efron, the potential seller, begins his words by saying, “No, my master, listen to me…” (v. 11) Then, again, he says: “But you, please, if you would but listen to me…” (v. 13) and “My master, listen to me…” (v. 15) Finally, the Torah reports: “And Abraham listened to Efron…” (v. 16)

Again and again, in what most commentators see as a very formalized and artificial give-and-take between Abraham and the locals, the appeal is made for the other side to “listen to me.” Did they say this because they were really worried that the other party was not listening? Perhaps? Or the phase “listen to me” may have been as ubiquitous as “Hi how are you?’ is in our conversations and emails. We don’t really expect a thoughtful reply, but custom demands that it be said.

Yet, even if it was a mandatory custom of the time, the very decision – some time long ago – to record this way of speaking, even between total strangers, seems to express that even then, as it is today the act of simply listening to one another is often lost in efficient, business-like transactions.

What need is there to listen, or to ask how another is doing when each party knows exactly what you are there to accomplish, what the next steps of the negotiation require? But it is included, this ancient rule of negotiating etiquette reminds us that listening is still needed!

This formal rule is a quiet but stubborn resistance and protest against the dehumanizing effect of a strictly transactional approach to living. It reminds us that, even if it will not happen during this efficient meeting – and perhaps that is exactly why we must be reminded in the very middle of the negotiations – we must find ways – even if it is at another time, in another place – to listen to each other. Just like our opening line of an

email asks, “how are you?” – to disagree with the famous line from the Godfather, “Its business, yes it’s also personal”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who’s yahrtzeit was this past week tells us: “There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It’s the most effective form of conflict resolution. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling that we have not been listened to—that they have not heard our pain…Job, who has suffered unjustly, is unmoved by the arguments of his comforters. It is not that he insists on being right: what he wants is to be heard.

Listening means that we are open to the other, that we respect him/her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. And so a good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his/her workers. A good company listens to its customers. A good leader listens to those they lead. Listening doesn’t mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

Rabbi Sacks continues: In Judaism we believe that our relationship with Gd is an ongoing tutorial in our relationships with other people. How can we expect Gd to listen to us if we fail to listen to our spouse, our children, or those affected by our work? And how can we expect to encounter Gd if we have not learned to listen?

Why are we not better listeners? We are impatient - waiting for our turn to speak instead of opening our hearts. We are distracted - too much to do and not enough time to do it. We are judgmental - we think we know what someone is going to say so why bother listening? We have so many rationalizations for not giving each other the blessed gift of our full and undivided attention. "Listening," writes Rabbi Sacks, "lies at the very heart of relationship. . . .Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow."

Attentive listening does NOT mean giving advice, dismissing feelings, interrogating, and definitely not one-upping! It DOES mean getting curious, reflecting, breathing, connecting.

We have all heard this before, but have we listened to the wise advice?

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote years ago in the reform prayer book, Gates of Prayer that many of us grew up with.

“Judaism begins with the commandment “Hear O Israel!” But what does it mean to hear? The person who attends a concert with a mind on business, hears - but does not really hear.

The person who walks amid the songs of birds and thinks only of what will be served for dinner, hears- but does not really hear.

The man who listens to the words of his friend, or his wife, or his child, and does not catch the note of urgency: “notice me, help me, care about me,” hears-but does not really hear.

The person who listens to the news and thinks only of how it will affect business, hears- but does not really hear.

The person who stifles the sound of conscience and thinks “I have done enough already,” hears-but does not really hear.

Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners. In the end, the key to loving another person is the same as loving G-d—we must give others the gift of our full attention.

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 our ears, but our eyes, our heart, our mind – indeed L'shma nefesh – we must listen with our soul, our complete being.

Abraham and his negotiation with the Hittites is not a lesson in how to invest in property, it is a lesson in how to invest in people. They were not from the same tribe, they were not followers of the same God, but by listening to each other they recognized in Abraham the anguish in a bereaved husband and he saw in them the sanctity of their land.

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.