

Rosh Hashana Morning 5777/2016
L'kabel / to receive
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Last night the theme was listening — shema. Listening is a particular form of receiving, which is what we are going to explore today. In order to “receive”, something must be “given”. With no “receivers” giving doesn’t happen. With no “givers” nothing can be received. Giving and receiving are therefore inextricably linked, existentially interdependent. Still our culture seems to put a higher value on giving. Let’s try something: Think of a quote, adage or aphorism extolling the virtues of “giving”. [ask for them]. Now do the same for “receiving”. We are raised on messages like this one from Paul, that wayward Jewish boy, “To give is greater than to receive” (Acts 20:35), or this message from Winston Churchill, “we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give; or these wise words from young Ann Frank, “no-one ever became poor by giving”. Albert Einstein: “The value of a man resides in what he gives and not in what he is capable of receiving.” Pablo Picasso: "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." John D. Rockefeller Jr.: "Think of giving not as a duty but as a privilege." The point is, giving is constantly held up as an important value and an action we should strive to embrace and make a part of our daily lives.

Not so much receiving. How many adages, quote etc extolling the virtues of receiving can you come up with.

There are two other semi dubious aspects about giving that I think are worth mentioning. First, most of us derive a degree of what I call a feel-good-energy when we are able to give and help someone. There is nothing wrong with this. But we have to realize that this is like a sugar rush. It doesn’t last. It’s unsustainable, and let’s face it, it’s also a little bit selfish. I give because I get a rush from it! Finally, in many situations there is also a power imbalance favoring the giver over the receiver. This is very obvious when the giver is clearly helping the receiver. Giving is the power position.

How many of you have a hard time asking for something that you need or want? Okay, so you get my point, on multiple levels we value giving over receiving.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not down on giving. **סָוֵן וְשָׁלוֹם**. God forbid! After all, CSH's ability to function depends heavily on people like you giving so generously year after year. No, giving is beautiful and it is essential for a healthy ecosystem. So I'm all for cultivating a giving mindset. To paraphrase one of our presidential candidates, "trust me, believe me, nobody loves giving more than me. Giving is tremendous, truly tremendous". But.....without a recipient, a receiver, giving is nothing. They are the opposite sides of the same coin. Giving exists only in relationship with receiving. Giving and receiving are existentially linked: one does not exist without the other. A Howard Ko-an: if a giver gives and there is no receiver can she say she gave?! Ergo, as important and valued as is giving, so too is receiving, although it doesn't get near the praise and admiration that it deserves, in my opinion, it is a lot harder to receive than it is to give. When was the last time someone sent you a thank you note for making them feel important, useful, powerful, good because you received what they offered? Ever see a plaque honoring big receivers? No, me neither.

So let me summarize: Essential to the vitality of any ecosystem there must be both givers AND receivers.

Now let's get into exploring "receiving". The Hebrew word to receive is **lekabal**. I'm sure almost everyone here will recognize this word in a slightly different form: **kabbalah**. This is what Jewish mysticism is called. It literally means receive. Jewish mysticism is received wisdom, with the emphasis on received. Although we emphasize the importance of giving within Judaism -- teaching about and doing **tzedakah** (giving charity) is certainly one of our noblest mitzvot -- our deepest wisdom is called receiving.

The ability to receive is a life skill we do not spend enough time developing. What does it take to be a good receiver? No, not sticky hands and good eye hand coordination. What does it mean to be a receiver of what someone or even what life has to offer? It means you are fully present physically, emotionally and perhaps even spiritually. Sometimes just being there to receive what is offered is ironically the greatest gift you can give someone at the moment. Forgive me if I told you this story before. During the prison chaplaincy chapter of my life I was called to the cell of a fellow. He was upset about something and needed to talk. English wasn't his first language. Actually, I'm not even sure he spoke to me in English. For about twenty minutes I leaned in toward the small opening in his cell door and listened to him talk in hushed tones. God's honest truth, the only words he said that I could hear and understand came at the end of the conversation when he lifted his head up, looked at me and with tears in his eyes said: "Thank you". I was present and received what he wanted/needed to say. It didn't matter that I couldn't understand him. What he needed was someone to be fully present who would receive what was in his heart that needed to be shared.

Sometimes to be a receiver you need to do tzimtzum. This is a term from Kabbalah. It means to make space within in order to receive. Tzimtzum almost always requires a modicum of humility on our part. We have to think of ourselves as less complete, less whole. Our model for this is no less than God. According to kabbalistic tradition God did tzimtzum in order to make space within the perfectness that was God so that there was space for our imperfect universe.

Paradoxically, along with humility we need to believe we are deserving of what is given to us. Think about how difficult it is for so many of us to receive a gift. "Oh, you shouldn't have". "You're too kind". "You're embarrassing me". For many of us it is even harder to receive a compliment or a kind word. Gevalt, tell me it doesn't make you squirm when someone is complimenting you! It is crazy, but for some reason so many of us just don't know how receive.

The consequences of this are not insignificant. We cannot experience true fulfillment in our lives if we are not prepared to receive from the world around us. We miss out on many of the infinite number of wondrous little happenings around us because we are not open to receiving their gifts. Perhaps even more serious than what we deprive ourselves of, we deprive the givers in our lives the opportunity to experience the rush of being a giver.

So here is what we're going to do now. First, just listen (shema) and receive (l'kabel) to all of the instructions. I am going to ask everyone to stand up and move about. As you are moving around make eye contact with someone. Approach that person then one of you give the other person a compliment then walk away and find another person to either give a compliment to or receive one from. Receivers say nothing. Just receive the compliments in silence. After you have received and given three compliments return to your seat.

Conclusion: To be able to receive is our path to fulfillment. As we move toward a greater sense of fulfillment so too grows our sense of gratitude. This is the principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity creates an interdependent environment. This interdependency allows us to not only fill a greater sense of fulfillment but it also makes us more efficient. It also creates a holy sense of responsibility for one another. One of the benefits of this is an increased sense of peace and wholeness. This leads me to another familiar Hebrew word: Shalom.

Everyone knows this means peace, hello and good bye. But the root meaning of shalom is complete or wholeness. This is not just an abstract ideal. It entails a sense of future obligation that makes it possible to build continuing relationships and exchanges. This is the basis of peace. When we participate in the process of sharing and receiving - reciprocity - we are creating, wholeness and peace, shalom.

The kabbalist gave us a beautiful image for this process. They imagined that God created above us a great vessel filled with a divine substance called shefa, translated

as divine abundance. Shefa flows freely from the heavens above through invisible pipes called tznurim into all of life in the lower worlds.

However, such is the nature of pipes they can become clogged. What keeps them unclogged and the shefa flowing, according to the kabbalist mythology, is when we express gratitude for this gift we receive. To them there were two ways to express this gratitude. One was in how we manifested this gift of holy abundance in our lives and the other is liturgical, by saying amen. In effect, saying thank you. They went further and said that it was this saying of amen that figuratively ascended back up through the tznurim, the pipes, and like a pipe cleaner cleared away the detrius sticking to the sides that potentially restricted the flow of shefa, divine abundance, into the lower words. Theologically speaking, this means our willingness to receive divine abundance, l'kabel shefa, was a reciprocial relationship between us and God.

Psychologically, what this metaphor teaches us is that we have the power to increase the sense of goodness leading to personal fulfillment when we are fully engaged in reciprocal relationships in which we express gratitude for the blessings in our lives. and embrace our shared responsibilities and obligations with others. The net result is shalom.

Amen v'amen.

