



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Ha'azinu 5774

By Rabbi Elliot Kukla

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This past July I spent three days at a monastery in Big Sur, California, with Benedictine monks who live as hermits. It is a silent atmosphere, so I spent most of my day in an isolated trailer without phone, traffic, email or conversation. The first day I was there was one of the longest and *noisiest* of my life. My own mind more than filled up the silence. I fretted endlessly over mistakes I had made in my most precious relationships and in my career. By the second day without speaking, the chatter inside my brain had started to quiet down. I began to get to the more essential concerns that lay below these fears. How can I best give and receive love? What do I truly want to change in the world?

On the third day, I was finally able to notice the silence. Small sounds became fiercely beautiful. The buzzing of a fly took on monumental proportions. My tiny interactions with other people also started to take on new meaning. I noticed how warm the young acolyte's smile was, the unusually graceful walk of an elderly woman who was a guest in one of the other trailers. The silence allowed me to be present to other people in new and surprising ways. Ironically, it gave me the space to truly listen.

When I first started doing pastoral counseling in rabbinical school I was always afraid that I would say the wrong thing. But I soon learned that what most people need during challenging moments in their lives is not more words, but the space to be heard.

This week we come to the penultimate portion of the Torah, *Parashat Ha'azinu*. It is a beautiful work of biblical poetry that opens with Moses asking to be listened to on a global level. We read: "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the Earth hear the words I utter! May my speech come down as the rain; my words distill as the dew."¹

What would global listening sound like? How might we live differently in the coming year if we truly stopped in this season and listened to the stories of pain and survival around the globe that surround us each day? What if we took the time and space to listen to the voices behind the news stories when we hear reports of famine or genocide? What if we stopped on the street corner to hear how poverty and a global imbalance of wealth impact the homeless man who just asked us for spare change?

During the High Holidays, the *mitzvah*, the sacred activity, connected to the shofar is not to blow it as we might have expected, but "*lishmoa kol shofar*," literally to *listen* to its voice. The pattern of shofar blasts that we sound is designed to mimic human tears. Deep moans...*tekiah*. Broken cries...*shevarim*. Staccato sobs...*teruah*. A long bellow...*tekiah gedolah*. Listening with our whole selves to the shofar crying on Rosh Hashanah teaches us how to be attentive to human stories of struggle all year round.

¹ Dvarim 32:1-2.

If we stop and listen, we might hear surprising things. On one level, the shofar sounds like tears, but it also sounds like laughter. Whole chuckles...*tekiah*. Broken giggles...*shevarim*. Sharp shrieks of merriment...*teruah*. A deep belly laugh...*tekiah gedolah*. There are moments of surprising hope and humor in even the saddest stories. There is survival in Darfur in the midst of genocide. There is hope in Burma in the midst of rebuilding after the cyclone.

A twenty-six year old friend of mine suddenly became seriously ill this summer and began chemotherapy in the days leading up to the High Holidays. She called me a few days ago and said: "This year during the High Holidays I finally get it. We do time all wrong. We fill our days with everything but listening to each other."

In the coming year may we pause within the hectic rush of our lives and create the space to listen—to the voices of suffering and the voices of joy in our own families, our communities and our planet. May the words of the *parashah* inspire us to "give our ears" to the earth and fill up our days and our hearts with listening and caring for each other.

Shana Tova.



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