

Tell Me More

Listening Well in a World Full of Noise

We admire good speakers. We hand them podiums and applause, and we quietly associate the ability to speak well with intelligence, confidence, even leadership. We do not extend the same admiration to good listeners. No one leaves a dinner announcing, "You should have seen how she listened." Why does one half of every conversation get all the credit?

Listening is acknowledged as important, but it is treated as an innate soft skill rather than something that can actually be studied and developed. Schools teach students to debate, present, and persuade, but almost never teach them how to listen. Communication training in healthcare and leadership tends to focus far more on how to speak than on how to listen.

Listening in Judaism

Judaism sends a different message. On Rosh Hashanah, when we crown Hashem as King and ask to be inscribed for life, the central mitzvah actually revolves around listening. One might assume the real religious act is blowing the shofar. The Rambam points in the opposite direction: "It is a positive commandment of the Torah to hear the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah" (*Hilchot Shofar* 1:1). The mitzvah is defined not as producing the sound, but as receiving it.

But why would the Torah frame its central mitzvah so passively, commanding us merely to hear rather than to act? Receiving the sound, it turns out, is not passive at all. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes the mitzvah as having, in addition to its auditory component, a "*kiyum shebalev*," a fulfillment within the heart requiring a subjective emotional response. The



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more deeply a person understands the meaning of the shofar and is affected by its majesty and awe, the greater is the fulfillment of the mitzvah.

Shema Yisrael, the statement that unites us as Jews and is so fundamental to who we are, also calls on us to listen: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, ה' אֶלֶּהינוּ, ה' אֶחָד, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that the verb שמע (shin-mem-ayin) can mean to hear, pay attention, understand, internalize, and respond. The midrash teaches that saying Shema is really

accepting *ol malchut shamayim*, the yoke of Heaven. When we say it, we are internalizing the messages and values of Judaism and accepting Hashem as our King.

Clearly, listening is actually quite important.

Why Listening Matters

Picture describing something hard to a friend, such as a health scare, a fight with a sibling, a rough week. She says, "I hear you," gently, and the conversation moves on. Nothing was done wrong. But you leave feeling strangely more alone than before you spoke, because whatever you were feeling had nowhere to go. It was acknowledged and set aside.

This holds equally when the news is good. Research on what psychologists call capitalization has found that sharing good news benefits both people most when the listener responds with real enthusiasm and follow-up questions, not simply a polite "that's great" (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). A flat response to good news can leave someone feeling nearly as unheard as a flat response to bad news.

High-quality listening changes both people in a conversation, not only one. The speaker feels understood and less alone. The listener gains access to an experience beyond her own, and often becomes more willing to reconsider what she thought she knew. The philosopher Martin Buber had a name for this: meeting someone as an "I-Thou," a full person encountered directly, rather than an "I-It," a problem to manage. Something gets created that did not exist a moment before, and neither one leaves quite the way they arrived.

The effect is stronger than people expect. In a 2026 study of more than 1,600 people, those who felt they were listened to well during a disagreement reported greater well-being than those merely agreed with but listened to only moderately (Saluk, Itzchakov, Weinstein, & Amar, 2026). Agreement signals that you think alike; being truly listened to signals something stronger: that even when you don't agree, the other person still matters enough for your full attention. Separate research found that people who disclosed painful experiences of social rejection felt less lonely afterward when they were listened to well (Itzchakov, Weinstein, Saluk, & Amar, 2023). In today's world, one might expect listening to come more easily than ever, given how much we communicate. In fact, it has become harder. The pace of daily life and its endless distractions work against listening well. Between the constant updates and notifications on our phones and watches, and the many demands on our attention, real listening has to compete for space that used to come naturally.

How to Listen Well

There is now a substantial body of research on listening. One influential study defines high-quality listening as resting on three components: attention, comprehension, and positive intention (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). What does each of these mean, and how can they be put into practice?

Attention means being fully present with the person in front of you, not merely occupying the same room while your mind is elsewhere. It is also the prerequisite for everything else: comprehension and positive intention are impossible without it. Attention competes with everything else pulling

at us: deadlines, notifications, the reply we're already rehearsing. There are some simple ways to improve our attention in this busy world: check whether this is a good time to listen; choose a setting where you can actually hear each other; notice when the mind starts to drift and pull it back; decide, on purpose, that this conversation is the priority; and put the phone somewhere it can't compete.

Divided attention is nothing new, and it isn't always obvious, even to the person whose mind has wandered. The Mishnah makes a related point: someone walking behind a shul who happens to hear the shofar has fulfilled the mitzvah only if his heart was directed toward it in that passing moment (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 3:7). To fulfill the mitzvah of shofar, one has to be paying attention and have the right intention at the same time.

That combination carries over to real conversations too. Attention only clears the space. Whether real feelings are invited in and accepted once that space exists depends on two further dimensions: comprehension and positive intention.

Comprehension and Positive Intention

Comprehension means understanding what an experience meant to the person living it, not just knowing the facts themselves. One way to learn more is to ask questions, and open-ended questions work better than closed ones: "What was the hardest part?" tends to open more than "What happened?" does. Small encouraging responses, like "Go on" or "Tell me more," signal there is still room to continue, while a quick reassurance can close a conversation before the speaker feels understood. Reflecting back what we think we heard

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helps too: "It sounds like what hurts most wasn't what she said, but that no one else spoke up. Is that right?" This draws feeling to the surface and often helps the speaker find clarity she hadn't fully articulated herself.

Positive intention refers to the listener's underlying motive: are we listening in order to understand, or simply waiting for an opening to judge, correct, fix, or win? At its best, positive intention is the intention to help, to support, and to witness whatever the speaker is bringing, good or bad, without rushing to change it.

When the conversation involves a disagreement, staying in the moment and listening becomes hardest. It's easy to feel defensive when someone criticizes or challenges us, but defensiveness crowds out actual listening. The first step is noticing this defensiveness and taking a moment to process that feeling. If we are able to, asking a follow-up question or addressing the feeling directly, with a statement such as "I understand why you see it that way, even though I don't agree" can help reduce defensiveness. Intent matters more than technique. Often, we hold back from really listening because we assume that once someone shares a problem, we owe them a solution, and without one, listening feels useless. It isn't. What actually helps is usually not a fix but showing genuine care and bearing witness to the person's experience. Ask one or two honest follow-up questions

and invite the speaker to express themselves. For example, saying "I hear you" can create an opening for further exploration: Tell me more. What was that like for you? What feels most important about this to you? (Kasriel, 2025, pp. 294–295)

Listening to the Cry of the Shofar

The mitzvah of shofar stands out in one more way. Not only is listening the focus; rather than speaking; no words are even uttered at all. The Sefat Emet, citing the *Zohar*, writes that *yesh ze'aka balev*, "there is a cry in the heart," one that can pierce the heavens precisely because it was never put into words. Some of our hopes for the coming year can be spoken plainly. Others are embedded too deeply in the soul for words. The shofar exists for exactly those.

The shofar asks something not only of the listener. Even the one blowing it must, at the same moment, be listening: the halacha requires his own intention as a hearer, not only his intention to produce the sound (*Hilchot Shofar* 2:4). We listen to the shofar. And when its sound reaches the heart, when it stirs a wish to do better, a look back at the past year, a hope for the next one, Hashem is there too, listening to the cry underneath it. Who, exactly, is listening to whom? Perhaps, this time of year, the answer is both at once. Perhaps this is what Elul points to each year. It is

the acronym of *אני לדודי ודודי לי*, I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me (Shir HaShirim 6:3), a relationship that moves in both directions at once.

Just as listening creates this kind of relationship with Hashem, it can create the same with the people in our lives. This year, when someone trusts us with something real, "I hear you" can become not the end of the conversation, but its opening, and we may find that we are not the only one who leaves the exchange changed.

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