

SHABBAT SERMON
Parashat Va-etchanan
5775

Over the next few months, I'll be changing my rabbinic practice. At the seminar I attended a few weeks ago, they taught us a technique of community organizing based on doing brief one-on-one interviews with people. Since a lot of us were clergymen, they gave us several articles of pastors who led their congregation by constantly meeting with their members. I am cautious of panaceas, but I think this works. The clergy who wrote about this style of practice said that it unleashed a lot of volunteerism and energy in the congregation.

The instructors at the seminar stressed that during the one-on-one meetings, the most important thing the organizer must do is be quiet and listen. The goal is to give people a chance to tell their story and be heard. What most of us want is for someone else to be quiet and just listen to us.

Most of us give that kind of listening rarely, if ever. Most of the time, when someone else is talking, we're formulating our own response rather than taking in everything they have to say. In a disagreement, that's what we do almost exclusively. That's why we get stuck, why we feel that we and the other are just talking past each other – until one of us blurts out, "You're not listening to me." It is probably true that neither party is listening to the other.

And so I'm going to go around to my congregation, one at a time, ask a couple of questions, and then listen – to stories of Jewish upbringing or of new Jewish commitment, to stories of Jewish regrets and Jewish dreams. I think over time, this process of listening will unleash new energy at Temple Judea and even transform our congregation into a listening congregation.

The Hebrew word *sh'ma* is commonly translated “hear,” but if there’s a difference between the words “hear” and “listen,” I think the word really means “listen.” I understand the word “hear” to be passive: we take in the sound around us whether we like it or not. But the word *sh'ma* has more than one meaning in Hebrew. It can also mean “learn.” And so its connotation is closer to “pay attention,” or even “take in and process.” There’s nothing passive about *sh'ma*. It’s a listening that requires us to open our minds and hearts to take in and think about the words being said.

I have a friend who’s a Catholic priest. Every morning, he asks “What does God want of me today?” When the Torah says, *Sh'ma Yisrael*, “Listen, O Israel,” it is telling us to open ourselves up to what God wants of us every morning and evening. We may have no certainty as to what the answer is or whether there’s an answer at all. But, if *sh'ma* means anything, it means that, even without the certainty, we are

still commanded to ask the question. And, even with no certainty, we are still commanded to approximate an answer by doing good: by caring for the creatures and the planet that are God's creation.

- There was a stabbing in Jerusalem this week – actually it was six stabbings – by an ultra-Orthodox man who attacked people at Jerusalem's gay pride parade. This man had just been released after serving ten years in prison for doing the same thing in the past. He said that he was doing God's will.
- There was a fire bombing of a Palestinian house in the West Bank yesterday in which a baby died. Both Israeli and Palestinian authorities expect that the act was committed by Jewish extremists. I wonder if they too thought they were doing God's will.

There is no real listening without also a wondering, a questioning, “Is this really what God wants of me?” When we’re absolutely certain that we know exactly what God wants of us, we’re probably better off thinking things through again.

I chose this theme this morning not only because the original setting of the Sh’má is in this week’s parashah. I chose it we’re celebrating Matt and Bunny this morning. I must confess: While I see Matt and Bunny here two or three times each week, I really don’t know much about their faith.

- I don’t know what goes on in their heads and hearts when they’re sitting in our sanctuary.
- I don’t know if they ask themselves in the morning, “What does God want of me today?”

But I do know how they act. I know that they worked regularly in a soup kitchen in New Mexico. And, when I called an open Social Action committee meeting a year ago, they showed up. And, when I needed someone to spearhead a

feed-the-hungry program for Temple Judea, Matt volunteered without being asked. And, then Matt and Bunny showed up month after month at Sally's Café. Whether they consciously ask the question or not, they do actively do God's work. They bring God's presence into this congregation and the world.

As for me, I'm going to start doing more listening to my congregation. I think that's what God wants from me. I think it's the first step on the road to being a

a "holy congregation" committed to listening and learning.