This week we saw a brave preacher speak truth to power. Bishop Mariann Budde, of the Episcopal church's Washington DC diocese gave the sermon during Trump's inaugural rituals and took the opportunity, as is tradition in these sermons, to speak directly to the newly inaugurated president.

Bishop Budde asked Donald Trump to "have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." She pointed out: "There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and Independent families, some who fear for their lives." Budde addressed the issue of undocumented workers and immigrants. She implored, "I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away."

It probably comes as no shock to learn that Trump did not take kindly to such admonition and pleas. In fact, he lashed out at the bishop with name-calling, personal attacks and calling for her to be removed from her post. Budde told TIME Magazine that she has "heard from many people who are grateful that someone was willing to speak on their behalf" as well as those who have said they do wish her dead, and, she says, "that's a little heartbreaking."

I'd say it's a lot heartbreaking.

What strikes me as truly heartbreaking is that we seem to have lost the ability to listen—to really take something in.

It's important to recognize that hearing and listening are two different things. According to the Cambridge English dictionary, 'Hearing' is an event; it is something

which happens to us as a natural process. ‘Listening’ is an action; it is something we do consciously.”

Some examples:

Hearing is an event: *Suddenly I **heard** a noise. Someone was in the garden. Did you **hear** the thunder last night? The connection is very bad. I can’t **hear** you.*

*Listening is an action: I **listened** very carefully **to** what she said and wrote it all down. Do you **listen to** podcasts in the car? George! **Listen to** me! I have something important to tell you.*

In learning counselling skills, I was taught about active listening (not active hearing, by the way. That’s an oxymoron.) What is active listening? It’s a technique whereby one person makes a statement, and the other person repeats it back in a way that shows the speaker that their message was received. In pre-marital counselling in particular, this is an exercise that I do with couples. Because conflicts often result in people not communicating effectively, we practice these skills so they can be used in the moment.

We teach people to express their feelings with “I” statements rather than “you” statements, putting the focus on how a situation makes me feel, rather than accusing someone and blaming them for whatever it is. It works. Try it, if you don’t already do this. It allows the conversation to focus on feelings and if you’re speaking

with a caring partner, they will want to address your feelings and get to a better place together.

Ideally this is what we do in all our relationships. Sadly, the receiver of the message often doesn't grasp the message the way we intend it, or their own stuff is in the way of them truly taking it to heart. And I think this is the difference between hearing and listening. Hearing—we detect the sound, we know there is noise. Listening—we heed the words, we consider them, take them to heart.

This is what makes "speaking truth to power" so difficult. Often "power" doesn't want to or cannot listen.

We see this dilemma play out in our Torah portion. As Moses confronts Power, the Pharaoh, with each plague, one by one, Pharaoh doesn't seem to be able to hear the message, let alone listen to it.

When Aaron and Moses approach Pharaoh asking for their people's freedom, Pharaoh, of course, is not acquiescing. As you well know. When they attempt to impress upon Pharaoh the might of our God, Aaron throws down his rod and it turns into a serpent. The Pharaoh's magicians do the same thing. Even though Aaron's serpent then eats the magicians' serpents, the text tells us, "Yet Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them." (Ex. 7:13) לֹ֣א שָׁמַ֣ע אֲלֵהֶ֔ם More precisely, he did not listen to/shama them.

So too after the plagues of blood, frogs, and of lice, we read, "Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them." (7:22, 8:11, 8:15)

The Hebrew in both cases is the same: לֹ֣א שָׁמַ֣ע אֲלֵהֶ֔ם

The Pharaoh did not listen to them.

The Hebrew word is “shama”—the same one as we say morning and evening as in Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad. Which we usually translate as “hear O Israel.” More precisely, we should say, “Listen, Israel…” because what follows are actions that Israel is then commanded to take. The Reconstructionist prayer book, Kol HaNeshamah, translates it this way.

The question we must ask is whether Pharaoh would have been capable of listening to the pleas of Moses and Aaron under any circumstances. I think the answer must be “no.” We see that from the outset—even before the first plague of Blood, Pharaoh hardens his heart such that he could not listen. For each of the first five plagues, the Pharaoh hardens his own heart. After that, Pharaoh has established a pattern of not listening. It is now an impossibility.

This was expected and the drama of the ten plagues seems to play out in a way that eventually convinces Pharaoh of our God’s power, at least for a moment. But that is really a red herring.

The people that Moses is trying to convince of God’s power are not Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but the Israelites.

Recall just a couple of chapters earlier at the beginning of our parshah, Moses tries to bring God’s message of their imminent freedom to the Israelites, but they can’t take in what he is saying. The Torah reads: “But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.” (6:9)

Then God tries to get Moses to speak to the Pharaoh, but he demurs saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמָעֵנִי פַרְעֹה.” (6:12) It’s a rhetorical question, of course, but God takes it up as a challenge.

The Pharaoh then becomes a tool in God’s grand plan to convince the Israelites and make them listen to Moses, and so too to convince Moses that he is capable of leading this people. This show of magic and might is not for the Pharaoh—he has hardened his heart such that it is impossible to convince him of anything. It’s the people that need to be convinced. They are crushed. But seeing the possibility of redemption just might open their eyes and cause them to trust Moses, the emissary of this powerful, mighty God who seems to be going to great lengths to save them.

This plan works. The Israelites are convinced and follow Moses, and Aaron. Miriam leads them in a celebratory dance in which they declare, “Mi Chamocha ba’eilim Adonai?” “Who is like you, Adonai?” And in the midst of their song they acknowledge that not only have they been convinced of God’s power, but other nations have as well, “ שָׁמְעוּ עַמִּים יִרְגָּזוּן The peoples listen, they tremble.” (15:14)

Bishop Budde knew this. She knew that the president would not listen to her admonitions. It would have been nice, but I don’t think she was holding her breath. She said what she said not for him alone, but more importantly, for everyone else to hear. She wanted to remind people of certain values that she gets from her tradition--that people must treat each other with mercy and compassion; that we are all children of God who are worthy of care and dignity.

And that is what we must do as well when we stand up and attempt to speak truth to power. The powerful ones may not hear us, or even be capable of listening. But all the others who hear our values-based messages of goodness, hope, cooperation, equality, and justice may have the ability to listen. And that is more important. Because if the people forget the values that ought to be guiding us—that come from our religious traditions—then our society will have lost its soul.

If we stop speaking words of Torah—which I believe are supportive of the stranger, the widow and the orphan, and which uphold the values of justice and goodness—if we stop speaking these words because we don't think the powerful are listening, they die. Our tradition dies. If we refrain from speaking our truths, they cease to be.

Because we're not speaking those words for the powerful people to hear. We're speaking those words for all of us little people to hear. The ones who need to choose righteous leaders, and who need to uphold those values in our everyday lives. That is how redemption and freedom come. When we choose to hear the voice of our tradition and to listen to it and act on its commandments and the values it espouses. We keep it alive.

May we continue to speak truth to the powerful, even when they're not listening, because the power is with the people, and the people carry the traditions and the values that are worth listening to.

Kein y'hi ratzon.

Rabbi Erin Polansky

January 25, 2025