

A middle-aged woman on a plane found herself sitting next to a man wearing a kippa ("yarmulka" in Yiddish). She called the attendant to complain about her seating. "You've sat me next to a Jew!! I can't possibly sit next to this strange man. Please find me another seat!" "Madam, I will see what I can do," the attendant replied, "but the flight is almost full and I don't know if there is another seat available."

The attendant soon returned and said,

Madam, we're full except for one seat in First Class. It is only for exceptional circumstances that we make this kind of upgrade, and I had to ask permission from the Captain. But, given the situation he felt that no one should be forced to sit next to an unpleasant person.

The flight attendant turned to the Jewish man sitting next to her, and said,

So if you'd like to get your things, Sir, I have a comfortable seat for you in First Class...

At that point, the surrounding passengers stood up and applauded while the Jewish man walked to the front of the plane.

The lady then said indignantly, "The Captain must have made a mistake." To which the attendant replied,

No Ma'am. Captain Cohen never makes a mistake.

Miscommunication is a way of life in our society. Sometimes the results are humorous, sometimes serious.

All of us can relate to the experience of our messages not always coming across in the way we intended.

How we communicate with others ultimately determines the quality of our lives. But the person who can communicate even passably seems rare. Did you ever notice how most conversations are just alternating monologues? People aren't listening; they're just coming up for air, waiting for the other person to stop talking so they can say their piece.

The question is, is there any real listening going on?

The importance of talking so people will listen and listening so people will talk is highlighted in a Torah passage we'll be reading on Shavous.

V'chol ha'am roim es ha'kolos v'es ha'lapidim v'ais kol ha'shofar Exodus 20:15

According to the Artscroll Stone Edition Chumash, the verse is translated: *The entire people saw the thunder and the flames, the sound of the shofar.*

However, the word *kolos*, translated as 'thunder', when translated literally means 'voices' or 'sounds'. What were these voices?

Years ago at a dinner party, Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce of Connecticut was seated next to David Burpee, chairman of the famous seed company that bears his name. Midway through the evening, Burpee realized that even though he had been introduced to Luce earlier, she had already forgotten his name. To help his dining companion avoid an awkward moment, Burpee leaned toward Luce and whispered, "I'm Burpee."

Unfortunately, even that blatant reminder didn't jog the memory of the urbane and socially adept congresswoman. Luce looked at her dinner companion, gently patted his hand, and said, "That's all right. I get that way sometimes myself."

What were the 'kolos' -- the voices?

The *Midrash* (Oral Torah) says that each person heard Hashem speak according to his or her own status. An elderly person heard the voice of an elder, a young person heard the voice of a youth. And so too a woman, chacham (wise) or simple person. Each person heard something different, according to the way in which they could best hear the Divine message. They heard not only the words of Hashem through prophecy, but also its explanation and understanding.

Each person heard the message of Hashem in a way personally tailored for their ears. Hashem understands that each of us are different, so He spoke and gave the Torah in a way every person could understand the full impact of what was being said.

Why is it so hard to talk so people can hear us?

One day as a child Billy Smith (not his real name), a resident of Newfoundland, couldn't take off his shoe. No amount of twisting or tugging would loosen its grip on his foot. The reason for his struggle eventually surfaced: a nail had pierced the sole and entered Smith's flesh, tightly binding his foot with his shoe. Removing the nail freed the foot, but solving that problem only underscored a bigger one: Billy hadn't noticed.

Billy Smith is among a tiny cluster of people, fewer than 30 in the world, who harbor a genetic quirk that renders them incapable of perceiving pain. Clinical geneticist C. Geoffrey Woods, who studied a group of such patients from northern Pakistan, said, "These humans are completely healthy, of normal intelligence, but don't know what pain is." They can sense touch, heat, vibration and their body's position in space. Yet for them, root canals are painless, as are falls, fires and whacks on the head with a baseball bat. One woman with so-called congenital indifference to pain (CIP) delivered a baby without discomfort.

While the case of Billy Smith is highly unusual, his condition underscores the idea that every human being experiences the world differently. For example:

-- Have you ever noticed how when you hear a recording of your voice it doesn't sound like you? Maybe you're like me: I've always hated hearing a recording of my own voice. It wasn't until I was well into my adult years that I learned the reason for the difference between what I hear and what I sound like on tape: When I speak, the sound waves that arrive in my ears travel not just through the air, but vibrate through my skull. And that alters the sound.

-- We see things differently. Women can see greater nuances in color than men. Men can track moving objects better than women. Red-green color-blindness is found in about 8% of white males. If I'd be trying to describe the richness of the colors of a nature painting, or of nature itself, I'd be talking in a language that some would have no experience to understand.

-- We taste differently. Some people can do a blind taste test and tell if something is sweetened with corn syrup, granulated sugar, or powdered sugar. But because of genes or environment, some people (such as myself) lack this ability. Coke, Pepsi, Royal Crown Cola -- to me, they're all the same!

-- And we smell differently. Some people can smell a perfume or cologne, and tell you many of the ingredients after just a whiff or two. And others lack certain genetic proteins necessary to tell their brain how to perceive certain scents.

"When a man mints coins with one stamp, all of the coins are similar to one other," our rabbis say, "but when the King of Kings mints each man from the "stamp" of Adam, the first man, each one of them is different."
And as our rabbis also said, *"Just as their faces are all different, so are their minds all different."*

Vive la différence! But still, what can we do to overcome the human communication gap? Let me suggest two approaches.

In the *7 habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey tells of a father who came to him saying, "I can't understand my kid. He just won't listen to me." Covey patiently tried to get the dad to see the inconsistency of his statement. He answered, "You don't understand people by getting them to listen to you. You understand them when you listen to them."

Covey suggest that there are five levels of *listening*:

- 1) We may be ignoring another person, not really listening at all
- 2) We may be pretending to listen
- 3) We may be practicing selective listening, drifting in and out of the conversation and paying attention to only parts of what the other person is saying.
- 4) We may be listening attentively.

But very few of us ever practice the fifth level, the highest form of listening -- empathetic listening, listening with intent to understand, to get inside the other person's frame of reference, seeking to understand them emotionally as well as intellectually. And it's rare to find those who listen empathetically.

A cartoon showed a husband and wife sitting together in the office of a marriage counselor. The husband is speaking, and says, "now that I've told you my side of the story, let me tell you hers."

Follow the advice of the great sage Rabbi Shimon (Avos 1:17) who said, *"All my life I've lived*

among the sages, and I have never found anything as good for oneself as silence." Learn to listen empathetically, so others can talk.

Second, though we differ from each other in so many ways, there *does* exist a universal language. I'm not referring to Esperanto, but rather, the language of *Affirmation*. Try saying the following to people you know: A positive response is guaranteed.

- What do you think?
- I like what you said.
- You did that perfectly
- I'm glad you came. I'm glad you're here.
- I believe in you.

It's amazing how just a bit of validation, affirmation, and sincere interest in others can not only inspire others to work harder and achieve more -- but just plain make them feel good. A few short words can have a huge, positive impact -- both for the people you're trying to communicate with, and for their feeling toward you.

When the Almighty gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, He spoke to each person according to who they were and where they were at. We should realize that the major problem with talking is that everybody does it, yet hardly anyone understands how to do it properly.

Seek first to understand, then, to affirm, and then, seek to be understood. Our ability to communicate effectively and respectfully depends upon it.