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Prophecy as Sacred Listening

The story goes that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi happened to meet the Messiah, and asked him -- my master and teacher, when will you arrive? His answer: today. Some time later, clearly after the Messiah had not come, Rabbi Yehoshua met Elijah, and asked him-- what happened? Did the Mashiach lie to me? No, said Elijah, the Mashiach would have come that day, if only you had heeded God's voice.

This story of not hearing is foundational in the story of our people. Our prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and more spoke to kings and commoners alike about how they needed to change their ways and heed the words of Adonai. "Is this the fast I desire?" Isaiah declaimed -- excoriating Jews for going through the motions of piety while ignoring the suffering of those around them. When, during good times, the people stopped their worship, God spoke through Jeremiah: "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness?"

Why then do My people say, 'we are free, we will no longer come to You'" (Jer. 2:31). Hosea tried to get through to Israel by showing, rather than telling. He tried to convey God's feeling of betrayal by marrying a known prostitute -- just as everyone would know she was cheating on him, so Israel should know that we were cheating on God! Yet we wouldn't listen.

The prophecy of Jonah that we'll read in a few minutes is the exception that proves the rule of our failure to listen! Leaving aside the distraction about the whale, the story goes that God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah - a great, non-Jewish city - and warn them that unless they fix their wicked ways, God would destroy them. Nineveh was so big and the scope of the problem so large, yet Jonah marched up to the king, warned of God's punishment and immediately this non-Jewish king put on sackcloth and ashes, directed his people to change, and the city was saved.

By contrast, as seen through the stories of our other prophets, when Jews heard words of biblical prophecy, we paid lip service to them, or ignored them, and all at our peril. Perhaps there's a lesson there: if Nineveh can heed words of truth when they hear it, why can't we?

In our day, we know that kernels of truth come from many different sources - not just from God or biblical prophets. Yet the same question remains: Will we heed it? Pay lip service to it? Or ignore it?

Today, our world is sharing its truth of climate change, and there are prophets in the form of scientists, politicians, and activists, who exhort us toward action and change. Whether it's Al Gore - the politically savvy and connected voice, or Greta Thunberg - the iconoclastic and underdog voice, or Dr. Seuss - who placed his voice inside the Lorax who spoke for the trees. Each cries out for our attention and asks us to acknowledge the potential for looming disaster. Do these voices speak truth that we heed, pay lip service to, or ignore?

Perhaps the truth coming from our fellow human beings will resonate. Black and Brown individuals cry out, sharing their stories of unequal treatment, of brutality, of pain. We see how the Covid 19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; we witness the killing of unarmed black and brown individuals; we hear frustration as this millenia old problem rears its ugly head again and again.

This year, we heard elevated voices from the AAPI - Asian American and Pacific Islander - communities, who experienced an uptick of visible, naked violence and burst forth with their stories and their truth. These individuals reminded us about the myth of the model minority; demanded we contend with nuance and multiplicity of AAPI experience and background; forced us to recall histories of oppression - whether building America's railroads, locked away in internment camps, or segregated through housing covenants or red lining.

And the Jewish community - also subject to that myth of the model minority -- we've experienced a dramatic uptick in antisemitism. Only a few years ago, I held the position, based on my own experience, that antisemitism was a phenomenon was dying. I can no longer say that as I contemplate the mass shooting victims of Pittsburgh and Poway, the stabbing victims in New York, the assaults in Los Angeles. Jewish students are being forced to defend their people in class or online. And so we too cry out -- proclaiming our truth that all those made in God's image are worthy of respect and decency -- hoping that someone will hear our prayer, will care. For all of us individuals' sharing their stories, will the world heed us, pay lip service to us, or ignore us?

Cisgender, non-binary, genderfluid, gay, straight, asexual, trans, queer. These words as signifiers are just labels, but ones that speak truth to how a person sees themselves internally, and how they wish to be understood in the world. When a person changes their name, or establishes a different set of pronouns, or shares their sexual identity, they are sharing intimate words of prophecy from the truth found within. I would hope that when someone trusts us with this piece of who they are, that we will heed and honor that truth as we do here at Temple Beth Shalom, rather than pay lip service to it, or ignore it.

And finally, it is often the truth within ourselves that can be the most illusive, and perhaps the most illuminating. We learn this from the book of 2 Kings, when Elijah also cries out his words of truth and prophecy only to be ignored. However, once he listens to his *kol dmama daka*, his still small voice inside of himself, he is able to move forward with his work and re-engage with the people once more. Each one of us has that internal voice, that emanates from the divine spark inside each living being, the one that speaks truth into our conscious mind through silence, through stillness. But how many of us are able to quiet ourselves enough to hear that voice, let alone heed it?

All of these stories, all of these truths (coming from ourselves, our friends, other communities, our leaders, our world, our tradition), often compete, and can overwhelm us. We want to honor the stories, the lived experiences, the truths embedded in each

narrative, but which one first? What voice do we follow? And do we have the energy to heed them all?

One reaction in the face of this overwhelming noise is all-too familiar: Run! Go and hide! Like Elijah who first fled to Sinai to escape the world. Like Jonah who fled God's call by hiding on a boat. In both of these instances, there was too much: too much brokenness, too much to undo, too much for any person to take on. How often do we see ourselves in those reactions - hearing the myriad voices and shutting down.

Another reaction in the face of the overwhelming noise is to exclusively tune into those voices that most closely align with our own narrative. The social isolation of these past 18 months brought this phenomenon into starker view. Michelle Goldberg of the NYTimes observed that "stuck at home, [we] had more time to get sucked into internet rabbit holes."¹ The algorithms on social media increase this tendency to validate our own beliefs, by continuing to feed us the articles and videos that had garnered our attention -- because they were the ones we would agree with or would vehemently reject. It's become increasingly difficult to hear and interact with "the other side" when we lack the opportunity to organically engage given the limitations imposed by lockdown. Israeli author and poet Amos Oz gave voice to the impact of this estrangement: "Millions and millions of people ..., in many places, wake up in the morning and start loathing those who do not agree with them, or those who think differently, or those who look to them as an immediate threat on their way of life. ... I think loathing begets fanaticism, and in the end loathing begets hatred and violence."² As Oz and Goldberg illustrate, and we all experience, one way to limit the deluge of information and truth coming our way is to read and absorb only that which aligns with our worldview. Maybe paying lip service to **their** truth, before ripping it apart in favor of my own.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/opinion/trump-covid-extremism-loneliness.html>

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<https://forward.com/culture/416752/amos-oz-in-final-q-a-israel-is-a-dream-come-true-and-as-a-dream-come-true/>

But while social distancing made it easier to lean into our echo chambers, it also ripped off any blinders we may have had to the many social ills in our world. We have seen a much-belated reckoning around racism, sexism, and many other inequities. In some ways, the fact that the pandemic cut us off from so much enabled us to hear the voices of these communal and individual truths in a new way, and we had more time to reflect on our own lives and to think about how we each can repair the world, during pandemic times and beyond.

So we know we cannot bury our heads in the sand, ignore the challenges of our world, or the stories of one another. All of these realities and truths are coming at us rapid fire, but once we hear them, we cannot claim ignorance. But it's overwhelming - they blend together like mixing frequencies on the radio, making it hard for us to discern and determine our own understanding of these truths. Again, we turn to our prophets for guidance as to how to move forward - to tune into the truth through the static. Our prophets' stories thankfully do not end with their fear and fleeing. When Elijah finally hears his *kol dmama daka* - that still small voice inside of him, he answers that call by returning to the world and continuing his calling of prophecy and healing. As the storm that punished Jonah for his flight threatened innocent sailors' lives, he chose to save them by jumping overboard in order to stop God's storm. It's through relationships, through seeing others' truths in their stories, that these prophets are able to forge connections, get their messages out, and make a difference in others' lives.

Amos Oz understands relationships in this way - "I listen to my political rivals sometimes with fear and trembling, sometimes with awe, sometimes with near panic, but always with a curiosity of nuances, curiosity for the language, curiosity for the story behind the "impossible" position." Oz's curiosity, his empathy, his sense of humor, are the tools he uses as a sacred listener. Not because he has an obligation to agree with their "impossible" position," but because their humanity demands he listens. May we heed his teaching.

Because another person's truth is not supposed to be some meme or joke, some TV show that we can consume and move on, something we ignore. It's not changing your profile picture or reposting someone else's words and thinking that's enough. The act of hearing someone's truth - that act of sacred listening - is *sacred* because it demands something from us. When we hear the truth of another person, created Btzelem Elohim... in the image of God, it is as if we are being grabbed by the collar, shaken from our slumber, and being obligated to action.

And yet... we know our normal response. We react as the kings that Isaiah or Elijah served - dismissive, or callous, or so overwhelmed we fail to act. Or we narrow our perspective - to only pay attention to those views we digest most easily. So what would it look like to change the story -- what would it look like to engage in sacred, prophetic listening -- before it's too late?

When the earth cries out to us, when the scientific consensus and our own experience of hot, wet, fiery summers, and increasingly frequent hurricanes testifies to the need to change our ways, will we listen? Will we act?

When another person of color is killed, when another LGBTQ+ youth takes their life because they do not feel accepted, when another state imposes restrictions on access to reproductive care, will we listen? Will we act?

Sacred listening affirms that truth is important. Truth we agree with. Truth we may not agree with. Truth of communities whose experience we do not share. The truth of our planet. Yes, the challenges of our world are overwhelming, but our sacred listening can and must turn into achievable action.³ It's leaving your thermostat a few degrees higher and ensuring you recycle. It's being fully present and supportive when someone comes out to you. It's ensuring your family is part of racially and socioeconomically diverse communities and experiences. It's saying "I believe you and I hear you" when someone

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https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres?fbclid=IwAR1UkSWPPnIUMmx_cMzr1dnOqermtHHAMyZhRWEVWfLUGvvMsiJzrXx0lkk

shares their sacred story of pain or discrimination. It's being an ally with your words, your actions, your votes, and your dollars. It's making an effort to hear and learn the stories of others, not because the cause is popular, or because there is violence in the streets, but because another human is sharing their experience, their sacred truth with you.

Let's return to the story of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who asked, "Why didn't the Messiah come when he said he would?" When Elijah responded that the Messiah had not come because Rabbi Yehoshua had not heeded God's voice, Elijah shared a message with all of us. The only thing keeping the Messiah -- the figure who signals a better future for us all -- from coming is our failure to listen. In this coming year, how will we do better than Rabbi Yehoshua? How will we listen? What truths will this bring? And how will we, together, heed our sacred stories, and lead ourselves to a brighter, better, dare I say worthy-of-the-Messiah, future?

Ken Y'hi Ratzon - May this be God's, and our, will.