

Message for *Parashat Va-etchanan*

Friday, 18 Aug 2016. *Tzimtzum*.

During the ceremony separating Shabbat from the rest of the week, we say a blessing over wine, one over spices and one over the flames of a candle. One interpretation teaches that all our senses must be engaged in experiencing Shabbat. Truth be told, Judaism celebrates all our senses. When it comes to experiencing God, however, Judaism stands out as a religion that rejects “seeing” as the main source our experiences of the Divine. Many ancient religions emphasized that their gods were the best looking or that they performed the best miracles. In Ancient Greek religion, for instance, the great looks of Apollo or Aphrodite made them who they were. We can still see it in the sculpture which survived from the ancient world. But, what about the God of Israel? Was He good looking, with good muscle tone? In the Ten Commandments, which are found in this week’s Torah portion, *Va’etchanan*, we read:

“You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth.” (Deut. 5:8).

This and many other verses in the Torah make it clear that we should not have any depictions of God at all. It is clear: We are not a people who worship images or representations of God. Yet, that only tells us who we are NOT. I wonder, what kind of religion is Judaism?

What is the main sense that allows us to access our experience of God?

Think for a moment: Is there a prayer that puts the sense of hearing above all other senses? [WAIT]. YES, you guessed it right, it is the *Sh'ma*, which also appears in this week's Torah portion. As a matter of fact, in *Va'etchanan*, there is a cluster of instructions to the Jewish people asking us to "listen."

This is how I see it: As Moses recapitulates the events at Mt. Sinai, he reminds the people that images are a "no, no," and, at the same time, that listening to God's words is central. Please, do not think for a moment that we are excluding the deaf—they are also part of the "listening." The core idea of Judaism is that God reaches us through the means of speech in contrast to other traditions that value apparitions and images as their main way of experiencing the Divine. In other words, since speech is uniquely human, then Judaism is a tradition that stresses our humanity the most.

The late Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel teaches:

"Jewish prayer is an act of listening. We do not bring forth our own words. The self is silent; the spirit of the people of Israel speaks. In prayer, we listen to what the words convey."

Heschel's idea is hard to grasp because despite our contemporary innovations, we still follow the received order of prayers. Most of the text of our prayers has not changed much in the past 1,500 years—although we have shortened many. I would take a step further and suggest that all the beautiful new poems and readings that we have in our *siddur*, are also part of that

tradition. In other for those prayers to speak to us, we need to be open to hearing them, and listen carefully to them.

Sometimes we need to practice what the mystics call *tzimtzum*, “contraction.” The idea is that right before the moment of creation, God had to “make room,” so to speak, for creation to come into existence. It did not diminish God, it just made possible for creation to happen.

In this same way, when we pray we have to “contract” our self-expression. Jewish prayer is an invitation to make room for the words, old and new, that we have received and to LISTEN. It is not that I want you only to LISTEN, and not sing or participate. I invite you to be channels for our tradition.

And what is true about the ongoing conversation between God and the Jewish people, it is also true about so many of our interactions. It is human nature to resist *tzimtzum*, to shy away from expressing what we think we should say or do. How many times have we been in a situation when it felt that we could not get one word in? How many times have we “monopolized” a conversation? It is at those moments that we must remember to practice *tzimtzum*, and make room for others and hear their holy words. We can all use a little *tzimtzum*, trust me.

On this Shabbat, when we hear the *Sh'ma* read in its context, let us open our eyes and HEAR the words of the Torah. God, help us to make room in our lives to for the act of listening to that the words of our prayers and indeed of our lives will bring us closer to You and to one another.