

The Audience is Listening. But for How Long?

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The Jewish Center
Rabbi Yosie Levine

A recent study by the Pew Research Center examined almost 50,000 sermons delivered in US Churches this past year. It doesn't seem the researchers were much interested in the content. More important, it seems, was the length of the sermon.

So maybe Christians and Jews have more in common after all.

Turns out the average length of a sermon is 37 minutes – and among evangelical Protestants – talks go on even longer.

So next time membership month rolls around and people ask you why they should join The Jewish Center: just tell them compared to Trinity Lutheran, they can save 25 minutes every week by coming to our shul.

The story of Yosef and his brothers is one of the most complex and protracted dramas in the Torah. And every now and again – betwixt and between the political intrigue – the text pauses to share something that humanizes the characters.

And it's one of these moments that I want to think about with you this morning. I want to argue that – understood correctly – it will dramatically alter the very way we think about Yosef and his family.

Remember the story:

A famine has gripped the region.

Thanks to Yosef's sage advice, the land of Egypt is prepared. But those in Canaan are starting to go hungry.

So Yaakov dispatches ten of his sons on a mission to buy food in מצרים. Years have passed. Yosef recognizes his brothers when they arrive; but they fail to recognize him.

He asks who they are.

They tell their story, but Yosef accuses them of being spies and throws them in prison.

And it's this short scene when the brothers are incarcerated to which I want to return.

Their fate unknown, they begin to reflect.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו, אֲבָל אֲנִשְׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ, אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהַתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ, וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ; עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ, הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת.

We're being punished, they say, on account of our brother. We saw his anguish, and yet because we paid no heed when he pleaded with us, this distress has come upon us.

My question is very simple: What's the trigger? All these years later, what makes them think of Yosef?

In their own minds, there was no doubt that the ills they were suffering at the hands of the Egyptian viceroy were some form of divine retribution. The question is: Accepting this internal logic: How do they purport to know the cause of their suffering?

By this point, the brothers had accumulated a list of crimes:

They weren't just guilty of selling Yosef.

- Reuven had played fast and loose with his father's concubine.
- Shimon and Levi had decimated Shchem.
- Yehudah had misjudged and almost executed, his daughter-in-law, Tamar.

If our modern appreciation for psychology has allowed us to say that the brothers are suffering a guilty conscience, it seems there's plenty of guilt to go around! What makes them jump immediately to the sale of Yosef?

It's certainly true that the circumstances are triggering. They threw Yosef into a pit and now they find themselves in a dungeon.

And the fact that it was the whole lot of them who were responsible for Yosef's sale and now the whole of them is in trouble is surely a contributing factor.

But I think their words themselves contain the answer.

Pay close attention to what they say. What's the great sin for which they're being punished?

- For hatching a plot to kill their brother?
- For selling Yosef into slavery?
- For covering up their crime by lying to their father?

If all these years later they're still racked with guilt, wouldn't one of these rise to the top of the list?

אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ, וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ

In the minds of the brothers, their real crime was their failure to hear Yosef when he was pleading for his life from the bottom of that fateful pit.

And that's the giveaway.

Yes – they've been thrown in a prison.

Yes – they've been tasked with going back to Canaan to fetch Binyamin.

But everything that's happened to them is a function something much more fundamental: It's all a function of the fact that they've not been

heard. They've told their story and it's not been believed. They made their case and their pleas were not heeded.

And so they jump to the natural conclusion: If our words aren't being heard, they reason, it's because at some point in the past we failed to hear the words of someone else.

And of course their minds race to the fateful scene in which Yosef pled with them from the bottom of a pit; and they callously ignored his cries.

It's the desire to be heard that animates the entire narrative.

Do you remember the very first thing Yosef says to his brothers in the Torah?

וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲלֵיהֶם: שְׁמְעוּ-נָא, הַחֲלוּם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חָלַמְתִּי .

Please listen, he says, to the dream that I have dreamt.

All he wants is for them to hear his words!

And so when the story finally reaches its dénouement, it should come as no surprise that listening is once again the centerpiece of the narrative.

Yehudah has just given his impassioned speech.

Yosef can conceal his identity no longer.

He clears the room as he's about to reveal himself.

And then entirely unexpectedly, the Torah tells us

וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-קֹלוֹ, בְּבִכּוֹ; וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ מִצָּרִים, וַיִּשְׁמַע בַּיִת פְּרִיעָה .

Yosef breaks down and he cries – and everyone hears!

What otherwise would be an inexplicable line, now makes perfect sense.

Do we really need to know who heard Yosef when he cried?

The answer is yes. Because it's when Yosef is finally heard that the story can come to a close.

In the rabbinic imagination, the most heinous interpersonal sin in the Torah is the sale of Yosef.

But it's what precipitated that dreadful event that's the real message of the story. The real problem is when we fail to listen.

And so the rest of the Torah is about listening.

It's axiomatic in Judaism that God cannot be seen; He can only be heard. And so almost 100 times in his farewell address does Moshe tell the Jewish people to listen.

שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד.

The first pasuk we teach our children and the last line we say before we leave this world – is about listening.

To listen in Judaism means to hear the word of God.

To listen in Judaism means to hear the cries of those in distress.

And to listen in Judaism means to stand eternally on call: ready to act; ready to do the right thing in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

So it's with great pride that I share with you how our own community listened and responded when such a moment arose just a few days ago.

This past week a member alerted us to a passing in the community.

A 96 year old Holocaust survivor had passed away with no family at all.

She wasn't herself affiliated, but had made her wishes known to a neighbor that she wanted a traditional Jewish burial.

And so our community swung into action.

- The Jewish Center donated a burial plot in our cemetery.
- Our chevra kaddisha arranged for a tahara.
- Through anonymous donations to our chesed fund, we covered all the fees owed to the funeral home and the cemetery.

- We put word out to be sure that we would have a minyan. And dozens of people answered the call.

One man who had come from Westchester said he was there because the members of his family who perished in the Holocaust were never given the dignity of a Jewish burial. So in some small way, he wanted to do his part to make sure a survivor of the Holocaust wouldn't suffer the same fate.

This is what's possible when we become listeners.
Not just those who hear; but those who hear and respond.

On Chanukah, we celebrate the victory of those who heeded the call of Jewish particularism in a world bent on universalism. I'm not sure things are so different today.

So what a blessing it is to celebrate Daniel's bar mitzvah: The bar mitzvah of a young man who recognizes his unique mission among a family and a community so attuned to the sounds of Torah and Mitzvot – so attuned to the opportunities to make others feel heard. Daniel: Today is just the beginning of what I know will be a lifetime spent in the service of the Jewish people. (To be honest, don't even worry too much about the listening-to-God piece right now. As long as you listen to your parents, you'll be fine.)

At the end of the day, it's not a question of how long we can listen, but simply a question of how we listen. Are our ears attuned to hear not only the voice of God; but also the voice of man?

We can never take for granted the wonders that Hashem has wrought both בימים ההם and בזמן הזה – in ancient days and in our own. But neither can we gainsay our own capacity to do wondrous things in this world if we are but willing to listen.