

The speech President Obama delivered to school children just over a week ago and the subsequent “controversy,” over parents “opting out” their kids from hearing it along with schools banning the speech from being seen in their classrooms altogether seemed altogether strange to me. To disagree with the positions and policies of any President of the United States is part of what it means to be an American. But in order to disagree and debate even in the most of subjective of contexts, however, means that we must first respect the office of the President and be willing to listen.

The America that I grew up in is one in which the Office of the President and more importantly the ideas of a President meant something and were to be respected even in bitter disagreement.

What happened with the Obama speech is symptomatic of a larger issue which is very sobering for many of us. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield speaks of this issue in his book, “You Don’t Have to be Wrong for Me to be Right,” when he says, “We live in a moment of polarized politics, angry rhetoric, and increasing violence, often pushed into the unfair choice between fanatical commitments that make us crazy and openness that is so loose it leaves us lonely.”

As I have preached before, I am no fan of post modern moral relativism where we all have to “get along and go along,” and always seek to find a “middle ground,” which diminishes our own beliefs and virtues. I also find that certain disagreements are necessary in a democracy and that we must struggle and wrestle with our faith, our ideas and ideals and our most sacred values in order grow both intellectually and spiritually.

In this age I have found that the profound struggle of our generation is to see things from the perspectives of others; to have true and enduring empathy for the plight of others, the thoughts and ideas that other people think and from whence their perspectives come. Empathy has become obsolete in a generation where self interests come first.

We must first listen before we can understand. When we understand we can have empathy. And I believe that sincere empathy can be a powerful pathway to peace.

One of the great debates of Jewish history existed between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai in the first century. In these often heated arguments, the students of Hillel stand as role models in Judaism for listening.¹ We are taught that the

¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 13b

School of Hillel would humbly listen to the opposing views first, before offering their own. They showed respect for views they didn't personally share. God considered the divergent views equally "words of the living God." Yet in the end, Hillel's views carried the day because of they encompassed the thoughts of others, and because of their humility. "Who is wise," our tradition asks us, "one who listens and learns from every person."²

In our generation, Nelson Mandela used listening and empathy as the way toward unification of a nation. "Don't enter the debate too early," he used to say. Mandela put this to practice as the African National Congress's first President of South Africa after the fall of apartheid. He would gather his cabinet around the dining-room table or sometimes in a circle in his driveway. Some of his colleagues would shout at him — to move faster, to be more radical — and Mandela would simply listen. When he finally did speak at those meetings, he slowly and methodically summarized everyone's points of view and then unfurled his own thoughts, subtly steering the decision in the direction he wanted, without imposing it. The trick of leadership, Mandela would say, is allowing yourself to be led too.³

Herein lies the truth we seek during these Days of Awe. That we all have something to say is a given. That we all have perspectives to share, lessons to teach and experiences which inform our ideas is part of what it means to be human. But this *Yom Teruah*, this day of hearing the Sound of the Shofar is about listening. The Torah commands us to be both spiritually and mentally moved by the sound as it enters our ears and penetrates our souls. To achieve this state of a new consciousness in a new year can only be achieved through listening.

When we listen we open our hearts and minds to hear others, when we listen we seek the goodness and kindness in others, when we listen we open ourselves up to the vulnerabilities which make us real and connected, when we listen we commit ourselves to understanding others so that we ourselves can become better people; when we listen we can hear the voice of God crying out to us: "Pursue peace!," "Seek justice!," "Walk humbly with God!" "Be kind, be compassionate and be holy."

During my 7th grade year, Ronald Reagan was elected President. Early in his first term he was scheduled to deliver an "address to the nation," about inflation and the dwindling value of the dollar. The day of the speech my *uber-liberal*, former hippie, Grateful Dead-head teacher instructed us that our homework assignment for that evening was to watch the entire address and then come back the next day ready to discuss it in class.

² Adapted from *Pirke Avot* 4:1

³ With my gratitude to Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel for letting me "borrow" these two texts from *his* Rosh Hashanah sermon.

I remember the discussion the following day was intense as my teacher slammed Reagan for the content of his address and the way in which he delivered it. "Hollywood!" he exclaimed, describing to us how the camera continued to pan in and out at Reagan sitting behind his desk in the Oval Office. Nonetheless we discussed and debated and tried to make sense of what policies could be enacted by Reagan to give a boost to the economy and produce a stronger dollar.

It is okay to listen even when we do not agree. It is not okay to shut people out, let alone to shut out a president because we disagree. From listening comes true empathy. From listening comes true meaning. From listening comes the pursuit of peace.

May we be open enough to seek understanding from those who we have shut out. May we be brave enough to engage in a conversation with others even when it is troubling. May we be "wise" enough to "listen and learn from others," as a pathway to seeking God and pursuing peace for ourselves and our world. Amen.