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Shabbat Shalom. I feel so honored to have been asked by Rabbis Leider and Levy to speak with you, the congregation where I grew up, about my experiences this summer in Israel. I know from many years in these pews that when one gives a drasha, one is supposed to talk about the week's parasha. Even though Parashat Shoftim is incredibly rich with law and ritual, I want to warn you that I am not going to focus on it today. I want, instead, for us to focus on a piece of text that we repeat every Shabbat and in fact every day but infrequently discuss at length: The Shema.

This past May, when I moved with my roommate into the Jerusalem apartment that would be our home for the next three months, one of the first things we did was affix a mezuzah to our door. It felt like a really important moment to mark the beginning of my summer in Jerusalem, and seeing and touching the little blue box on the doorframe every time I came and went felt comforting. But of course the principle of affixing a mezuzah has nothing to do with the little box we're all used to seeing. It has to do with what is inside, the Shema and Ve'Ahavta.

Originally spoken by Moses to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the land of Israel, in Parashat Va'Etchanan, the Shema was later extracted from its original context and became a focal part of daily prayer: "Listen, Israel. Adonai is our God. Adonai is One. The shema affirms the existence of divine presence, of Godliness, in every moment. It declares "Adonai is one" – all creation, all holiness, is from one source. It focuses us upon the beauty of wholeness, oneness, in all things.

Reciting the Shema when we wake up and when we go to sleep is actually its own mitzvah, separate from the other commandments to pray three times a day. It is the first prayer most Jewish children learn to say, and traditionally it is also the prayer we say in the moments before we pass away. In all of our beginnings and all of our endings we repeat this commandment to ourselves out loud. But why was listening chosen? After all, a hundred different words could have easily fit the bill. 'Look,' or 'understand,' or even 'proclaim.' But "listen" was the word selected. Why?

This summer, I had the chance to spend a lot of time thinking about some possible answers to this question. During the same week I taped up the new mezuzah on my door, I began my internship at Encounter. Encounter is an organization dedicated to strengthening the capacity of the Jewish people to be constructive agents of change in transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They work to provide American Jewish leaders with access to Palestinian narratives, which aren't frequently available to us within our community.

One aspect of Encounter's work is running two-day trips to the West Bank, where Jewish participants have the opportunity to listen to Palestinian civil society leaders as they describe their daily lives, challenges, and hopes. The fact is that many of us American Jews, who consider ourselves deeply invested stakeholders in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have actually never met the stakeholders on the "other side" or come into contact with their narratives. Encounter sets out to change this. Yet unlike many other tour programs that include Palestinian voices, the organization does *not* frame itself as a dialogue project. Jewish participants don't share or exchange narratives with each of the Palestinian speakers. For two days, we step back

and we just listen. It's a complete break from how we often experience discussions around the conflict in our community – endless argumentation, rebuttal, and finally just closing our ears because – after all- we already know *exactly* what the other person is going to say.

This is the world I came from when I went on my first trip with Encounter. The proposition of just listening seemed like an incredibly scary and vulnerable position to put myself in. But it turns out that actually this imperative to just listen was an incredible gift to me. It released me. I no longer had to argue, to respond, to think of the next point. I could just be with the stories I was hearing.

The Jewish community is a community that thrives off of stories. Every Shabbat, we participate in the re-telling of our collective history as a people. We remind ourselves of our past because it has made up everything we are today. In the same way, when we talk about Israel, we retell the stories of Herzl and the first Zionist congress. We talk about Golda Meir and the first kibbutzim and the return to the Western Wall in 1967, because all of these things represent incredible moments in defining who we have become as a people today. But for the most part, we do not talk about Palestinian stories. Most of us have heard few, if any, of these narratives in our lives. When we choose to skip these parts of our history and our present, I believe we are doing ourselves a huge disservice. Because these stories are also a part of our story, and in skipping that part we are losing a piece of ourselves.

The first time I really understood what it means that Palestinian stories are a part of my Jewish story was when I met Daoud Nassar. Daoud lives with his family on their organic farm, in the hills south of Bethlehem, where his grandfather first purchased land and began farming in 1916. Despite continual legal struggles in Israel's courts over the ownership of their land, the Nassar family has managed to create a large and thriving self-sustainable farm where they run programs in nonviolence education under the slogan "we refuse to be enemies." Sitting in one of the caves that Daoud's family has maintained as living and working space on the farm, I heard Daoud speak with pride about the solar power grid he created for the farm since Israel does not provide the electricity it is responsible for in the area where the farm is located. The extensive volunteer and education frameworks that he has developed are also a source of great joy for him. But without a doubt, the central element of the farm are the family's fruit trees – both the primary source of income and the symbol of a deep connection to the land. I listened as Daoud described how due to a dispute over ownership of his field, 1500 of his trees were bulldozed in one day by the Israeli army, just two weeks before the harvest. Although the Nassar family has found ways to begin replanting and move forward, it was clear in Daoud's words that the trauma of that day - both financial and emotional – will stay with them for a long time.

In this week's parasha, we receive a series of commandments regarding actions acceptable during times of war and conflict. In Dvarim chapter 20 verse 19, we read: "When you shall besiege a city for a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its fruit trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down. Are trees of the field human, to be besieged by you?" This commandment has come to form much of modern Judaism's attitude toward preservation of nature, whether in days of conflict or in quieter days, but it's not one I ever spent much time thinking about before. Yet when I heard Daoud describe what happened to his grove, this commandment jumped to mind right away. Leaving aside the technicalities of siege and conquering and whether they apply here or not, hearing Daoud's raw pain over the destruction of his trees connected me to a piece of Jewish tradition that had meant much less to me before. Through his story I understood the impact of

cutting down a fruit tree – and understood why Jews are commanded not to do so – in a tangible way for the first time. As hard as the story was to hear, listening to it allowed me to recover a part of myself and my communal story that had been missing.

What made this moment possible was Encounter's conviction that we should bring our entire Jewish selves to our engagement with Palestinian voices. No one is asked to leave their Judaism behind –rather, the act of listening is understood as a deeply Jewish act. Divrei Torah, times set aside for prayer and reflection, and Hekshered food for those who prefer it create an environment that is critical in allowing us to exit our comfort zones while remaining our full Jewish selves. But perhaps the most crucial element is that we don't leave our Jewish communal conversations behind when we engage in this experience. Participants meet throughout the trip in small groups to process and express what is on our hearts. In these internal conversations, we have the chance to work through our own fears and struggles together, digging deeper into the moments of tension that the trip experience brings up for us instead of running from them.

Before I speak a bit more about internal conversations, I'd like to return to the Shema now for a minute, because so far I've only spoken about its first line. But the Shema that we find in our mezuzot and our prayerbooks directly precedes the ve'ahavta, a commandment to love Adonai – and to love all that we encounter in Adonai's creation - with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might. Jewish loving, as outlined in the ve'ahavta, is a commandment that embraces plurality in the search for oneness. We can love through the way we teach our children. We can love through the way that we talk in our homes and in our communities. We can love by performing any of 613 mitzvot, and in many more ways besides.

There is something very significant to me about the fact that commandments to listen and to love follow directly on each other's heels. The link between the two seems especially critical when we consider that it is often hardest for us to listen to new voices on issues where our deepest and most emotional love is involved. This summer at Encounter, I understood what it looks like to forget this link. While we as Jews have countless beautiful ways to express love for creation and for the holiness that we see in the world, we let ourselves fall into the illusion that there is and always has been only one *right way* to love Israel. In our communal conversation on Israel and the conflict, we have ripped the commandments of listening and loving apart. We only make room for our own definitions. We don't listen to the views that exist beyond our own echo chambers. Perhaps we assume we already know what dissenting voices will have to say. Perhaps we are afraid to listen, or perhaps we believe that listening marks us as insecure in our own stance. Whatever the reasons, we close off.

Opening up our ears, and our definitions, is one of the most difficult tasks our community faces today. Like loving in the ve'ahavta, it is something we have to do *be'chol me'odeinu* – with all of our might. It is anything but a passive act. Too often, we think of listening as the way we tolerate others or wait for them to say their piece. When we say someone is "a listener," it usually has a connotation of emptiness- what we really mean is 'that person just doesn't have anything to say.' But what if we view listening as an action, one of hundreds of active commandments and ways to express love? Putting up a mezuzah, wrapping tefillin, wearing tzitzit: These are all *actions* that Jews take in seeking out the wholeness and the holiness in our world. So too listening can be something that we do, an active commandment that we have the opportunity to fulfill each day. Listening does not have to mean that we are empty vessels waiting to be filled.

In my own experience as a participant and later as a trained facilitator with Encounter, listening has meant creation: Making a new expansiveness and potential for change within myself. It is also about sticking with it when things are difficult to hear. I remember on my very first Encounter trip back in December, one of my fellow participants asked the Palestinian speakers on a panel to share what Zionism meant to them. They shared honestly from their own experience, saying that Zionism has always meant military presence and restrictions on movement, and that Zionists are part of a controlling and essentially negative force bent upon taking away all they had. This was a moment of real challenge for many of us who were listening. I remember wanting to stand up and declare that what they had described was not my Zionism, to tell them what Zionism means to me and convince them that other definitions were possible. But in that moment I couldn't do any of those things. And so instead I did my very best to be a resilient listener, to find space for someone else's truth when I already felt that I was overflowing. There have been many moments like this throughout my summer, whether when hearing from Palestinian speakers or conversing with Jewish participants. When they happen, I often think of a beautiful Talmudic passage from Masechet Sota on handling disagreements, which my mentor and friend Rabba Melanie Landau often quotes. The passage concerns a disagreement between the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai, and it reads as follows:

“If the house of Shammai declares something unclean and the house of Hillel declares it clean – if this one prohibits and that one permits, then how does one learn Torah?”

In other words, the Talmud presents many dissenting voices on a single case, such as the purity of an object. How are we to know which voice points the right path?

The Talmud presents the following answer: “All the interpretations are given by a single shepherd; Adonai has spoken them all. Therefore, make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean.”

The Talmud does not ask that we forget our previous views in encountering dissenting ones, nor that we change our original opinion on the spot. It simply instructs to open up new rooms, new spaces inside ourselves to hold the plurality that together comprises the voice of Adonai. Viewed through the eyes of the Talmud, the choice to open up more space is not an act of defeat or even agreement. It is a step towards understanding that all these narratives flowed forth from a single voice: *Adonai Echad*, just as in the Shema. When we consider listening in this way, always striving to add rooms to our heart, holding plurality can become a path to wholeness instead of an unproductive clash.

Just before I finish, I have to make a last confession: For a large part of my life, I really didn't like the Shema. I didn't like it because I had always been taught to say it with my eyes closed, in order to concentrate better. As a child, this never made sense to me: How could I faithfully make a statement about the oneness and wholeness of God and all creation when all I could see was the inside of my own palm? It was not until my Bat Mitzvah, standing in front of this congregation with the Torah in my arms and my eyes wide open, that I felt I was able to really mean the Shema when I said it. Looking out at all of you, hearing you repeat the Shema back to me, I saw holiness and wholeness. The prayer no longer felt disconnected or isolated.

Approaching our relationship with Israel – or any complex loving relationship, for that matter – with our eyes, ears, and hearts open is admittedly much harder than keeping them closed. A full

embrace of Shema means realizing all the ways in which we are broken and unwhole and hurting. Listening will not fix all of this - not in a day, maybe not even in years. But inviting Shema into our lives can be the beginning of our healing.

It is my wish for all of us that we are blessed with the strength to take on the commandment of listening in the moments that are hardest, and that in those moments we find ourselves brought a just bit closer to wholeness.

I am happy to speak more later on with anyone who has questions about my experiences this summer or anything I've said today. For now, Shabbat Shalom, and thank you for being such wonderful listeners.