

We are in the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the ten days of teshuvah, the ten days of return, often translated as the ten days of repentance. Every year we imagine that the gates of heaven are open for ten days and that anything might happen. For ten days it's possible for anything and anyone to be completely transformed. We imagine that the gates of heaven are open and if we decide that we want to change the possibilities are limitless to do so.

Ha'Azinu is the second to last Torah reading in the whole Torah. We always read it on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The first half, the poetry part, appears in a special layout of two columns. It's as if the Torah wants to grab our attention before we get to the end, and make us listen.

Ha'Azinu means to listen. We listen to Moses' farewell address as he climbs Mount Nevo and approaches his death. We listen to the words that tell us to follow the Torah that has been entrusted to us. We listen to the part of God that lies within us and we make teshuvah, we think about what we have done wrong, we work out how we can do better next year, we make amends with anyone we've hurt and we try and get back on track to be the people we really want to be. We listen to the story of our history.

But listening is not easy and it's getting harder every day. We hear but we don't always listen. We live in a world of

information overload, where people form opinions by listening to other people who think like them in the echo chambers of social media. Sometimes it's hard to cut through all the noise to really listen to one person's story. Our attention spans are so short these days. Can we spend long enough away from our phone, whatsapp and e-mails to really listen to someone?

And who are we listening to? This has been a difficult, upsetting and divisive year in the Jewish world. It's easier just to listen to each other. We speak the same language. We can mourn together those who were killed last year, worry about the hostages still in captivity, the uptick in anti-semitism, the thousands of Israelis still trapped in hotels. But there are other people we need to listen to, people whose perspective on the whole situation in Israel is very different to ours, and they have also been deeply hurt. And we need to sit down and listen to each other. Peace will only come when we can sit down and listen to each other's stories and hear each other's pain, and acknowledge that there are different perspectives and different narratives. When we can hear that which is hard for us to hear.

It begins small - sometimes it's hard to listen to each other in the same family. It's easy for parents to feel their children aren't listening to them. And teenagers often feel their parents don't understand them. It's really important to listen well. And if we start by really listening to the people we live with, maybe we can extend that outward and start listening to other people in

our community, our neighbours, and even people we don't necessarily agree with.

In the Jewish tradition, words really matter and so does the ability to listen to them. One of our most important prayers, the Shema, is a command to listen. And in order to listen you need to be able to stop and focus.

When Moses was a shepherd in the desert, he saw a burning bush and he stopped to take a closer look. The thing is that bushes burn in the desert all the time – its not an unusual sight. But mostly they just burn out and if he had just passed by, that's what he would have thought and we'd still be slaves in Egypt. But he stopped and paid attention and watched, so he noticed that the flames didn't go out. And then, once he was really paying attention and listening, he heard the voice of God. If you stop and focus, you might really hear the voice of another person. You might hear God.

It's something worth trying over the next week as we continue through these ten days of teshuvah, these ten days of return and renewal, when we are concerned with reinvigorating and reimagining our lives.