

Elul Week 1: Wake Up and Listen (A Teaching on Silence and Listening)

Dear Friends,

In early June, Eileen, our son, and our daughter-in-law were visiting Santa Fe. After a wonderful morning at the farmer's market, we spent a few memorable hours at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. On the wall was a quote that stopped me: "...you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower - and I don't." I knew, standing there, that listening needed to be a focal practice for this month of Elul.

We move through life assuming that others see the world through the same lens we do. They don't. And the deepest gift we can offer another person — especially someone in pain - is to set that assumption aside entirely. That is what I want to call silent listening: not listening in order to advise, solve, or set straight, but listening simply to accompany.

This is harder than it sounds, because our instinct, especially with the people we love most, is to fix. I'll be honest with you - I've made real progress in this practice, but the place I still struggle most is with those closest to me, where the pull toward problem-solving is strongest. The work of Elul, I think, is learning to ask: what does this person actually need from me right now - not what would make me feel useful, but what would be healing to them.

A friend of mine commuted regularly through New York Penn Station, and for years bought breakfast for a woman who was seemingly homeless. One morning he asked her, directly, what she needed. She was quiet for a moment, looked him in the eye, and said: "I need someone to talk to." So he stopped. They talked. And mostly, he listened — no advice, no solutions — and when it was over, he thanked her.

Our own tradition tells a version of this same lesson. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan goes to visit his friend Rabbi Eliezer, who is gravely ill and weeping. Yochanan tries every diagnosis he can think of - is it this, is it that - searching for the right question, the right fix. None of it lands. It is only when he finally stops asking and simply says, "Yes, you have every reason to weep," that the two of them weep together - and only then that Eliezer finds the strength to rise. Even our sages, it turns out, had to learn this the

hard way: healing didn't come from Yochanan's questions. It came from his presence.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls this "deep listening" - listening with the sole purpose of helping someone else's heart empty out, without trying to correct their perception or argue a better one, because that alone is enough to help a person suffer less.

Rachel Naomi Remen names what this kind of listening actually does: our listening creates a sanctuary for the parts of another person that have been unloved, denied, hidden - the parts nobody else has made room for. And Rabbi Jonathan Sacks identifies the obstacle plainly: too often we spend our listening time composing what we'll say next, instead of actually receiving what's being offered to us. Listening, he says, is one of the greatest gifts we can give someone - because it tells them we take them seriously, and that we accept, without argument, the gift of their words.

A practice for the week

As we move through this first week of Elul, I'd like to ask you to try this: the next time someone comes to you with a problem, a dilemma, a wall they've hit - resist, just once, the urge to solve it. Ask nothing. Offer nothing. Just listen, the way Rabbi Yochanan finally did, the way my friend did in Penn Station. See what happens.

This week's musical selections:

We begin again with **Ana b'Koach**, the mystical Kabbalat Shabbat prayer that asks us to empty ourselves of distraction in order to receive — along with the My Jewish Learning piece, "**Ana b'Koach: A Portal to Creation**," which explores its meaning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ5xNYP0HRY>

Ana b'Koach: A Portal to Creation | My Jewish Learning

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ana-bkoach-a-portal-to-creation/>

Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" - its melody is gentle, but its lyrics warn of conversation that never really connects.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av21FvTeScE>

And we close with **"If I Needed You,"** written by Townes Van Zandt, who said the song came to him whole in a fever dream and that he barely changed a word of it upon waking. The rendition we love, performed by **Lara Tupper and Bobby Sweet**, is one Eileen and I discovered near our country home in the Berkshires, where both are treasured local artists. The whole song rests on one quiet, vulnerable question — not "can you fix this," but "will you simply come." That, in the end, is what silent listening offers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLRXup0-Oc4>

Alan