I appreciate and affirm the sacred gifts and balance as found in Orthodox Judaism. I appreciate the absolute commitment to Torah and *halakhah* which helps us to resist incorporating harmful ideas, which may be compared to dangerous rooms. I am envious, however, that others are willing to consider new styles of houses while we *generally* resist incorporating even elements of the new thinking in architecture. ◆

Sacred hearing, sacred learning

Rachel T. Sabath

"Incline Your ear toward me, and hear my words;" *"Hat oznekha li; sh'ma imrati"*(*Psalms* 17:6) When we utter these words in the High Holiday liturgy, we pray that God will hear us and be affected. We each utter our own words, *imrati,* praying that they will reach and have an impact on the One Who Hears.

God, the One Who Hears, is the Supreme Listener. If we see ourselves as having been created in the image of God, *b'tzelem elohim,* and we seek to emulate God, then we, too, must seek to be ones who hear, supreme listeners. To incline our ears means becoming ones who listen with increasing sensitivity and hear with greater understanding the complexity of the Other. This Divine-human listening is the fine-tuning which has given strength to and developed our covenant, our relationship with God.

Harmonizing Voices

God's voice, however we understand it, heard at Sinai and until today, is not the only voice we hear. Into our dialogue with God, modernity has insisted that we add other voices. Modern Jewish thinkers, prioritizing the ethical, insist that our theology must include the voices of the "other" and the self. Martin Buber, the great Jewish thinker who focused on the impact of interpersonal encounters, taught that if we truly listen we are affected; we are changed by what we hear. This kind of transformative sacred listening demands an ongoing act of inclining the ear: *hat oznekha.* Hearing means listening to a multiplicity of voices including God's voice (as we understand it through the tradition), the human voices of others (Jewish and non-Jewish alike), as well as voice of the self. Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, perhaps the most important theologian of Liberal Judaism, frames this listening as a process which incorporates hearing God, the Jewish people—past, present and future, as well as all of humanity together with the situated Jewish self.

Liberal Judaism has thus sought to strengthen the Covenant by listening. Our Liberal Jewish theology, our ideology, and our practice are, for now, the imperfect result of this multi-voiced conversation between God, Israel, and the self. Liberal Judaism is an attempt to hear God's commanding voice as it was interpreted at Sinai and by the rabbis while simultaneously listening to how it sounds today, in the context of modernity and with our understanding of the human self and its ethical demands. This is the unique contribution of Liberal Judaism: the affirmation of and the demand for sacred listening to other voices as necessary for maintaining our renewed and evolving covenant with God. Sacred hearing, however, should also lead to sacred learning and growing.

Responding To The Voices

From this demand for sacred listening emerge many questions: How do we incline our ear toward others who incline their ears toward God yet hear different demands? To what degree are we and can we be affected by their voices?

To hear a multiplicity of voices allows for a cacophony that can deafen and result in entrenchment both ideologically and spiritually. Yet to incline one's ear in a biblical, Buberian and Borowitzian sense, means hearing the tradition and the person situated in the moment speaking so loudly that we must necessarily respond to their calls. For me, this kind of sacred listening incorporates hearing the commanding voice of *halakhah* and the voices of the most ethical in the Orthodox community. While I affirm the value of autonomous choices, I also surrender myself to the decisive impact of *halakhah.* Practically, this has meant observing Shabbat according to *halakhah* and *kashrut* in ways which can at times separate me from large parts of the Reform Jewish community, but also allow me to be part of a transformation.

Hearing the voices of Israel, past, present and future has, perhaps paradoxically, meant confirming that as a rabbi I cannot officiate at intermarriages while I can affirm the potential sacred nature of a same-sex union. Hearing the voices of the Jewish self in the context of modernity and in covenant with God means that while I uphold aspects of traditional roles for men and women, hearing the commanding voice of ethics demands egalitarianism, equal roles for men and women throughout Jewish

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life including—for example—in prayer, as witnesses, and as rabbis. That I am an observant rabbi does not mean that I am not liberal, and conversely, that I am a liberal rabbi does not mean that I am not observant.

God, Torah, Israel, the World and the Self all speak loudly, and I strive to attune my ears to hearing their calls. Fortunately, to be sure that I am hearing the most subtle aspects of their calls, I need not depend on my ears alone. I need not depend solely on a liberal perspective when I listen but rather I am constantly attuning my ears by listening to the perspective of others, by coming to appreciate the melodies of their systems of Jewish life. This is another aspect of sacred listening which can lead to sacred learning and thus a strengthening of Israel's covenant with God.

Confidence Allows Openness

Strengthening the covenant, and allowing for the possibilities I have described has, of course, large implications for the Reform community and for the broader Jewish community, *clal yisrael.* Being a Reform rabbi today means not only knowing and teaching our tradition from a decidedly liberal perspective, but also being in serious and open dialogue with rabbis of other denominations. Yet for the dialogue to be meaningful and ethical, we are necessarily opening ourselves, not just as individuals, to the possibility of being affected by that dialogue. A self-reflective liberal Judaism that is seeking to re-invigorate itself demands engaging in a full conversation which necessitates sacred listening to many voices including the most traditional. The extent to which the Reform Movement in North America has been successful, however, allows it now to be more courageous in its interactions with other denominations. Confident that we have found effective, and what we consider to be true, ways of speaking to and for a majority of American Jews, we can now open ourselves to hearing the truths of other ways, which cover, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, different ranges of the spectrum.

A serious self-reflective Liberal Judaism, acknowledging that our truths may be limited to certain ranges, turns now with greater openness and attunement to hearing the voices emerging from more traditional movements. Our confidence to engage in an honest self-evaluation in the presence of respectful teachers, colleagues and friends, and with other rabbis who also seek to expand the Covenant, will enable all of us to grow to meet the challenges of American Jewry in the 21st century. The extent to which we will meet these challenges, will depend on our ability to engage in sacred listening and sacred learning. ●

Choosing one's losses

Dianne Esses

After spending most of my youth—until age 18—in a Modern Orthodox Yeshivah, I left Judaism. My rebellion led me far afield. I went as far as to declare myself an atheist—believing that religion was simply "the opiate of the masses." Subsequently, however, I felt lonely for my religion—for some system of meaning—and I returned. In my return I at first went back to Modern Orthodoxy and then moved to a traditional egalitarianism—which is where I find myself now.

Wanting to immerse my life in studying and teaching Judaism, I became a Conservative rabbi. There I found a "room of my own" in which I could struggle to integrate my Judaism and being a woman. It was the movement in which, essentially, I did not have to cut off one of those pieces of myself for the other. There I found the most traditional expression of Judaism which still gave women the opportunity to be rabbis—an opportunity I could not have imagined as a child for myself nor, for that matter, for anybody else. Most of the Syrian Jewish community where I grew up saw and still sees non-Orthodox Judaism as invalid; the female rabbinate symbolizes the pinnacle of its heresy.

Now, an ordained rabbi, I often shake my head in disbelief. I-a rabbi? I-count in a *minyan*? I-called upon to give *divrei torah* and lectures? I-called rabbi by my students? These are the blessings and gifts made possible for me by the movement which I chose to become part of. They are all the more so blessings because they were not gifts bestowed upon me at birth. Rather, to become a Conservative rabbi was a choice—a choice that cost me much discomfort regarding my family and the community of my youth.

With this gift, however, came much loss. Not only was it difficult because it was a choice not easily understood by my family and community, but because to leave a traditional community for liberal Judaism comes at a high price. Never again will I live in a community where Judaism is so naturally, so unself-consciously, an integral part of people's lives. While "meaning" was rarely a subject for discussion, so much of life was naturally imbued with religious meaning. Never again will I live in a community where it can be assumed that most of its members are observant—that a Jewish life rich in *halakhic* observance will be transmitted to most of the next generation.

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