

This summer at URJ Camp Harlam, my rabbinic and education colleagues and I listened to a chapter from the audio recording of Trevor Noah's autobiography, *Born a Crime*. Noah, the host of *The Daily Show*, is a South African-born comedian. When he was born in 1984, the relationship between his white European father and black South African mother was illegal under the laws of apartheid—his mother was subsequently jailed and fined by the South African government.

I've since listened to and reread this chapter repeatedly. Although Noah is recounting the assumptions and misunderstandings he faced growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, what's at the core of the experience he describes is something that plagues us here, in America, today.

After high school, Noah had a DJ business. During this time diversity programs were emerging in schools to encourage communities to embrace the cultures around them in this post-apartheid era. Noah, a dancer he worked with, and his crew, were booked to come and share their music and culture at the King David School, a Jewish school, just a few miles from where they usually performed.

Noah got the crowd—the teachers, parents, and *kippot*-wearing students—up and dancing, having a fantastic time!

When Noah was ready to bring the energy up a notch, he called out his star dancer.

“Give it up and make some noise for....HITLER!!!!!”

Out came the dancer, his crew surrounded him, bouncing their arms up and down chanting, “Go Hitler, Go Hitler, Go Hitler!”

The room froze as a teacher rushed up, ripped the plug from his system screamed: “How *dare* you?! You horrible, disgusting, vile creature!”

Perplexed, Noah tried to figure out what this teacher was so upset about. And then, it hit him. His star dancer was doing an African dance move that also happened to be very suggestive. Noah, offended that the teacher was offended by him sharing his culture, had clarity: This teacher was racist.

“This is not insulting anyone. This is who we are!” he yelled.

“Get out of here! *You people* are disgusting!...I’ll have you know that *my* people stopped people like you before, and we can stop you again.”

Noah wrote, “She was talking, of course, about stopping the Nazis in World War II, but that’s not what I was hearing...All I was hearing was some white lady shouting about how white people beat us before and they’ll beat us again.”

“You will never stop us again,” Noah yelled, “because now we have *Nelson Mandela* on our side! And he *told* us we can do this!”

Noah took his belongings, his crew, and his star dancer, and, as the flabbergasted students, teachers, and parents watched, they danced their way out of that school chanting, “Go Hitler!”ⁱ

How would you feel if someone came into Temple Shalom and encouraged us to all cheer for Hitler?

Shocked?

Humiliated?

Unsafe?

Livid?

Devastated?

Terrified?

Sick to your stomach?

Embarrassed by your community's actions?

All valid feelings.

Why didn't Noah "get it"? What cues was he missing?

And, how on earth did a man named Hitler end up doing a dance performance on a cultural day at a Jewish day school?

Noah explained that from colonial times through the end of apartheid, black people in South Africa were required to pick English or European names so that white people could pronounce them. Their limited knowledge of western culture often left parents choosing names from the Bible, of movie stars, or names they tried to remember from history class. And what many knew of World War II was that there was some guy named Hitler who was so powerful that at some point the white allies had to ask black people to help them fight against him. This implied one thing: Hitler was tough. Therefore if you wanted your kid to be tough, you might name your kid Hitler.

The name wasn't offensive to a black South African because Hitler wasn't part of *their* narrative.

“[I]f black South Africans could go back in time and kill one person, Cecil Rhodes would come up before Hitler...In Africa [Hitler's] just another strongman from the history books,” Noah explained.

Noah and Hitler only traveled a few miles from where they usually DJed to the Jewish day school, and yet they possessed no cultural context to know that Hitler's name would provoke such shock.

And the parents, students, and teachers had no cultural context to understand how this could possibly, with absolutely no intention of offense, be the dancer's name.

Just a few miles away from each other, and they couldn't have understood each other less.

And so, the two groups, who perhaps could have learned that they in fact had a great deal in common, dismissed the other as racist. As anti-semitic.

Noah was primed to perceive racism.

The Jewish community was primed to perceive anti-semitism.

And why wouldn't they?

Both communities had extensive trauma in their fairly recent histories.

And sometimes, we are so caught up in *our own* trauma that we project our personal narrative into someone else's actions and forget that they, too, may have *their own* trauma.

At a diversity day in a Jewish day school, Jewish and black South Africans came together—and no one could communicate about the diversity of their experience or about their respective traumas.

And, perhaps, the most *devastating* part of this entire story is not the misunderstanding itself.

It's that there's no resolution.

The words behind me above the ark say, “*Da lifnei mi atah omed,*” “**Know before whom you stand.**” Traditionally, this refers to God.

But, what about knowing the *people* before whom we stand?

I mean *really* knowing them.

In order to really get to know another person, we must be willing to listen to them.

Listening is hard.

Really hard. Especially when people may be yelling, “Go Hitler!”

The *Mishnah* teaches us that there are 48 *middot*, or virtues, that can help us to gain knowledge to understand Torah: the first three *middot* are: *talmud*, *shmiat ha’ozen*, and *arichat s’fatayim*:

Learning

Listening of the ear

And preparation of speechⁱⁱ

That order is important: Our tradition teaches that the first three things we must do in order to acquire knowledge are: *first* learn, *then* listen, and *then* prepare to speak.

Talmud, Learn: know before whom you stand.

Shmiat ha’ozen, Listen: really hear the person standing before you.

Arichat s’fatayim, Prepare to speak: think carefully about how to respond to that person.

Or, as Steven Covey, the late author of the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* taught, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Learn. Listen. Prepare to speak—in that order.

Simple. Yet we so rarely do it. When was the last time you sat before someone with whom you *truly* believed you disagreed, and tried to really listen to what they were saying *before* formulating your response?

As we are bombarded with headlines and soundbites on a constant loop, I find myself filtering what I *want* to see and hear from what I *assume* is offensive. I welcome the opinions I *obviously* agree with and *without* hesitation, dismiss that which on its surface offends my sensibilities, justifying my decision because I believe that the intention is racist, anti-semitic, homophobic, xenophobic, or bigoted.

And I assume I am not alone.

Our current political and social climate is fostering an environment where our inclination is to assume intended offense and the worst of others.

Our obsession with politics and the need to be right has hampered our capacity to empathize.

Empathy exists when we stop jumping in and telling someone *why* they are wrong, and instead take the time to *learn* about them, *listen* to their story, and *then think carefully* about how we will respond to their narrative.

Learn.

Listen.

Prepare to speak.

This morning we read our *Haftarah* portion from the book of Samuel.

More than anything Channah wanted children, but she remained childless. One year, Eli, the priest, watched this woman as she approached the Temple.

Bitter to the core, Channah prayed to God —sobbing, promising, if granted a son, to dedicate him as a servant to the Temple.

She wept silently and moved her mouth fervently as her prayer intensified, *but* her words were inaudible.

Eli watched her mouth. Though her lips were moving, her voice could not be heard.

Eli was sure...she was drunk.

Instead of learning and listening, he reprimanded Channah:

“How long will you persist in drunkenness? Put away your wine—get rid of it.”

He had no intention learning her story, of listening to her pain, of asking her why she was upset and what she was doing there. He assumed he *knew*—she was a drunk woman coming to desecrate God’s holy space. What other explanation could there be?

Channah could have left. She could have shied away in shame. Eli certainly believed she should.

But instead, through her grief, Channah answered: “No, my lord. I am a woman of sorrow. I drank neither wine nor spirits, but poured out my soul before the Eternal. Do not take your servant for a worthless woman. All this time I have spoken from the depth of my anger, from the greatness of my grievance.”

And...Eli paused as she told her story. He listened and processed. He understood her visit, her grief. He saw that Channah was not there to dishonor God, but rather to gain strength through sacred space. Instead of dismissing her, he *heard* her.

“Go in peace, and may God of Israel grant your request.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Eli was wrong. He hurt Channah. He assumed he knew the impetus for the silent words pouring from her mouth. He didn't give her the benefit of the doubt at the beginning.

But something caused him to pause and take a step back and reevaluate.

I think many of us, like Eli, have had a hard time, particularly over the past two years, truly listening to people when we believe we already know their story. We jump in to responding—or dismissing others—as opposed to learning and listening to their stories.

I look at the news and I see a perspective that infuriates me, so I stop reading partway down the page.

I see a bumper sticker on someone's car that offends me, and I dismiss the possibility that they are expressing themselves from a genuinely good place, or a pained place, or a place of needing to be understood. I just can't believe that they would express such a perspective, so I turn away in anger.

I struggle to have the patience to *LEARN, LISTEN, and then PREPARE MY RESPONSE.*

Many of us have struggled with this over the past several years.

Not because we're bad people.

But because, as I spoke about last night, we are under a considerable amount stress and are concerned about the national and political climate in which we live.

We're tired. We've been through a lot. And we don't want to be hurt anymore.

So, we read our own narrative into someone else's story and use that to justify shutting them down.

It's much easier today, and often *feels* necessary, to dismiss or ignore or blatantly tell-off those who seem to hold a contrary view, than it is to take the time to *sit* and *learn* and *listen*.

It's *not* realistic to be expected to empathize with *everyone*.

Because there are white supremacists and Nazis and people who are homophobic and xenophobic...

But Channah wasn't out to desecrate the Temple.

Trevor Noah and his dancer Hitler weren't anti-semitic.

The teacher at the Jewish day school wasn't racist.

Taking the time to LISTEN, LEARN, and *then* PREPARE A RESPONSE would have left us with a very different story ending.

Eli teaches us that we can to *teshuvah*, we can realize our mistake, return, and begin the conversation again. (We can also do something that Eli didn't do which is apologize and ask for forgiveness for assuming wrong of others.)

Imagine how Trevor Noah's story would have been different if everyone was willing to understand before being understood.

When Noah told everyone, "Let's give it up for Hitler!" what if the teacher ran over, turned off the music and paused for a moment to think, "Now, I know that he would not have been recommended to come here as a presenter if he were a Nazi. What in the world is going on?"

It may be unrealistic to expect the teacher to calmly walk over and ask, "Excuse me, why did you bring a man named Hitler here to dance?"

But, what if, before she screamed, she carefully asked the question she she (wrongly) assumed she already knew the answer to: "How could you bring a Nazi here to dance and have us cheer for Hitler! This is incredibly hurtful and disrespectful!"

Noah would still have been confused, but there would have been no assumed racism. It would be clear that it wasn't about the suggestive nature of the dance or the music. It would have been about a name—a name that invokes a great deal of fear among Jewish people.

The discomfort and embarrassment—on all sides—would have still existed, but a profound realization would have also come to light. "His name is Hitler because white people, like you, told us we needed European names. Hitler is a European name that implies 'tough guy,' so Hitler's mom named him Hitler."

It's not as funny of a story.

It's tragic on so many levels.

It doesn't make the name Hitler any easier to hear. It doesn't make the trauma of the Holocaust any less horrific. It doesn't erase the pain of apartheid.

But now I know it's not about me.

And I know about the trauma inflicted on someone else—something about which I was completely ignorant before. And I know that I, as a white person, am representative of power and trauma that another people faced.

Wouldn't that have achieved the goal of a diversity day?

They'd have stood before each other, learned each other's histories, listened to each others stories, and then figured out how to respond.

When we take the time to **LEARN, LISTEN**, and then to **PREPARE OUR RESPONSE**, the outcome dramatically shifts.

A man approached Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik to ask if it would be permissible to use four cups of milk instead of four cups of wine at the Passover *seder*.

“Are you ill?” asked the rabbi.

“No, my health is fine. The wine is just more than I can afford.”

The rabbi gave him 25 rubles.

“Why did you give him so much money?” asked his wife. “That is significantly more than the cost of wine.”

The rabbi answered, “If he was considering having milk at the *seder*, then he probably didn’t have enough money for meat or any other foods that he needed to make the *seder* meal.”^{iv}

The man asked the rabbi about milk.

The rabbi could have said, “Unless you are sick, the law requires you use wine.”

But instead of trying to make himself *heard*, the rabbi stopped to learn before whom he stood, he really listened not just to the words, but the reason behind the question asked, and then he prepared his response.

Talmud, learn.

Shmiat ha’ozen, **really** listen.

Arichat sfatayim, **prepare** your response.

The *mitzvah* of the *shofar* is *not* to blow the *shofar*, but to *hear* the *kol shofar*, the voice of the *shofar*. We are supposed to listen to it, allow it to be a wake-up call to *teshuvah*, bringing us back to our moral selves.

In tractate *Rosh HaShanah* of the *Talmud*, we learn that the sound of the *shofar* is supposed to remind us of the mother of Sisera.^v

Sisera was a Canaanite general who oppressed Israel. The prophet Deborah gathered an army to oppose him and after he was defeated he was killed by a woman named Yael as he ran away to seek refuge.

Sisera's mother waited at the window for her son to return and behind the lattice she cried out, "Why is his chariot taking so long to return?"^{vi}

It is *the* cry of our enemy's mother, the longing for a child who has been killed, that we are supposed to hear in the sounding of the *shofar*.

Rabbi Edward Feld writes:

"Make no mistake—the Rabbis are proud of Deborah's victory, she acted to save Israel and did what was required in that hour. And yet, on Rosh Hashanah we are to feel not only the pride of the victory but...we are asked to be able to see both sides of the story—our own need, and the humanity of the "other" who may even be our enemy."^{vii}

We blow the *shofar* repeatedly on *Rosh HaShanah*.

We can let its sound simply wash over us.

We can cringe because it's loud.

We can time how long *tekiah gedolah* sounds for.

Or, we can *really* listen.

Listen for the cry of Sisera's mother.

Listen for the pain of the person standing before us.

Listen for the question *behind* the question.

Listen to what someone is *really* saying, *not* what we *expect* to hear.

Listen *before* preparing what we will say in response.

Listen *before* trying to be understood.

Let's learn from Trevor Noah's grand misunderstanding, from Eli's *teshuvah*, from Solevetchik's ability to listen to the words *not even said*, from the pain of Sisera's mother.

Let's learn before whom we stand, let's really listen to each other's stories, to the voice of the *shofar* and the story it is seeking to tell.

Let's prepare our speech based on what others are *really* saying, as opposed to what our pre-conceived notions prompt us to hear.

Let us seek to understand before we seek to be understood.

ⁱⁱ Noah, Trevor, *Born A Crime*, pp. 196-199.

ⁱⁱ *Pirkei Avot* 6:6

ⁱⁱⁱ I Samuel 1:1-1:18

^{iv} https://www.centralsynagogue.org/assets/downloads/Elul_29_Days_of_Reflection.pdf

^v BT *Rosh HaShanah* 33b

^{vi} Judges 5:28

^{vii} *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, Rabbi Edward Feld, pp. 185-186, "The Wailing of the Shofar: Feeling the Other's Pain"