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This summer, I met Peter, Brianna, and Mark, three patients at New York-Presbyterian Hospital where I completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, a national program that trains clergy and lay people to become Chaplains. Peter is a middle-aged non-practicing Catholic man who still has an active prayer life and a strong relationship with God. The first time I met Peter, he had requested to see the chaplain-on-call since it was late in the evening. I responded and found Peter in a state of deep sorrow and fear. I sat with him as he shared about the pain of his treatment, about his tense relationship with his wife, and about his doubts about his will to live. He also shared about his deep sense of faith-- about all of the ways in which he felt like God had been with him in trying times. He cried softly as I said a prayer and I left him to rest.

Brianna is 23-year-old Christian woman with several developmental disabilities. Due to a complicated family situation, Brianna stayed in the hospital for two months, simply because no biological or legal guardians would take responsibility for her. Brianna was one of the first patients that I met over the summer, and I quickly developed a relationship with her. With all of the chaos in her family and her hospital course, I was a constant in Brianna's life--when I came to visit, I didn't require anything of her-- there was no poking or prodding, no questioning or demanding. She remembered me as the person who brought her a Bible on her first day in the hospital. When I came to visit, she would share how she was feeling and then we would read some Bible passages and pray together. When she was feeling well, we would go for a walk around the unit and she would show off her progress. She always asked when I would be back, when she would be able to see me again.

Mark is an older Reform Jewish man. He was the only patient this summer who specifically requested a visit from a Reform Rabbi Chaplain, since he so admires his own Reform Rabbi. Mark was in quite a good mood when I arrived to his room, a welcome change from many of my other patient visits. Mark just wanted someone who 'spoke his language' so to speak, to share his time. He talked about his family, his synagogue, and his love of New York City. Because of his general sense of cheer, I was surprised to see tears roll down his cheeks as I said the Mi Shebeirach prayer for healing. I asked him what the prayer brought up for him, and he said that it was the Hebrew itself that he heard in a new way.

Peter, Brianna, and Mark are just three of the many people I encountered this summer at the hospital. Each of them has clearly left a significant impression on me in different ways. But what the collective of my patients demonstrated to me was that each person-- regardless of age, religion, race, socio-economic status- *everyone* just wants to be heard, to feel known. Peter wanted someone to see how much he struggled, Brianna wanted someone to really listen to her emotions and her view of her life, and Mark wanted someone to affirm his pride in his community and his faith. While I experienced this deep human need within the walls of a hospital, this desire to be seen and heard exists within all of us.

Our texts and rituals speak to this very condition. In our Creation narrative, just after God forms man, God says לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבָדוֹ lo tov he'yot ha'adam l'vado, "it is not good for

man to be alone.”¹ God created wild beasts and birds and brought each one to Man to name. But even the power to name did not bring Man close enough to any being, so God created Woman. The need for human connection, for partnership, for someone to lean on is not a sign of weakness-- it is a sign of divinity, of our original Creation.

Our people has expressed this longing for generations through the ritual of sounding the shofar. Over time, various meanings have been ascribed to each of the different sounds of the shofar blasts. **Tekiyah**, a single blast, is a call to gather-- it announces the birthday of the world, our celebration of Creation. **Shevarim**, the three blasts together, are compared to sobbing or wailing. These blasts are said to echo Sarah’s wailing upon hearing about the Akeidah, the Binding of her son, Isaac-- it is the ancient sound of despair, longing, and yearning. **T’ruah**, the nine short blasts, serve as a sort of alarm clock, waking us up to our own spiritual lives and the life of the community. **Tekiah Gedolah**, the single long blast, is meant to lift us up and leave us with a feeling of hope.

Together, the shofar service models for us what it means to be in relationship with another-- we are called together, we express ourselves freely, we pay attention, and we lift each other up. But those moments of Shevarim, of brokenness, are crucial to this cycle. If we are not heard and noticed in our lowest moments, we cannot be our most authentic selves.

לֹא טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ lo tov he’yot ha’adam l’vado “it is not good for a person to be alone”-- so how can we meet people where they’re at and help make them feel known?

Dr. Rita Charon, founder of the program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, believes that listening, like reading, is a skill that must be taught. She writes:

“We propose that teaching people how to read seriously and carefully allows them not only to make intimate and individualized contact with written texts but also endows them otherwise very difficult-to-develop gifts in what is increasingly being called ‘radical listening,’ a form of listening that occurs when the listener can abandon his or her preconceived assumptions and can clear the mind of implicit biases and the need to defend held positions. The radical listener can move beyond empathy toward a risky state of active witnessing of another’s world view, however it might challenge or conflict with his or her own. When this occurs, radical change can take place—whether in private life, government, education, law, health care, or the corporate world.”²

What Dr. Sharon highlights in her discussion of radical listening is the notion of listening to understand, rather than listening to respond. It is not just hearing words, but listening for what’s behind the words-- it is actively listening for the sake of the other person, not for your own sake-- and it is leaving room for reflection and silence.

A scene that perhaps best illustrates this pastoral listening comes from the Disney Pixar movie ‘Inside Out,’ in which emotions of a young girl named Riley are embodied as individual characters. The characters of Sadness and Joy get stuck in the memory void, where they meet

¹ Genesis 2:18

² Rita Charon, MD PhD, “How Reading Matters in the World: From Enactive Reading to Radical Listening”

Riley's old imaginary friend Bing Bong. When Bing Bong gets upset about losing a toy, Joy immediately tries to cheer him up and get him to move past his feelings. But that doesn't work. So Sadness sits down next to him. She affirms his feelings and gives him space to share more. He talks, they hug, and he gathers himself to keep going. 'How did you do that?' asks Joy, shocked that Sadness was helpful. 'I listened' Sadness responded.

There's another element at play here that perhaps comes before this type of active listening--and that is the element of presence. Just sitting with someone without distractions, holding the space for them to feel whatever they're feeling, without judgement--this can mean the world to someone.

There's a teaching that I learned from Rabbi Larry Hoffman based on the traditional laws of visiting the sick. When you visit someone who is ill, the teaching says, you should sit in a chair by the foot of their bed. Part of this is for logistical reasons-- by sitting, you demonstrate that you're really interested in being there, that you're committed. But there is a larger theological purpose to this set-up. When someone is sick or in a dark place, they cannot sense or see the Divine Presence, because the Divine presence dwells just outside of their peripheral vision, to the side of their head. The role of the visitor, then, by sitting in front of the sick person, is to serve as a mirror-- the Divine Presence shines onto the visitor, who reflects it back to the person in need.

That is the purpose of presence-- to help someone uncover the Divine, to remind them that they are not alone, to make them feel known. Sometimes words can get in our way, or we're worried about saying the wrong thing, but creating space for someone to feel what they feel can be just as powerful as words.

Over the next several days, we bare our souls to the Eternal. We cry out to God, 'shema kolineu,' 'hear our voice;' 'zochreinu Adonai,' 'remember us;' 'aneinu Adonai,' 'answer us.' We beseech God to notice us, to hear us. 'Ya'aleh v'yavo v'yagia,' 'May a memory of us ascend and come before You. May it be heard and seen by You.' We express these innately human longings to God, but God knows that we need each other too. לֹא טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ lo tov he'yot ha'adam l'vado "it is not good for a person to be alone."

Like Peter, Brianna, and Mark, we all have moments where we need someone else to listen, to hold space for us, to make us feel known. Sometimes we lose our way and need another person to remind us of the Divinity of our experiences and the Divinity within us. Throughout these Days of Awe and the year to come, may this physical space make room for all of us to become reacquainted with our own true selves. May we each have the experience of feeling heard and of hearing others. And may this be a joyous and sweet new year.

Shanah tovah!