

Good Morning and Shannah Tova:

About two months ago, I was sitting in a cubicle at Salesforce.com, nervously awaiting a job interview. My cell phone rang ... a number I did not recognize: it was our Rabbi, asking if I would accept the honor of teaching this morning. I was a bit stunned -- and preoccupied with my upcoming interview -- but I knew that I had to accept.

And of course, there's that whole matter of "The Call". It's part of our tradition to be called, so how could I ignore it ... even if it was not a call from our God, just Rabbi Angel?

But, why me? I am not particularly learned, certainly not religious in a traditional way. What wisdom can I share with you, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav ... my extended family by choice? Our history is full of the reluctant, including Moses, and Yonah. But when I asked the Rabbi, "What makes me worthy?" ... she answered quickly and easily: "We are all worthy." So as you make your mental checklist of "guidance Michael shared with us on Rosh Hashanah," the first item on your list should be "I am worthy". Each one of us matters, and our participation in this community matters. Next year it could be you standing here: an idea that should thrill you, but perhaps scare you to your core.

So I spent time thinking about these days of Awe, and my responsibility, in this period where we "call timeout", to ponder what has been, and what might be. To quote an old Coca-Cola slogan, this

time is “The Pause that Refreshes”: a time to take time, to examine ourselves and our souls, to take a moment, to try to make ourselves and our world a bit better.

And honestly, I wrestled with this morning’s portion. As the story is presented, it has always struck me hard, leaving me with a sense of sadness and shame for the actions of our foremother Sarah.

Seemingly without much provocation, she asks Abraham to evict Hagar and Ishmael ... and while Abraham complains a bit to God, he does what is asked of him. It’s pretty harsh.

I want to redeem Sarah: to find some justification for these heartless acts of our foremother. I went back to previous chapters to get more context and background on the relationship between Hagar and Sarah. I studied the interpretations of “mitzaheck” – the key verb that describes how Ishmael was interacting with Isaac again, trying to understand why Sarah felt the need to expel Hagar and her son. While our mahzor and many others translate mitzaheck as play, others translate it as mockery. Rashi’s interpretation is closer to abuse. So, was Ishmael playing with Isaac, mocking him, or abusing him? If the latter, I could understand Sarah’s reaction, but I’m an Engineer by training ... I like facts, and these competing versions confuse me. I’m left unresolved: while this confusion softens my heart a bit for Sarah, I’m still left unsettled.

And, by the way, Abraham doesn't look so heroic either, sending his child and the mother of his child into the wild with almost no provisions, out to certain death.

Skipping to the end of our story -- Hagar is wandering in the wilderness of Beersheba. She has been cast out from her family, and her son is dying. Despondent, she drops him under a bush and walks "a bow-shot away" ... 20 yards, 30 yards ... and waits, because she cannot bear to see what is going to happen. But an Angel of God calls to her and Hagar hears that voice, in the midst of her despair, making her not a victim, but a hero. The story is clear in this regard: Hagar has given up all hope, but God hears the cry of the boy – and an Angel speaks to Hagar.

So ... item two on this morning's checklist: "Listen for the call" It could come in answer to your prayer ... but then again, perhaps in answer to someone else's prayer.

How hard is that? To hear a call when you're not the one reaching out? Consider this idea: that you could be the answer to someone else's prayer.

If we take this mitzvah seriously, with some responsibility ... I think that's the meaning of tzedakah. To be open, and listening for a call of need ... and responding to that call: that is the true meaning of charity and justice.

In this season we are encouraged ... actually commanded ... to engage in this internal dialog ... to “listen hard”. Indeed, the very nature of prayer is to explore our inner space, to attempt to express what is felt, but mostly goes unexpressed. We pray, in part, to give shape and texture to these feelings – to figure it out, and to call out, what we need and want ... and to acknowledge what we are grateful for.

When I think about prayer, the easy definition is that prayer is a form of speech ... “to pray” is to entreat, to ask. Perhaps instead, especially in this season, we should first think of prayer as an act of listening.

Our central prayer, The Shema, is in fact a call to listen: “Shema, Yisrael” ... “Hear this, Israel”. And in the middle of the second paragraph of the Shema, the traditional translation is “Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived and you turn away to other gods”. Listen ... to your God, and to your own heart.

Our mahzor Sha’ar Zahav translates this as “But beware, lest your heart go astray ...” Beware, a contraction for “Be aware” ... “be self-aware”. “Be present”: that is the core of the commandment ... and be wary of those other gods.

We live in a time and a place filled with distractions – with inventions and media that fill our senses – all day and all night. In our day-to-day life we are blessed in many ways But how often do we acknowledge these blessings? How can you hear that still, small voice

while your iPhone is buzzing, the Blackberry is filled with unread emails, your TiVo is primed with a whole season of Jersey Shore...

Author and philosopher Kenneth Seeskin, in his book “*No Other Gods*”, defines idolatry as that point where attention and devotion cross the line to worship and adoration. I’d like to challenge you to measure the depth of your relationship to your iPhone: how much devotion does it get? Do you positively adore it? Does your partner get as much attention? Your kids? Your friends? The people around you?

And when you’re speaking with someone and the phone rings, which one wins?

And then there are our internal voices, also competing for our attention. How can we tell if they’re “the still small voice” of our better selves, or just mindless, internal chatter? Frankly, not every voice is one worth listening to, whether it be on your iPhone, or on your “internal phone.” I have struggled with the voice of addiction, and I have many friends ... both inside and outside this community, who describe themselves as alcoholics or addicts. My dear friend Ben and I had lunch over the summer: he is a survivor of a serious battle with crystal meth.

I'm happy to report that Ben won that war, and it left him profoundly grateful – of his relationship with himself, with others around him, and with God. In his recovery, Ben found God in the midst of his life, and is now a new person -- in his words, “released from bondage”.

Ben taught me that the challenge is to “hear the true voice,” the one that leads us to life, community, and health. Because in any addict’s head, there is another voice ... the life-negating, isolating voice of addiction, addiction being another form of idolatry. Adoration and worship would accurately describe how we feel about our drug of choice, whatever it may be. Meth, pot, booze ... even work, or shopping, or sex ... it doesn’t matter. Our desires have a powerful voice ... and the internal dialog is complex. Anyone in recovery can tell you that learning to hear the difference between the two voices is an on-going process. I know it sounds trite, but it’s true: one day at a time is how recovery is accomplished: being present and listening for your own, authentic, true voice.

So how, you might ask, do you hear the voice?

Try Shabbat. Create time for yourself, to listen. To “sanctify” ... to make holy, is literally “to set apart”. To make a day holy – or even just an evening – is to set that time apart, as an explicit, creative act. Reach out for your community – and they will reflect the sound of your true voice.

And when you are at Shabbat dinner, with your friends, your partner, or your kid, ask a good question. In *Zen & the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig suggests that the question to ask is not “What’s new?” – which gets you “an endless parade of trivia”, but “What is best?” For me, I’d settle for “What was good today?” -- something that made you feel truly blessed.

That’s the last item on my list for this morning: to ask yourself “What is good?” You’ll have the next ten days to consider all the things that you don’t like – about yourself, about this world we share. Along with that consideration, make space in your heart to consider what is good. I think it will make the rest of your prayer of listening that much easier.

And for those of you that are still bothered by a vision of Ishmael and Hagar, sitting by the well, but still out in the wilderness of Beersheba, remember that the Holy one promised a number of times to make a great nation of Ishmael, and She does indeed come through. The happy ending occurs a few chapters later, when Abraham dies, at the age of 175. Ishmael returns, and together he and Isaac bury their father – and Ishmael becomes the patriarch of 12 tribes of his own.

I take comfort in a vision of Ishmael and Isaac, each secure and confident, each with wealth and extended family ... coming together again. I pray that all the children of Abraham, of Sarah and of Hagar, will come together in our time to continue that work of peace, speedily and soon.

I wish for us all a season of reflecting and a year of listening ... to each other, and to ourselves. We are each uniquely created in an image of the divine, and our community needs each one of us. Find, and hear, that still, small voice in your own heart ... the one that leads you back to yourself, and to peace.

Shanna Tova, and may you be inscribed for a year of health and joy, maybe a little prosperity, and a lot of peace.

(v9)