**First Time – First Day Rosh Hashana 5779, 2018**

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I was probably about 15 years old when I first heard the song; it spoke directly to me heart. I was riveted. I am referring to Roberta Flack’s version of “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face”. Written by Ewan McColl a British political singer in 1957, it became a major hit for Roberta Flak in 1972.

“The first time ever I saw your face

I thought the sun rose in your eyes.

And the moon and the stars were the gift you gave

To the dark and the endless skies.”

I know Caron is going to kill me for saying this but the song is probably etched into my soul because she played it for me on her guitar when we were going out together as teenagers…It’s a powerful song, not only for its beautiful lyrics and the haunting evocative quality of Franklin’s version, but also because it captures something of the hope, potential and freshness of first or new love. It also embodies the excitement of any significant first. Just Like the בכורים, the first fruits that an Israeli grower would bring in a spirit of שמחה an overflowing heart, a sense of how good it is to be alive.

I got to thinking about this song and the formidable power of a first when I blew the shofar for my 1-year-old grandson Ezra just over a week ago. His reaction was a mix of fear and fun, unsure yet curious, awe-struck, apprehensive and yet filled with wonderment. And it hit me then, not only what it must be like to hear the shofar for the very first time of your life, but also what it is to truly listen.

You may know that I am obsessed with the art of listening. And the older I get the more I am convinced that our personal relationships depend on our capacity to pay attention to each other, that our social and business relationships rely on our ability to really hear the other, that our national and international engagements hinge on the way we listen to one another.

I have also become more concerned that most of the time we hear but do not listen, we don’t really make the effort to give the other person our full undivided, intense attention. Shema is one of the key words of the final and urgent speech and message of Moshe to his people before he died. It appears no less than 92 times in the Book of Devarim and it’s of course one of the axiomatic words of Judaism itself. שמע ישראל Listen Jews! It is, as you know, the critical mitzvah of today – not to blow but to hear the sound of the shofar.

Rabbi Sacks has observed, there isn’t a word for obedience in Hebrew, the closest is to listen. God wants us to listen with the deepest parts of ourselves – the heart has been called the third ear – to listen isn’t just to obey, Shema Yisrael open yourselves to the potency of His challenges, Shema Yisrael really question very deeply what it is to be a Jew, what it is to be called on, to believe, to listen to our own hearts, to pay attention to our guts, our conscience. And out of this listening you can in turn argue with and challenge your Creator: Shema Koleinu.

It may sound surprising but it takes courage to really listen (Carl Rogers). It can be especially painful to have to listen, to be confronted to move outside your comfort zone. It’s so easy today, courtesy of Google filters and Facebook friends to live in an echo chamber and only hear the voices of those who share your views. Remember it’s the people unlike us who make us grow (Sacks). It’s also the antidote to the fundamental mind-set and its slogan: “I am right; you are wrong, go to hell” (Bernard Lewis quoted by Sacks).As I said yesterday, listening is also being respectful of different views, holding civil discussions about the politics that divide us, not just discounting your opposition as a basket of deplorables or dismissing everything they say as fake news or with crude insults

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So are we really listening with all our hearts, our souls and our being? Mobile phones may help us reach people a lot quicker but they haven’t quickened our ability to reach out to them. In fact, if in the middle of a conversation with someone you’ve texted or scrolled through your phone or taken a call, you’re guilty of phubbing also known as phone-snubbing.

There’s a new category we’ve got to add to the Yom Kippur confessional: the “אשמנו בגדנו גזלנו. We’ve sinned, we’ve rebelled, we’ve stolen”. Now we also have to add “Fabanu” we’ve phone snubbed. Phubbing may seem harmless and almost normal, but it disconnects you from the person you’re having a conversation with. It’s actually bad for your mental health and your emotional well-being. It affects our deep need to attach meaningfully to other human beings, it degrades empathy. We know that phubbers who use their phones during a meal with friends or family actually enjoy their food less and felt disengaged from everyone at the table. And of course phubbing is most damaging for couples: it can ruin that special intimate moment together with your life partner. At work, it diminishes respect for your employer if they cut you off to take that call. Even a momentary glance or distraction – you know the ping – you’ve got a message or an alert or even just having your phone visible undermines the quality of our different relationships. We feel unheard, disrespected, disregarded.

Relating is about listening and listening is about being fully present without distractions, without deviations. It’s like the love of the שמע which demands we do it בכל לבבך יבכל נפשך ובכל מאדך with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength. It’s like the opening words of the second paragraph of the שמע with its double emphasis:

והיה אם שמוע תשמעוי . If you indeed heed or Sacks’s more forceful translation – ‘If you listen – and I mean really listen’. You can imagine the Israelites saying to Moses “OK. Genuk Shein, enough already, we hear you” and Moshe replying “No you don’t, you simply don’t get it: The Creator of the universe is asking you the smallest of nations, you, the most ordinary of individuals, to tune into yourself, to tune into others, to tune into his world: to do something about suffering: be it the hungry and homeless outside the Coles supermarket, the terrified kids in Yemen or Idlib, the displaced Rohinga of Myanmar, the desperate depressed kids on Manus and Naru. Being compassionate isn’t about being political, it’s about being human, it’s about being true to your Jewish tradition.

And incidentally talking about listening it’s about looking directly at other people, reading their expressions hearing the nuances in their voices, noticing their postures. That’s what Moshe models for us when he speaks directly to God on that first Yom Kippur פנים אל פנים – face-to-face, heart to heart – eye-to-eye, no filter, no phubbing no funiculling.

We feel more empathy when we put away our smartphones and that’s why I love the Shabbat. Despite my mobile addiction, on this day I’m liberated, screen-free and smarter than my phone. I listen better, I hear more sounds of the world around me, I’m more attuned to nature, I’m close to my Creator, I talk more and hopefully better to my wife and kids and congregants. I’m more in touch with the loneliness that people are experiencing and that is growing across our culture. I feel connected to my community.

And talking about community, for those who missed yesterday’s drasha I would like to repeat that despite the rumours and doomers,our new shul president David Mond and I intend to talk and listen to each other and to you the members of our congregation to work together for the good of this wonderful Shule to strengthen and enhance it and to advance our ambitious Building Project.

I would suggest that listening and loving are the most important skills we all need – not that I always get it right. I am a husband, the species who doesn’t listen especially well. In fact, I know too often I miss the cues or am too distracted by the distractions of life… And men are more serial phubbers then women; they find it less disturbing. But I certainly know from experience when I truly listen it’s the greatest gift I can give another person, to adapt the words of that sensational song to acutely listen is “to feel the earth move in your hand. Like the trembling heart of a captive bid that was there at my command (my love)”.

That’s why it’s no coincidence that the first word of the first paragraph of the שמע prayer is ואהבת you shall love. For only when you really listen do you really love. Love, as the Torah reminds us ,is not only about loving the ones closest to you –your family ,neighbours and friends ,but the mitzvah to love extends to the other stranger, the widow, the poor ,the displaced and the vulnerable refugee .Veahavta et hager…(You shall love the stranger)

If there are two words you should take home today, it’s Listen and Love. Listen like you’re hearing for the first time, love like you’re discovering it for the very first time. And if you want to add a third call it lead –be a leader, be an exemplar, take action, don’t underestimate what you can do-one person may not be able to change the world but you can change the world for one person! You can be a Rosh, a leader on Rosh Hashana

It’s no coincidence that it’s on Rosh Hashana we’re called on to love, listen and lead. For this is the very first day of the year commemorating and echoing the beginning of Creation and the very first day that Adam burst into the world newly-born, newly formed, unfolding like the first splendid day of spring. It was this day he strode across the universe as its first leader .That’s why we’ve been loudly proclaiming throughout the service Hayom Harat Olam –Today the world was formed. Birth is about hope and beginnings are about boldness, freshness and leadership .Listen,Love,Lead!

Rosh Hashana tell us that despite the confusion, perplexity and uncertainty around us, and my God the world is in a strange and difficult zone, we can overcome, we are the Listening people, we are the people who gave Love and Leadership to the world: As Adam probably sang to Eve on that First Friday she was introduced to him: Bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh… First time ever I lay beside you

I felt your heart close to mine

And I knew our joy would fill the earth

And last till the end of time my love…

First time ever I saw your face”