

**“Hear” O Israel:
The Art of Conversation in and Age of Conflict
Parashat Shmini; April 20, 2012**

This is an odd week in the Jewish calendar, in a variety of ways. Most prominent of the problems is the fact that what we read depends on where we are. Because of the way that Pesach fell this year, beginning on a Friday night, the distinction between Israel and the Diaspora over how long the holiday lasts has a serious impact on Bar and Bat Mitzvah studies around the world. In Israel – and, also, for us, as Reform Jews, Pesach lasted seven days. It was therefore over last Friday night, and we moved on, last week, with the next portion in the weekly cycle of readings, Parashat Shmini. For Conservative and Orthodox Jews outside of Israel, of course, they observe Passover for eight days, and therefore had a special holiday reading designated for the Eighth Day of Passover as the Torah reading last Saturday morning. The result is that Israel and the Diaspora are now out of synch in Torah readings.

As a Reform synagogue we followed our custom, and the Israeli one, of seven days of Pesach, and so we read Shmini last week, but then we face the dilemma of whether to remain on an Israeli calendar for the next few weeks, or to get back in synch right away with our neighbors down the street and around town, as it were. Our choice – the recommendation of our movement but also what I would have done on my own – is that we read Shmini again, for a second consecutive week. There’s enough to say about any portion for more than one week of study, of course – and it would be just too confusing for

everyone if people went to different synagogues in the same city and heard different portions. After all, comparing notes about the Torah portion we encountered is clearly how most of us spend our Saturday nights, right?

Well, odd week that it is, I actually want to reach back just a bit before the beginning of Shmini for my text tonight. At the end of Parashat Tzav, several weeks past already by now, in the description of the ordination ceremony leading up to Shmini, there, in Leviticus 8:22-23, we encounter the following seemingly odd custom:

He brought forward the second ram, the ram of ordination. Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the ram's head, and it was slaughtered. Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.

The action, the dabbing of blood on the outer extremities, is then repeated, with each of Aaron's sons.

This is not, needless to say, what I went through when I became of rabbi. I mean, there may have been a barbeque, but no toe tipping blood dabbing incense burning scene like this.

Much has been written, of course, about the symbolism of the marked sites on the body. The JPS Torah Commentary on Leviticus notes speculates about the original intent: "dabbing sacrificial blood on certain extremities of the body is essentially a rite of purification." But the act is seen and interpreted

throughout our history, in a metaphorical manner. We serve God, many people say, with the head, the hands and the feet – intellect, action and application. The hands... perhaps this is a reminder... that in this world, God has no hands but ours. The feet... I call to mind the famous phrase of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the one very visible traditional-looking Jew who marched against the War in Vietnam, and for civil rights. He said that when he marched at Selma, he felt as if his feet were praying.

For tonight, however, it is the ear which interests me. The ear, and the act of hearing.

What is the most memorable, the most powerful, the single most important sentence in Jewish liturgical life? More potent, even, perhaps, than the Fifth Question, which is “when do we eat?” This is a sentence so significant that one religious school student in Cleveland once got up in front of the congregation and announced that “we now recite the washword of our face,” because, of course, he had no idea what the introduction he was told to mimic, the “watchword of our faith,” actually meant. It is, of course, the Shema. The commandment, more than a prayer, to “Hear, O Israel.”

It may be, by the way, that the Shema, which we take as the ultimate and original declaration of monotheism, was actually not that at all. Biblical scholars – and this really bothered me the first time I heard it – some Biblical scholars assert that the phrase actually should be translated not as “God is one,” but, instead, “Listen, You Israelites; Adonai is our God...*and only*

Adonai!” *If this is true*, then this phrase would be a statement not of pure monotheism, but, rather of henotheism; not denying the reality of other gods, but asserting, rather, that *we* have but one God. It would be a loyalty oath, as it were, denying the other gods not existence but relevance or any role in our lives.

For me, personally, on a spiritual level, the question of the original meaning of the words is less relevant than their impact in my life. I do see this as a statement not only of the oneness of God but also the unity of the universe, the notion that, in the end, everything is connected.

But whatever the rest of the line may mean, the opening word is clear. “Hear!” “Listen carefully.” “Pay attention.”

We think, perhaps, that this is an easy thing to do. But all of us, I would suggest, all of us suffer from a form of selective hearing. The message from our tradition is that holiness is found, service to God depends on *really* listening, listening to what we want to hear, *and* to what we do not want to hear.

The rub, it turns out, comes in the second part. In hearing the hard stuff. In taking in, what we very much want to leave out.

I was reminded of that truth again last weekend, in one of the best discussions I have ever had on the topic of interfaith marriage.

Every year at our Spring Retreat, I tackle this very tough topic with our Tenth Grade students. But something has changed over time, and it worries me greatly, and it has nothing to do with the content of the topic, as much it does with the process of conversation.

For the first number of years that I was the rabbi of this congregation, when I had this conversation with our Tenth Graders, I would field angry phone calls from parents afterwards, and we would consistently find that the kids reported to their parents statements I never made, and assertions I myself would be horrified to hear. Andy Mark began taking notes about what I said each year, and was able to show the parents the discrepancy, but that was not enough. So then I began meeting with the parents in advance, showing them a typed out copy of what I would say – and that was not enough. Still the misquotes and misunderstandings and misrepresentations continued.

And then something changed. What changed... is my position on officiation at interfaith marriages. For reasons beyond what we will go into here but which remain available on our website, I moved from not performing interfaith weddings to doing so under certain defined and specific circumstances. Whether this was a good move, the right one, how it feels, all of those are beyond what I want to share tonight.

What I will say is that 90%, perhaps 95% of my presentation to the Tenth Grade class every spring remained, essentially, the same as it had been before.

Careful, calibrated, warm, welcoming, inclusive, broad -- but challenging as well.

But all of a sudden... the misquotes simply stopped. The kids reported back to their parents what I had said to them... with essential factual accuracy, instead of wildly off the wall claims.

What happened? What is going on? I think the implications here are really important.

Because the vast majority of the students were not preoccupied with disagreeing with me about something – often very vocally disagreeing – I believe they were able to “hear” what I was saying in an entirely new way.

This is amazing. But it is also a huge problem. Is it really the case... that we can only really take in... that which we really want to hear?

Look around! Look at the way we get and process news in the modern world. You pay your money and you make your choice: MSNBC, Fox News, preselected websites who send “push” notices to us over our ubiquitous so-called “smart” phones! We live in a world with a blessing of choices – but the blessing is a complicated one, it is a double-edged sword if all of us only learn how to hide behind the external reinforcement of our previously held beliefs! We can get supposedly objective presentations of reality from a carefully pruned list of those whose subjective inclinations we already share!

I know, I know: postmodernism has undercut the notion that anyone is objective, ever, and has questioned our ability to view raw facts without the influence of biases in every position. It seems the job of university professors or scholars to go around exposing those hidden assumptions as part of their deconstruction of the inherent power structure all around us. Stick it to The Man!

But isn't there some way to get beyond the boundaries and limitations of what we want to hear? What would holy hearing look like? How would we listen? And what would we hear?

I suggest to you that what would emerge out of really listening, of opening our eyes, would be uncomfortable truths about our daily lives. That to set aside biases and assumptions would involve radical thinking about everything, from how we relate to one another to how we get around to what we eat. Mostly, I suspect that there are untold stories – or, rather, unheard ones -- behind why we pay so little... not so much, I said, but so little, for food and fuel and other commodities.

I am neither a consumer nor a conveyer of conspiracy theories. But I do believe that, in our everyday discourse, we allow ourselves to hear but a narrow spectrum of the bandwidth of truth. And, mostly, we take in, we absorb, we are open to... mostly that which props up our previous positions, and supports and sustains the way we lead our lives.

Shema Yisrael! Let us listen, O Jews. To each other, and to the other. Let us make an effort, at least a little, to open ourselves up, and be open to where it takes us. Let us allow challenge in our lives, and not just comfort. The sanctification of the ought, and not just that of the is. The voice of the prophet and not just the cult of the priest.

Shabbat Shalom.