

Good morning. I am honored to stand before you, friends whom I have known for years and friends whom I have yet to meet. All of us stand together on the edge of a new year. In the words of William Shakespeare, "How fearful. And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!"

My mother had a magic formula for facing the new year. She declared that it was bad luck not to have all new clothes for all the services. And so every year she acquired a brand new supply of those grape-colored crepe dresses with matching jackets, the lapels covered in beads, by mail order from Lane Bryant. My father had to buy a new suit. I had to get dresses.

I still do this, but that is not the substance of my drash today. I would like to look forward with everyone to a new year in which we know there will be change and we wonder how to welcome it, whether or not it is welcome. I want to talk about how we can welcome it together, because that is where we will be -- together.

We are simultaneously entering a new year in which we have, through a the 18-month strategic process that this congregation has undergone, resolved, among other things, to see the divinity in one another. This, I think, is something to look forward to.

But how, exactly do we SEE the divinity in one another? And how does it help us through change?

If you know me, you probably know that I have been working at Suicide Prevention for quite a while. People often ask what we SAY to someone who is in extreme pain or crisis to help them through this moment in time. I explain that we don't SAY anything. We LISTEN.

Listening is an exquisite art that needs to be developed. I stumble at it sometimes. Done well, it allows another person to reveal to themselves who they are, who they can be and how they can heal. And as Jews, we are -- peculiarly -- a nation of listeners. "Hear O Israel," begins the watchword of our faith, not, "Look," "Remember," or "Shout." It is, I think not an accident that so many of us are therapists of one kind or another. We are the people of the ear. We know that hearing heals.

In "The Art of Racing in the Rain," the author, Garth Stein, posits the idea that dogs are beings who are practicing to become human. That this is who they will be in their next life. One of the main characters says,

"Here's why I will be a good person. Because I listen. I cannot talk, so I listen very well. I never deflect the course of the conversation with a comment of my own. People, if you pay attention to them, change the direction of one another's conversations constantly. It's like having a passenger in in your car who suddenly grabs the wheel and turns you down a side street...Learn to listen! I beg of you. Pretend you are a dog like me and listen to other people rather than steal their stories."

Of course this is not as easy as it sounds. There are certain obstacles to listening. Sometimes we talk to each other from a distance and our entire meaning gets garbled. Last week my husband assured me from the far end of the house that “Hope brings a turtle.” I had to go find him for the translation: “Hope springs eternal.”

Also, we are often only afforded the opportunity to listen to the people we really want to hear in restaurants that are rated in the newspapers with four firecrackers or a bomb.

But the biggest obstacles are technical. We have to learn the technology of listening. Here is what we teach where I work.

Listening means not instructing. Sometimes the very act of not giving the obvious advice can make little beads of blood pop out on your forehead. Instead, one commiserates and validates what has been confided. The Yiddish language is uniquely gifted with a two-letter empathic response to catastrophe: the word, “Oy!” If only this was included in more graduate level clinical curricula.

One can also respond by reflecting what one has heard without passing any judgement on it. Just repeating enough to let the speaker know the content has come through: “So you're saying the motorcycle needs a whole new engine.” Or one can enter the quiz show I call, “Name That Emotion.” By helping someone attach a name to the emotion of that moment, we are giving them a certain power over it. “You feel abandoned.” gives a person the opportunity to tell themselves in the future that the abandoned feeling has come back, instead of reacting once more to what feels like a mysterious force.

Most people respond to really skilled listening by coming up with their own realizations and plans of action. And if you think back to a really catastrophic moment in your own life and list in your mind the people you trusted with information about it and the people you would never have trusted at all, you will usually see that the ones who did not give you advice were the ones in whom you confided.

How can we know that we are in the presence of someone to whom we should listen? There are four people who approach their need of us differently, just as there are four children at Passover who express their relationship to the story of Moses in Egypt differently.

One person bluntly says, “I am in so much trouble.” She may have said this many times before and so people can easily come to the point of ignoring her. She always means what she says and she always needs us to stop and listen.

A second person is not certain that he is worthy of help but will leave that decision up to forces beyond his control. He hints that he is in trouble very indirectly, but never really asks for help. You, yourself need to begin the conversation by saying three things: you have noticed something he said, you are worried because you care, and you want to help.

He has a cousin who is also uncertain of worthiness, but instead of hinting, acts this out by behaving in ways that ask for help. She may stop appearing where she is expected, give away belongings or pets, neglect her appearance. The fourth person takes unusual risks that may even be life-threatening. He may become involved in unsafe substance use, driving, sex or violence. Again, you will need to start the conversation.

Each of us when we are in trouble is also divine. Not only divine in ourselves but capable of engaging the divinity in everyone around us when they notice and hear us. And in doing this, I believe, we are also doing the work of Adonai. When we read the Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah, of Hannah and Samuel, the priest, Eli, did not offer advice about perhaps becoming pregnant by taking her temperature on a regular basis, but rather simply said, "God has heard you." And Hannah named her child "Shmu-el," a combination of the word for hearing, "Shma" and "El" for Adonai.

I believe that Adonai listens to us. After five Books of Moses during which there is a great period of talking, there seems to now be a great period of listening. Adonai does not offer unwelcome advice or steal one's stories. There is simply the listening. I believe that if we are to listen to others, we should take advantage of the best listener in the universe as well to replenish own strength.

In fact we recognize this ability in Adonai when we pray during these Holy Days, "Shema Kolenu," "Hear our voice, God of all of us." We can try it again next week, I believe. Or the week after that. Who knows what would happen?

The great sage, Yogi Berra, once observed, "It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future." We may not know what will happen to each of us personally in the year to come, as we peer over the precipice of change, but we do know for certain that each of us will be needed by at least one other person and that we can be part of the miracle of healing, this web of holiness.

And so my prayer for the new year full of changes is that we will become blessed with the ability to see and hear the divinity that is in each of us, and in each other. And that we will listen for it. And that we will hear it. And that we will be one.

Whether or not our clothing is new.

Good Yontov.