

I Am Listening

I am listening to the fears; I am seeing the anger.

I am listening to the fears of our African-American brothers and sisters: police brutality; the disproportionate spread of the novel coronavirus among their community; structural racism so deep that most are not even conscious of it; and the income inequality they experience, along with the myriad side-effects that result.¹

I am listening to the voices of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd calling to us from the grave, and I am listening to the very-much-alive Reverend Dr. Deedee Coleman who, in a meeting this week with the Michigan Board of Rabbis, explained that the African-American community is suffering simultaneously both pandemic (Covid-19) and epidemic (racism). On top of it all, many can barely afford to put even a piece of meat on their children's plates.

I am listening to your fears, too, and I know that you too might be angry.

I am listening to the fears of so many among us, who worry that, as life begins to return to some normalcy, our neighbors' refusal to wear a mask (or inability to wear it correctly) or others' inability to respect physical distancing recommendations will sicken and kill us, our loved ones, or the vulnerable among us. I know that you are angry and that you wish everyone would just be smart and cautious.

I am listening to the fears of many among us who are suffering the economic impact of the shutdown: voicing concerns over an inability or potential inability to make payroll, to pay rent, or to put food on the table. I know that you are angry and ready to get back to work.

I am listening to the fears of the law enforcement community, many of whom understand the fears pervading our society and are trying, actively trying, to help – though there are bad apples seemingly spoiling the bunch. For so many reasons, you are afraid; I know that you, too, are angry.

I am listening to the voice of the President of the United States, and in his words and in his actions are fear and anger; many of the President's supporters feel similarly.

I am listening to the fears of those who heard the words and saw the actions of President Trump, whose calls for "law and order" and threats to send the military against American citizens sound like a death call for democracy and a major step toward totalitarianism. I know that you are afraid and that you are angry.

¹ https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-african-americans-a-painful-economic-reversal-of-fortune-11591176602?mod=hp_lead_pos11

I too am afraid, and sometimes, even for me, that manifests as anger. I am afraid for our African-American brothers and sisters; I am afraid for the shut-down to end and I am afraid for the shut-down to continue; I am afraid of the riots – some of which in other cities have vandalized synagogues – and I am afraid of a U.S. president who is speaking in and acting on fear and anger.

I am afraid too that Jews will become “too comfortable” with online services and thus not return to the building when it opens and, much more so, I am afraid of rushing a return to the building and thus putting at life-threatening risk our members – our friends and our family, so many of whom fall into the vulnerable categories even if they do not admit it.

I am afraid that High Holiday services will not look or feel the same this year – that they cannot look or feel the same this year – and that some will consider ending their membership with the CSZ family and perhaps, even worse, just stop practicing Judaism altogether.

But despite all the fears and the anger, I see a profound light in the darkness from the actions of our friends and our community. I see Jews and gentiles alike lifting up the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. I see Jews and gentiles practicing compassion, performing *cheshbon hanefesh* (searching one’s soul) to root out unintentional bias, and donating *tzedakah* to so many – including and especially to the Jewish community, to our synagogue, and to all those who are in need. Indeed, I see people listening and responding with love.

Despite all the fears and the anger, I am comforted by the rise of our CSZ “attendance” at daily, Shabbat and holiday prayer services. Though we are together online only, there are in fact more of us coming together. Congregation Shaarey Zedek is getting stronger by your efforts and by the efforts of our synagogue leadership. Our community transcends our building.

And despite all the fears and all the anger, I am reassured by our faith. “When you call Me, and come and pray to Me, I will listen to you” God tells us (Jeremiah 29:12-13). “You will search for Me and find Me, if only you seek Me wholeheartedly.” God is listening, so long as our prayers are accompanied by actions.

What does it mean to seek God “wholeheartedly”? What actions is God asking of us? “Learn to do good,” God tells us (Isaiah 1:17). “Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow.”

When we don’t listen to God – when we are unrighteous and practice injustice as is happening right now, then I think that God is probably pretty angry too. So, together, let us try to listen a little harder to others. Let us try to reduce some of our own anger. And let us partner together to strengthen Jews and Judaism by learning to do good, by devoting ourselves to justice, by aiding the wronged, by upholding the rights of the orphan, and by defending the cause of the widow. Let us partner together, too, by deepening our commitment to Congregation Shaarey Zedek in

good times and in challenging times: through prayer, through learning, through friendship, and through performing acts of loving-kindness.

I am listening to your fears; I know that you are angry. But I am here for you. Your Shaarey Zedek family is here for you. And God is here for you too.

Every person has a story; every person needs to be heard. Just as twice each day we echo God's command *Shema Yisrael* – LISTEN, O Israel – and three times each day we pray *Shema Koleinu* – Listen to our voices, God! – so too let us work harder: at first just to listen, then to act and to change.

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you and our whole country, truly, *Shabbat shalom*: a Sabbath of inner peace, and a Sabbath of peace all around.

Rabbi Aaron Starr
June 4, 2020