

Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin
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Listen up, Open-hearted

On our second wedding anniversary last year, my husband Geoff and I did not go out for a candle-lit dinner. We didn't share a special day in nature or with dear friends. We were too consumed by Charlottesville's "summer of hate." Instead, we attended an intensive training, hoping that it would prepare us to resist neo-Nazis and white supremacists. We were anxious, not just about the looming weekend of August 11th and 12th, but also about the training, about throwing ourselves into unknown spaces, trying to build bridges, with people with whom we disagree on issues that matter deeply to us. As strong Zionists, we wondered what it would be like to form alliances with individuals who are quietly, or even outspokenly anti-Zionists. Would it even come up? Despite our discomfort, we believed it was vital to form relationships across lines of difference.

And indeed, by the end of the training, Geoff and I found ourselves in a conversation about Israel, with Becca, a brave social justice activist and woman of color. I have changed her name in this story to protect her privacy. The conversation covered a lot of ground; it was painful and challenging, but something in me said, "shema," listen up, take note, this is sacred, this is holy.

For months afterwards, I thought about that conversation. At one point in our conversation, I talked about collective holocaust trauma, how Israel is the place to which I would flee, if history every repeated itself. She looked at me and said, "Well I'm black and non-Jewish, where am I supposed to go?" This question, and other stories she shared with me about her

experience as a black woman in America, swirl around in my head to this day. What I didn't know at the time was that she hadn't stopped thinking about our conversation either.

Six months later, Geoff and I received an email from Becca. Something in her had also said, “shema,” listen up, take note. She had not stopped thinking about what we had told her about our connection to Israel, about our feeling of being part of a Jewish peoplehood. She shared that she had done her own research on Zionism and Israel, hoping to approach the topic with more nuance. She had come to understand that Zionism represents the dreams and hopes of so many Jews worldwide.

Becca's email re-opened our dialogue. Though there are still many things about which we disagree, there are also many things on which we *do* agree. We dream of a better Charlottesville, we pray for a better world, and we believe that if we work together, we can resist the kind of hate we saw during the summer of 2017, and still see in too many places. We've gone out for coffee, we've given each other big hugs, and she has become a trusted friend.

Shema – listen – what does it mean? “Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.” We will chant these words numerous times during these High Holy Days, and in fact, at the very end of Yom Kippur we will chant these words one last time. What are we actually saying when we recite these words? This central statement of Judaism is much more than a bold assertion of monotheism. The standard translation of, "Hear O' Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One," does not do this statement justice. The words of the Shema come from Torah. Biblically, shema was a word of introduction, rather than a verb of hearing.¹ When we say “shema,” we say, “Hey! Listen up! Take Note!” But we are not just saying, “Hey! Listen up! Take note, there is only one

¹ Hoffman, Lawrence A., and Marc Zvi. Brettler. *The Sh'ma and Its Blessings*. Jewish Lights Pub., 1997. 91

God!” Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, shares a teaching from the Tanya, the major work of Chabad Chasidism - “God is one” means that God is all there is. There is nothing in this world that is separate from God...There is no person without a divine spark. The shema instructs us to seek unity, oneness. But how could we possibly begin to bring about and experience this oneness?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that at its core, Judaism is a religion of listening, of hearing, of paying attention. Our God is a God we cannot see.² On Mount Sinai the Israelites *saw* nothing. They *heard* a voice.³ God communicated the commandments, the blueprint for how the Israelites should live their entire lives, through sound. The covenant was dependent upon the Israelites listening, paying attention. But not just listening by taking in sounds, rather, listening with your heart, with your entire body, keeping your entire being open, eager to learn, willing to withstand the discomfort that comes with encountering ideas and precepts that are completely new.

I don't know about you, but for me, discomfort is often the place in which I come to understand something deeply, to learn, or to grow. Listening, being open-hearted, creates the possibility of connecting with God, with something out there larger than ourselves. The Shema is not just a statement of faith, but an instruction. The paragraphs following the first two lines, spell out specific actions for us to take. What does the first line instruct us to do? Listen up Israel, be open-hearted, so that you can feel the presence of God, so that you can feel unity, oneness. I think that presence, that oneness, is what I felt as I listened to Becca, as I pushed through discomfort, and as she listened to me. Had I seen Becca that summer evening as nothing more than a non-Zionist radical activist, the sacred, holy, encounter we had would never have

² “The Spirituality of Listening (Eikev 5776).” *Rabbi Sacks*, 30 Aug. 2016, rabbisacks.org/spirituality-listening-ekev-5776/.

³ Deuteronomy 4:12

been possible. But God was present between us, as we engaged respectfully with one another. We looked beyond difference, and **discovered unity**, through **our common humanity**.

I was blessed to have this experience, but I'm not so naïve to think that this is always possible. Of course, there are some with whom we feel we can't converse, and to whom it does not feel possible to listen. So, I'll share one more story.

This past January, Geoff and I took a vacation to Israel. Eager to buy items for our close friends who are refugees from Syria, and to have the opportunity to talk with Arab Israelis (Geoff speaks Arabic), we ventured into Jaffa. We first stopped in an Arab bookstore. As we searched the shelves for Arabic books that our friends might enjoy, Geoff noticed an Arabic translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* on the shelf. I lost my breath and my insides began to boil. Should we say something? I looked at Geoff knowing that we had to. We asked the owner why he had such a hateful and dangerous book on the shelves. He mumbled something about preserving history, but it was clear from his response and body language that he was not sorry. I knew we could no longer shop there, that we weren't wanted there, and that we could not have a productive conversation.

In her newest book, *Braving the Wilderness*, social worker and author Brene Brown explores our human capacity to listen and be in relationship with people across differences. She explains that in the absence of physical and emotional safety, we can't be open and vulnerable. When someone dehumanizes us, we no longer feel emotionally or physically safe.⁴ Geoff and I had to leave the book store in Tel Aviv, because the presence of *Mein Kampf* on the shelves, and the owner's unapologetic attitude, made us feel dehumanized and shut down, so shut down in

⁴ Brown Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: the Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. Thorndike Press, a Part of Gale, a Cengage Company, 2018.

fact, that I wanted to conclude our adventure in Jaffa. The experience reinforced certain stereotypes and ideas about the relationship between Arabs and Jews that I work hard not to succumb to.

I stood looking at the Mediterranean Sea, predominantly Jewish Tel Aviv to my right, predominantly Arab Jaffa to my left. I felt as if I had invisible strings attached to each of my shoulders. One was pulling me to the right, to the known, to the comfortable. But the other string was yanking me to the left, to the unknown, to the uncomfortable. Shema. Listen to the voice within telling you not to allow one bad experience in an Arab neighborhood to close you off to other encounters. We continued on our journey.

After walking for a while, we found a perfect store to buy our friends new hijabs, head scarves. An Arab woman named Jihan seemed intrigued by us, probably due to the unusual sight of seeing two people like us shopping for Muslim head scarves. She asked us what we were doing. When we told her about our friends from Syria, she placed 200 shekels in our hands and told us that she wanted to purchase the scarves herself. A few minutes later she ran back into the store, gave us her address, and told us to come over in an hour.

As we traveled into Jihan's neighborhood, I wondered if we should turn back. Geoff and I did not blend in in this part of Jaffa. We were most definitely out of our comfort zone. But when we arrived at Jihan's apartment, she and her whole family brought out clothes, holy books, and more money for us to bring home to the Syrian family. They offered us food, and poured us sweet sugary juice. I don't know what Jihan's politics are, or how she and her family feel about Israel, but I am sure that we would not agree on everything. In that moment though, it didn't matter that they were Muslim, and that we were Jewish, or that we were American and they Israeli, because we were united around a common cause to help victims from the horrifying and

deadly conflict in Syria. “Shema,” I told myself. Be open-hearted. Pay attention to the cause that unites you, not to the potential issues that divide you. Don’t focus on your assumptions, pay attention to their actions in this moment. Pushing through discomfort enabled me to have one of the most moving experiences I’ve ever had in my eight trips to Israel.

The New Year is upon us. The Days of Awe are here. For some, just being in synagogue might be very uncomfortable. And for many, The High Holy Days themselves might feel like a recipe for discomfort. It’s not easy to look at ourselves and admit where we have fallen short. It’s not easy to take steps to repair relationships, to apologize and ask for forgiveness. Some of us may have someone in our family or friend group with whom we have ongoing issues because of our disparate views on something; and not necessarily disparate views on politics or the state of the world, but on some event or situation that has occurred between us or in our family. We want them to see it our way. They want us to see it their way. What would it be like to shema, to listen to one another, to try to understand each other’s perspectives, and to honor one another despite the differences? Whatever else these Days of Awe are, these are days in which we are called into the discomfort of difficult personal and interpersonal work.

But for Jews in Charlottesville, this time of sacred discomfort extends beyond our smaller circles. These High Holy Days come just after the anniversary of August 11th and 12th. For many in this community, this past year has been emotionally draining. The summer of 2017 jolted, and even traumatized some of us. Perhaps, only now, a little over a year later, does healing feel possible. It seems to me that in some ways our work is only beginning. The Jewish mourning process officially lasts for eleven months. Judaism demonstrates great wisdom in knowing that it takes about a year before a person can emerge from the depths of loss. Are we ready to emerge from the depths of the rupture that was the Charlottesville’s “summer of hate?” As we emerge,

what will we do? How will we face the troubled history of this town and country and move towards a real and lasting tikkun, repair?

I believe we will need to continue to, or begin for the first time, to lean into discomfort. We will have to seek out spaces where we can meet people who are different from us, or venture into places that we usually avoid. We will have to talk to people with different views and ideas, and really listen, to approach them with an open heart. And we will have to partner with people with whom we may disagree on certain issues, but with whom we share many common goals. This applies whether we are conservatives or liberals, right or left, or perfectly center. We can start right here in this congregation, knowing we are not a monolithic voice, but that our love of, and commitment to Judaism brings us together.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. Listen up Israel, be open-hearted, so that you can feel the presence of God, so that you can feel unity, oneness. At the conclusion of the Neilah service, the very end of Yom Kippur, we will recite the Shema one last time. Just before the gates close, we will again declare that we are people grounded in listening, in open-heartedness, and in discomfort. What might this central tenant of who we are, enable us to offer the world? Jonathan Sacks writes, "Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners. Whether between us and God, or us and other people, listening is the prelude to love." In this new year, let's listen, with open hearts, and push ourselves to be uncomfortable, so that as the gates of repentance close ten days from now, the gates of love open. And maybe, just maybe, through relationships, and new experiences, we will feel that oneness, that unity, the presence of God.