

Listen, Love, Do

"And you shall love"

v'Ahavta ואהבתה

V'Etchanan (Deuteronomy)

July 31, 2020

There is a *minhag*, a custom, in a house of mourning where people are sitting *shiva*: a visitor should not speak until after the mourner speaks first. The visitor must be fully present for the mourner and to listen to what the mourner wants to say (or not say). The Talmud reminds us we have two ears and only one mouth- to remind us listening is twice as important as speaking.

This past week was Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Jewish month of Av, a day of mourning. According to the Talmud, on *Tisha b'Av*, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of *Sinat Chinam*, baseless hatred- which arose when people stopped listening to one another. At that time, the society of Judea was deeply divided. The Pharisees would not listen to the Sadducees. The Sadducees would not listen to the Essenes. The Essenes would not listen to

the zealots. It was a society full of hatred. Hatred blocked ears and hearts. The society was so divided it could not defend itself against the world's most powerful army of that time, the Roman Legions. Hatred led to deafness to the 'Other', and deafness led to the destruction of society.

The Torah offers an antidote to overcome the poison of hatred.

The medicine is in the *Shema*- listening and hearing- contained in this week's Torah portion. Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Tisha b'Av* occurs in the same week that we are given the *Shema*.

The message of the *Shema* is both timely and timeless. In *our* society, we have different factions unwilling to listen to -or engage with -each other. Unfortunately this has escalated in some cases to the demonization of others and an attempt to shut down their legitimate right to speak. Even when we are convinced the 'Other' is wrong- and they might be!- our tradition teaches us the im-

portance of listening. We do not have to agree, but there has to be respectful conversation.

The word *Shema* means "Listen!". In Jewish, sincere listening is *bchol nafshecha, bchol meodecha*, with all your soul and all your might. Real listening -with full presence- leads to love. The Jewish understanding of love, *Ahava*, is different from its meaning in English. In English, love is about emotions, feelings. In our tradition, *Ahava, love*, is about taking action.

The word *V'ahavta*, "and you shall love," occurs three times in the Torah. First, *Vahavta l'reyecha kmocha*, "Love your neighbor as yourself," then *V'ahavta et ha ger*, "Love the stranger," and then lastly, in our portion, *Ve'ahavta et Adonai*, "Love the lord your God".

A midrash teaches this order is intentional. It teaches us that in order to love what is Holy, we need to show love for our fellow

human beings, even those who are very different from us. When the Torah says "and you shall love," it is not commanding feelings, which is impossible, the Torah is commanding responsibility towards others.

This week a congregant told me that he does not believe in God- yet he does a vast amount of social action work, volunteering countless hours of his time towards helping others. And so he is putting the *Shema* into action. Belief, like emotions and feelings, cannot be commanded. What is important, as demonstrated by this congregant, is to listen and to do - and through actions we are showing our love of what is Holy- however *we* might understand that.

The Torah continues "*V'Shnantam Levanecha*" "And you shall it to teach your children." It goes without saying Jewish parents love their children. And how do we show our love? What is the action we do? We give our children an education. But it is not

enough to teach a child algebra or grammar. How do you teach a child to be a good human being – to be a *mensch*? The answer and the steps are right here in the *Shema*. We teach our children how to listen, *Shema* - real listening- deep listening - the kind of listening that leads to commitment, actions and responsibility - A life of *ma'asim tovim*, of good deeds.

Tisha b'Av happened because people did not listen to each other. This led to *Sinai Hinam*, baseless hatred. Rabbi Kook wrote what we need in this generation to overcome hatred is *ahavat hinam*, unconditional love. This love exists regardless of any shortcomings in the other, or without any conditions that have to be met. Even with all of the deficiencies and imperfections in people. There can be great differences in personalities, or disagreements, or debates over the right thing to do, but true *Ahavah* (love) transcends all of this. The challenge for us is how to put this into practice in our own time.

Tisha B'Av is now behind us. Next week, we celebrate *Tu B'Av* the Jewish holiday of love. And in seven weeks is *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, a time when we mark our loving relationship with God. Like a bride under the *chuppah* does seven circles around her beloved, we, the Jewish people tonight begin the journey of circling through seven weeks until we remove *our* veil- the blockages in our ears and hearts- on *Rosh Hashanah*. During these seven weeks, may we be mindful of listening, loving and doing.

Shabbat Shalom