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The Hebrew and Yiddish writer and Zionist leader Shmaryahu Levin tells a story in his autobiography of a transformative incident that took place in his early life. At around age 10, growing up in Eastern Europe, he received a gift of his very own Shofar. As Rosh HaShanah approached, he was so excited to practice blowing the Shofar -- but try as he could, he just couldn't get any sound out of it at all. (I know Rob Harari makes it look easy - but it's more difficult than it looks!) Each day, during the month of Elul leading up to Rosh HaShanah, he would spend at least an hour - holding his mouth in various positions, making various kinds of rude vibrating noises with his lips, trying to produce any sound with the Shofar. But to no avail.

The day before Rosh HaShanah, as he was practicing outside his home, a Russian farmer came by. "What's that?" he asked. Young Shmaryahu responded, "It's a Shofar." Not realizing that this might be an unfamiliar word to a Russian farmer.

And the farmer said, "What's a Shofar?" The boy explained, "It's a ram's horn, and we blow it in synagogue to commemorate Rosh HaShanah."

The farmer said, "Can I try?" He took the Shofar, held it up to his lips, and out came a Tekiah Gedolah that would be the envy of any Shofar-blower in the world!

He handed the Shofar back to young Shmaryahu Levin, who raced back to the Shammos, the synagogue functionary who had been trying to teach him how to blow the Shofar. Choking back tears, he said, "It's just not fair! I spend all this time, for more than a month, practicing to blow the Shofar, and this farmer, who has never even HEARD of a Shofar, gets a beautiful sound out of it!"

The Shammos heard the boy's anguish, and said to him reassuringly, "The mitzvah, the commandment, isn't in the blowing. The mitzvah is in the listening. The trick isn't how to blow the Shofar. The trick is how to listen."

Shmaryahu Levin would say that later in his life, he would sometimes be tempted to measure his success in terms of his output - in terms of what he said, and what he wrote, and how much. But he would remind himself the lesson he learned as a young boy: that the trick is not how to introduce MORE sound into a world that is already saturated with sound. The trick is how to listen.

More than any other Jewish holiday, Rosh HaShanah is about listening: listening to the sound of the Shofar; listening to the voices deep within ourselves; committing ourselves to listening more intently to friends and family. But then again, listening is supposed to be a theme of every day of a Jewish life. How could it be otherwise, when the first prayer we teach to a young child is *Shma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*? "Listen - Israel - Adonai is our God; Adonai is one!" We may call it a prayer, but the Shema is not really a prayer. It's not addressed to God, but rather it's addressed to us, telling us to listen.

It shouldn't surprise us that listening is a core religious value in Judaism. We live, of course, in a world of multi-tasking. But we all know that listening is one activity that is utterly incompatible with multi-tasking. (I confess that I know this from a good deal of experience

trying and failing - a trait I find I have in common with many men!) True listening can only happen when the listener is free of distractions, is fully present, not pre-occupied, in a state of mind that is relaxed but alert. In all these ways, a 'listening state' resembles a meditative state. Both demand uncommon powers of focus. No wonder the experience of listening is often described as a 'spiritual' activity, one that seems to transcend our material existence.

Shmaryahu Levin learned that the trick is how to listen. But, frankly, some kinds of listening are easier than others. Perhaps the most challenging kind of listening is listening to those with whom we disagree. But this is the form of listening that the Jewish people seems to specialize in.

Let me give you a contemporary example, from the perhaps surprising world of Israeli hip-hop music. (Yes, you heard me correctly.) And the most popular song in Israel right now is a hip-hop song called "Shirat Ha-Sticker." which means "the sticker song." It has this name because - the entire lyrics of the song are taken from dozens of Israeli bumper stickers. The writer of the song is the respected Israeli novelist David Grossman. For the last few years, he has been writing down every bumper sticker he saw, and now has arranged the texts of some 50 bumper stickers so that they rhyme.

When you listen to this song, it's a cacophony of sound bites from the Israeli political landscape, fragments of arguments shouted back and forth, by a society in deep pain, and not infrequently in deep grief.

In the song, you can hear some liberal voices: for example, *am hazak oseh shalom* - a strong nation makes peace. *Dor shalem doresh shalom* - an entire generation seeks peace. *ein lanu yeladim la-milchamot yetarot*. We don't have enough children for unnecessary wars.

And you can hear some right-wing voices: for example, *yesh li bitachon be-shalom shel sharon*. I trust Sharon's peacemaking. *Hevron me-az uletamid*. Hevron - now and always. *Akirat yishuvim mefaleget et ha-am*. Uprooting settlements fractures the nation.

And you can hear some religious voices: *No Fear - Mashiach ba-ir*. Have no fear - the Mashiach is in the city. (the Mashiach is coming.)

Medinat halakhah - Israel ought to be a halakhic state - a state operating according to Jewish law. To which another, secular, bumper sticker responds: *medinat halakhah - halcha ha-medinah!* If Israel becomes a halakhic state - there goes the nation!

And then there are various other voices weighing in on other issues: for example, *kama ro'a efshar livlo'a* -- how much evil can we swallow? - a slogan, believe it or not, from an effort to make the force-feeding of geese for *foie gras* illegal in Israel.

How did all these diverse slogans, opinions and sound bites come to coexist in the same song? David Grossman has been thinking about this song, ever since the day after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in 1995. He remembers driving past a man who was bent down by the bumper of his car, trying to scrape off a bumper sticker - a sticker that said '*Rabin rotzeach*' - 'Rabin is a murderer.'

This sight motivated David Grossman to start to collect bumper stickers, and to hold them up as a mirror to Israeli society - in part to remind them of the impossibility, and the danger, of truly discussing any policy matter with bumper stickers or sound bites. The trick isn't how to blow your horn. The trick is, how to listen.

No one particularly expected this song to be a hit. But it has been played on the radio continuously all summer. According to the newspaper reports, it has been played at virtually every Jewish wedding in Israel this summer: The secular weddings, **and** the religious weddings as well. What is the root of its popularity? Perhaps because - in a peculiar way - it forces Israelis with diverse views to begin to listen to one another. It enables every Israeli to hear the juxtaposition of ideas he or she supports, and ideas he or she absolutely detests, and to remember that they all part of the same family, wrestling with the same issues. It's a reminder that a community is not necessary a collection of people who all have the same answers. Rather, a community is a collection of people who are all asking the same questions.

The song also promotes humility. When you listen to the song, no matter where you are on the political spectrum, you become aware that the situation defies easy answers. There is a tremendous gap between left and right in Israel, primarily because the problems facing Israel today are so intractable. How can Israel protect the lives of its people from suicidal terror while also protecting the civil rights and civil liberties of all its residents? How can Israel achieve its dream of peace with the Palestinians, when opinion polls consistently show that well over half of Palestinians support suicide bombings against Israel, and the Palestinian leadership has actually funded and celebrated such acts of suicidal murder? One who listens to the Sticker Song has to conclude: the answers aren't simple. The people who disagree with me aren't necessarily deranged. If you want to come to some solution, some common ground, that process won't involve bumper stickers or sound bites, but rather, it will involve people sitting down together and talking together and listening to each other. (When is the last time someone changed their mind, or developed a deeper understanding of an issue, simply by seeing a bumper sticker or hearing a sound bite?)

There's something else about this song that caught my attention, which is - just how "Jewish" it sounds. When I first heard about this song, I thought, Only in Israel could there be a song that is so comfortable with the juxtaposition of opposites and open expression of disagreement. After all, we Jews are the ones who have raised disagreement to the level of an art form!

David Ben-Gurion's famous quip - "Two Jews, three opinions" - actually has some basis in Jewish tradition. In every generation, Jewish societies have been noted for the amount of disagreement and dissent that we've been able to tolerate. It's part of the strength of our tradition. In the ancient world, there was no other culture that encouraged uninhibited, far-ranging discussion the way Jewish tradition did. In fact, according to legal scholars Elliot Dorff and Arthur Rosett, you have to wait until the advent of the United States before you can find another society that tolerated this degree of vigorous disagreement.

If you have ever seen a picture of a page of the Talmud, you know what I mean. Unlike almost any other book you have seen, where the words progress neatly across the page, forming one coherent argument, the Talmud is a chorus of disagreeing voices. Or as the British rabbi and scholar Lionel Blue says, other religions' holy books are books of holy answers - but the Talmud is a book of diverse answers to holy questions. It's a book of holy arguments. To study Talmud means to confront opinions with which you disagree, to listen to them, and to think them through.

This is a quality that we could stand to see more of in the United States today. Already, this election season is being called the most divisive in this country since the Vietnam era. Once

again, it's because of intractable issues. How do we protect ourselves from terror in a world that grows ever more chaotic and unpredictable? How do we balance our responsibilities to our citizens with our responsibilities to the rest of the world? How do we balance our responsibilities towards the most vulnerable in the society with our responsibilities to help the general economy to thrive? I have my opinions on the answers to these questions, but I have to acknowledge, and I wish more people would acknowledge, that these are issues on which reasonable people can disagree. And it does not bode well that the campaign for what may be the most important election of my lifetime seems to focus much more on pithy sound bites and personality quirks than on genuine discussions of policy.

In addition, because of the proliferation of cable channels and internet news sites, most Americans have the opportunity to choose their own ideological "echo chamber," to hear echoed back to them the opinions they have already, rather than to make an honest effort to hear and confront DIFFERENT opinions.

The Talmud has a story about what it's like to be in such an echo chamber - to hear only from those with whom you agree. It's the story of two rabbis from 1800 years ago, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. They were the two top scholars of their generation, and the best of friends - and study partners, whose disagreements would spur each other to ever greater understanding

Resh Lakish became ill and died. Rabbi Yohanan mourned bitterly for his friend. He could not bear the thought of returning to the study house without Resh Lakish. The other sages determined that SOMEONE should become Rabbi Yohanan's new study partner. They chose the finest remaining scholar for that esteemed role. Finally Rabbi Yohanan returned to the study house, and he and his new study partner began to study. But whenever Rabbi Yohanan would say anything, this new partner would immediately lend support to his opinion. Eventually, this bothered Rabbi Yohanan so much that he burst out in uncharacteristic anger: "Do you think you are at all like my friend Resh Lakish? Whenever I would say anything, Resh Lakish used to raise 24 objections, and I would have to respond with 24 rebuttals. But all you do is - agree with me! What's the use of that?" Then Rabbi Yohanan stood up, tore his garments, and wept for the memory of his beloved friend.

Can you imagine the transformation that would take place in our country if THIS were the level of respect that we would - even occasionally - give to those with whom we disagree?.....

The commandment to listen to the other finds its most surprising statement in a detail in Jewish law regarding the Shofar. If you pay close attention to the Shofar blowing today, you'll notice that there are exactly 100 Shofar blasts.

Why? I promise you: it's not in honor of the centennial of our congregation. Rather, these 100 blasts of the Shofar are said to correspond to the 100 sobs of the mother of Sisera. Who is Sisera? And why is his mother crying? Sisera is the villain in the story of Deborah, in the Book of Judges. He is the Canaanite general who seeks to destroy the people of Israel. Deborah and Barak defeat his army, and Sisera himself is recognized and killed when he seeks refuge. All this is memorialized in a song in the book of judges known as the "Song of Deborah." At the end of the song, we are asked to picture Sisera's mother, sitting by the window, waiting for him to come home from battle, wondering and wailing: "why is his chariot so late in returning?"

THIS is the image that the 100 blasts of the Shofar is to conjure up in us. Sisera's mother is the mother of the enemy! Sisera's mother is the epitome of someone in pain - and we couldn't care less just how much pain she is in. In fact, we despise her, as much as she despises us. And yet, Jewish tradition tells us that when we listen to the Shofar, we are listening to HER cry. (I would never have the audacity to MAKE UP an interpretation like that. But there it is, on the page of the Talmud!)

This does not mean that we are bidden to LIKE Sisera's mother – and we DARE NOT use her tears to justify her hatred and her advocacy of her son's violence. But no matter how much we want to ignore the cries of Sisera's mother, we're bidden to listen to them. And if we listen to the cries of Sisera's mother, then there could not be ANYONE whose cries of pain we are allowed to ignore.

This year, without a doubt, the most profound opportunities I had to listen to those with whom I disagreed revolved around ... a certain religious film that was just released on DVD. As you remember from this past March and April, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was THE big story. Our rabbinic intern Melissa Weintraub and I, and the priests and ministers on the Hoboken Clergy Coalition, decided to organize a public discussion of the film, the controversy, and the issues it raised. But especially, we wanted to create a space where people with opposing perspectives - and perhaps perspectives that were deeply offensive to one another - could come together to listen to each other, seeking to understand each other.

This is how I knew the program was a success. At the end of the program, as I was leaving, I overheard a man from one of the churches in town remarking to one of the Jewish participants: "I am so glad I came here, because until now, I couldn't understand how anyone could POSSIBLY regard this film as anti-Semitic. And now I think I do."

To which the Jewish woman responded: "I, too, am glad I came here, because until now, I couldn't understand how anyone could possibly be inspired religiously by that story. And now I think I do."

The trick was not in what was said.

The trick was in the listening.

May the 100 Shofar blasts we hear this morning remind us to listen ever more deeply to our friends, our family members, our neighbors, our fellow citizens, and everyone with whom we share this world.

Shanah Tovah!