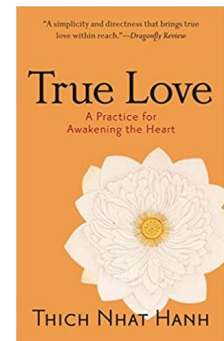


What If We Truly Speak and Listen to Each Other
Korah 5781

I would like to pivot to an aspect of this narrative and to begin I will share a story that I read in Thich Naht Hahn's beautiful and pithy book: True Love about a couple in Vietnam.

A young man went off to war leaving his pregnant wife behind. Two years later, he was able to return home, and the young woman went with their young son to meet her husband. They cried out together in joy.



The young mother went out to buy supplies for a ritual of reunion while the young father attempted to convince his son to call him 'Daddy.'

The little boy refused: 'Mister, you are not my daddy. My daddy is someone else. He visits us every night and mommy talks to him every night, and very often she cries with him. And every time my mommy sits down, he sits down too. Every time she lies down, he lies down too.'

...The father is hurt, deeply humiliated, and that is why, when his wife came home, he would no longer look at her or speak a word to her.

He then humiliates her by not allowing her to perform the rituals of reunion. He turns to alcohol, leaving his wife every night without speaking with her.

Her suffering was so great that in the end she threw herself in the river and drowned.

When the young father heard this news, he returned to the house, and that night he was one who went to get the lamp and lit it.

Suddenly the child cried out: 'Mister, Mister, it's my daddy, he's come back!'

And he pointed to the shadow of his father on the wall. 'You know, Mister, my father comes every night. Mommy talks to



him and sometimes she cries; and every time she sits down my daddy sits down too.'

In reality, this woman had been alone in the house too much and every night, she had talked to her shadow: 'My dear one, you are so far away from me. How can I raise my child all by myself? ... You must come back soon.' She would cry and of course, every time she sat down, the shadow would sit down. Now, the husband's false

perception was no longer there, but it was too late – his wife was already dead.

Underneath this tragic story is the question of why did the young father not want to talk about this with his wife? When we do not ask clarifying questions and when we do not deeply listen to them, suffering ensues.

* * *

We find a similar situation in our Torah reading this morning. Korah and his followers rose up complaining about Moshe's leadership. And then Moshe falls on his face and defensively tells them that they will get their due for their words of rebellion.

Today, I want to imagine a different scenario where Korah approaches Moshe with different words: "Moshe, we appreciate all you have done for our people. And now, we were hoping that you could involve us in the leadership of our people; perhaps we could talk about how we can help."

How might Moshe have responded in this case?

Or even if Korah said what he did but Moshe reacted differently. The text states "*Vayishma Moshe Vayipol al panav* – and when Moses heard this fell on his face."

But did Moshe really hear their complaint? Did he really hear their suffering? Did he try to understand where they were coming from? Did he try to give them the benefit of the doubt?

Too often we "listen," but we do not hear. We talk past each other, but we do not really engage. Sometimes, our minds are elsewhere, thinking about something else. Sometimes, we are not listening at all; I cannot tell

how many times I have spoken with someone and they are looking at their phones, and this is not just during Zoom meetings – even in person!

To listen deeply, we must look into each other's eyes, deeply connecting and taking in what they are saying. We must say I am here for you – as the Torah states: *Hineini*.

Even when someone is criticizing you, as Moshe was experiencing with Korah, we must try not to become defensive. This is not easy; the parts of ourselves that protect us get activated and they can react strongly and defensively. But instead, we should try to understand where someone is coming from, giving them the benefit of the doubt – *l'khaf zekhut*, as our rabbis teach in *Pirkei Avot*.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasized this aspect of the tradition. He points out the difference between two foundational cultures of the Western world: Ancient Greece and Judaism.

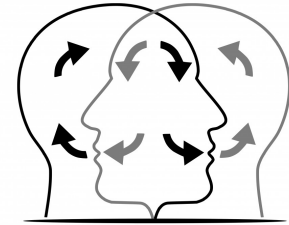


The Greeks were primarily a visual culture – creating masterpieces of art, sculpture, and architecture that you could see. And it had its spectacles – plays and the Olympic games. Seeing is knowing and still is a basic idea in our culture; this is true even more so with YouTube and the video world we inhabit.

But Judaism offered another approach, radically different. In the Torah, God communicates, but we cannot see the Divine. Instead, at Mount Sinai, the book of Deuteronomy states: “You heard the sound of words, but saw no image; there was only a voice.” (Deut. 4:12) 92 times that idea of listening is emphasized in the last book of the Torah.

This concept is picked up by rabbinic Judaism, which made the *Shema* the central pillar of Judaism – listen, deeply hear and internalize the concept of the Oneness of God and the universe.

When the rabbis of the Talmud wanted to introduce a new idea, their opening is *Ta Shema* – come and listen – come and take in these words.



In fact, the basic methodology of Torah study is a *hevruta* – two people coming together to study Torah; they read the text aloud, hearing it and each other, listening deeply. This gets picked up in a *shiva* home when we are asked to listen intently to the mourner.

Perhaps the entire conflict with Korah was caused by not hearing his pain, by not hearing the complaints; it was a failure of empathy. We live in a world where we do not always take the time to really hear others and that often leaves us without the ability to hear perspectives different from our own.

And we can miss the shadows that reveal the truth.

We must always try to remember that deep listening, asking questions, and responding with compassion can transform the world; it may in fact prevent us from getting swallowed by our conflicts, bringing more peace to us all.