

Shoftim 5780 – Derasha

This week a historic connection was made.

Earlier this week, Sunday in fact, at 1:15 pm, phone service worked. Now, to be honest that is not the historic connection I was talking about. After all, phones have been connected since March 10, 1876 when Alexander Graham Bell connected with his assistant, Thomas Watson. THAT was a historic connection¹. No, this week's historic connection referred to something similar but not the same. On Sunday, for the first time in 72 years, phone calls emanating from the United Arab Emirates were able to be connected to phones in Israel. Whereas for years, anyone in UAE who dialed the country code +972 got an immediate message that the calls "couldn't be connected," on Sunday they were. And, while people in both countries – perhaps beyond – throughout the world, celebrated the message in the call², I found myself seeking a different connection.

Think about it, ours is a Parasha that speaks, through its myriad of Mitzvos, to connection. Indeed, time and again in the Parasha Hashem grants us Mitzvos designed to creating a connection, improving communication and even restoring connections when things go awry. Whether we speak of the Mitzvos of establishing courts designed to improve our relationship with Hashem's Middah of Tzedek³ or the rules of which Novi (prophet) we are supposed to listen to the word of Hashem from, or of the Mitzvos throughout the parsha where the words of explanation – L'maan ("so that") or "Kee" (because") give not only the instructional imperative, but also the reason for, the Mitzvos that dot the parsha throughout, we seem to be getting an impression that it is not just the "doing" of the Mitzva that is important to Hashem but also that through the "Doing" there is an improvement in the communication with Hashem and the ability to improve our relationship with him.

So, on a week of communication to get a world-wide message of connection, I must stop and ask – what message within the message are we to take from this historic event? Is there anything connected about being connected to UAE this particular week⁴?

My answer (and I do not believe it is the exclusive one) is absolutely "YES" – and the issue is not so much about the calls going through as much as the reception of the call on the other end – that of the listener. There are ALWAYS calls. But there are not always people who are open to listening to the message – or even picking up the phone. The difference between a successful call and one that is dropped⁵ is whether there is a connection – and THAT requires 2 participants – the caller and the receiver.

Take Avraham Aveinu for instance. We know nothing from the the Torah about his early years. Instead, we first find mention of his life when he is told "Lech Lecha". Sfas Emes quotes from the Zohar that Avraham's greatness was simply was that he heard this voice – that of Hashem, and DID something because of it. He moved closer to improve the reception. You see, the Rambam explains that when a Navi had a prophecy, a nevuah, it wasn't a phone call- it was a radio signal. It wasn't so much that Hashem sent a

¹ Alfred, Randy (10 March 2008). "March 10, 1876: 'Mr. Watson, Come Here ... '". Wired magazine.

² See more here: <https://nypost.com/2020/08/16/telephone-service-begins-between-uae-and-israel-as-ties-open/>

³ Even the king, whose appointment is also mentioned in the Parasha, writes a Sefer Torah in order to learn to fear Hashem.

⁴ Especially given the comments of my dear friend Dr. Avey Wenger that EVERYTHING is connected.

⁵ <https://www.weboost.com/blog/causes-of-dropped-calls-and-how-to-fix-them>

direct line to the navi, but that he Navi, must prepare himself- tune in- for the signal. The greatness of Avraham was that he stopped to listen...-- to hear the call and then to respond.

Similarly, the Gemara⁶ tells a story told about two great Amoraim, who were extremely poor: Rav Yochanan and אילפא. They decided to go into business together to make some money. As they set out on their journey they stopped and sat down alongside a dilapidated wall. While they were eating bread two angels came by. Rav Yochanan overheard their conversation: One angel said: "let us topple this wall on them and kill them for they forsake the pursuit of עולם הבא and occupy themselves with the concerns of *this* world". The other angel said: leave them alone because one among them has yet to attain greatness...it's not his time. Rav Yochanan overheard the conversation but his friend, Ilfa did not. He asked Ilfa: did you hear anything" and Ilfa said "No". Rav Yochanan said to himself: "Since I overheard and Ilfa did not it is evident that it is me who has yet to achieve greatness". He decided to return to yeshiva and Ilfa did not. By the time Ilfa came back to Yeshiva from his venture, Rav Yochanan had been crowned the head of the yeshiva. Rav Shalom Rosner noted that both could have heard the call – but only Rav Yochanan was receptive to it. Thus, he gained from it while Ilfa let the call drop and the opportunity pass him by.

Perhaps this is the point that Parshas Shoftim repeats time and time again. The Torah wants us to understand that we get many "calls for connection" daily from Hashem. Each Mitzva give us a purpose – maybe it is a chance to learn L'Yirah Es Hashem – to see the awe of Hashem. Sometimes it is a chance to "live and inherit the land". Other times it is to get closer to Him in other ways by realizing what He finds proper and what He considers repulsive. In all cases, a Mitzva is a chance to be connected to him – removing the blocks that impede. To borrow a comment from Israeli communications Minister Yoaz Hendel about the UAE phone move – when we do Mitzvos and open communications with Hashem we too are taking what Hendel called "trust building steps (which) are an important step toward advancing...interests." Hashem calls – and this week he is asking us "Can you hear me now?"

The phone calls from UAE were not the only calls that spoke out this week. In open spaces in our Shul and in shuls around the world – COVID connected and beyond, the sound of the Shofar also began to sound. The Rambam notes that there is a hint in its sounding. According to the Rambam⁸, the sound of the Shofar calls to us to wake up and take a hint – and return. With the month of Elul upon us, amidst all of the different calls we hear, what message does the shofar convey? This week, I suggest that the message is not singular to us all. The call is dependent on what way you choose to hear it and what message you want to take from it.

That's why this Shabbos our shul is partnering with the OU for Project Resolve Together. Project Resolve Together is a great way for each of us, individual, family and community to think about the messages of the past year and to consider the messages we have been able to hear from them. Through Project Resolve Together, we will join with Jews throughout the world reflecting on the positive ways that we have coped, connected, and transcended these difficult times. What were the good things that came out of it? What were the new habits and practices that we'd like to stick, long after the virus becomes a memory? Take the time out to download the guide attached⁹ and to utilize it at your Shabbos meals or

⁶ Taanis 11a

⁷ By the way, Paul Marcarelli seemed to be doing quite well when he learned to ask "Can you hear me now?" – don't you think it would be good for us too?

⁸ Hil. Teshuva 3:4

⁹ <https://www.ou.org/resolve/files/2020/08/Copy-of-Cream-Simple-Photo-School-Newsletter.pdf> (Thank you to Debbie Fox LCSW for preparing the discussion guide and to Rabbi David Pardo for sharing it with us.)

in causal conversation.¹⁰ Set a tone for Elul in your home that in turn will create a stronger feel in our greater community.

The messages of call are specific. They really depend not only on the speaker at one end of the line but also on the listener and what he hears as well. This has been true for thousands of years but in modern history it has been that way since the creation of the telephone. You see, the first call on March 10, 1876 went from Bell to Watson. In it, Bell asked Watson to “come here, I want to see you.” However, in his notes of the call, Watson recorded a different message. He noted that Bell transmitted a different message “ Mr. Watson, come here, I want you.” This difference is precisely the Elul call. Hashem not only wants to see us, He wants us to know that he wants us. If we open our ears to that reception in every opportunity that crosses our paths to connect, we WILL connect – and neither we nor He will ever hang up.

¹⁰ Properly social distanced of course