Sermon/ Drasha Berashis: "Is Anyone Listening?"

The South Bronx in 1950 was the home of a large and thriving community, predominantly Jewish. In the 1950s the Bronx had synagogues, mikvas, kosher bakeries, and kosher butchers - all the amenities one would expect from an Orthodox Jewish community.

Due to the postwar baby boom, the South Bronx had its own baby equipment store, Sickser's. Sickser's specialized in "everything for the baby" as its slogan ran. It had cribs, baby carriages, playpens, high chairs, changing tables, and toys; everything a baby -- or at least, a baby's parents -- could want or need. Mr. Sickser ran a profitable business in a neighborhood of an expanding child population.

And the language of the store was -- no surprise -- primarily Yiddish

One particularly busy spring day, Mr. Sickser couldn't handle the unexpected throng of customers. Desperate for help, Mr. Sickser ran out of the store and stopped the first young person he saw on the street. "Young man," he panted, "how would you like to make a little extra money? I need some help in the store. You want to work a little?"

The tall, lanky black boy of 13 years old flashed a toothy smile back. "Yes, sir, I'd like some work."

"Well then, let's get started."

The boy followed his new boss into the store. Mr. Sickser was immediately impressed with the boy's good manners and demeanor. As the days went by and he came again and again to work and help, Mr. Sickser became increasingly impressed with the young man's diligence, punctuality, and readiness to learn. And he was particularly impressed with his new worker's ability to listen to the needs of each customer. He was a young man who really seemed to care.

Eventually Mr. Sickser made him a regular employee at the store. It was gratifying to find an employee with an almost soldier-like willingness to perform even the most menial of tasks and to perform them well. From the age of 13 until his sophomore year in college, this young man put in from 12 to 15 hours a week.

Although the young man had Jamaican origins and had little familiarity with Jewish culture, he was a quick learner and good listener. To the pleasant surprise of many customers whose English wasn't so great, this young black man was able to communicate fairly well in Yiddish.

What ever became of Mr. Sickser's protege? He went on to become a great success in life. But for those who haven't figured out who is 'the hero of this story' -- and for the rest of us -- I think it's worthwhile to focus on the qualities that made Mr. Sickser's young worker such an exceptional success.

And those qualities are to be a caring, compassionate listener.

Ethics of the Fathers (1:17) states in the name of a prominent rabbi: *“All my life I have been raised among the Sages, and I have not found anything better for oneself than silence.”*

Most people are pretty good at talking, but it's rare to find a good listener.

Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. FDR regularly complained that no one really paid any attention to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment.

To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, the President murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. G-d bless you, sir."

It wasn't until the end of the line while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that the President's words were actually heard. Calmly, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

The importance of being a caring, compassionate listener makes a surprising appearance in this week's Torah portion.

One wouldn't think that the Creator would need any help to complete the work of creation. Surely, Hashem was perfectly capable of creating anything He chose to create. And yet, on the seventh day of creation He said, *Naaseh adam*. Let us make man." Whose help was He seeking? And why?

Our Sages explain that Hashem was consulting with the angels, inviting their participation in the process of creating mankind. Although He obviously did not need their participation, Hashem was teaching us to be sensitive to protocol and proper behavior. Specifically: Before undertaking a major project, consult with others.

Why is this lesson important?

On the one hand, every person is infinitely valuable, created in the image of G-d. On the other hand, there are people who don't fulfill their purpose and design.

How then do we evaluate a person?

The Torah is teaching us that we look to see if he is attuned to others or if he is totally egocentric. Only a person who recognizes that there is much to be learned from the knowledge and experience of his peers, who is sensitive to the feelings and sensibilities of others, truly has the potential for growth and fulfillment as a the type of human being which Hashem intended to create.

Several years ago 15-year-old Douglas Maurer, of Creve Coeur (St. Louis) had been feeling bad for several days. His temperature was ranging between 103 and 105 degrees, and he was suffering from severe flu-like symptoms. Finally, his mother took him to the hospital. Doug was diagnosed as having leukemia. The doctors told him in frank terms about his disease. They said that for the next three years, he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugarcoat the side effects. They told him he would go bald and that his body would most likely bloat.

Upon hearing this very difficult news, Doug went into a deep depression. His aunt called a floral shop to send an arrangement of flowers. She told the clerk that it was for her teenage nephew who has leukemia. When the beautiful flowers arrived at the hospital, Douglas read the card from his aunt. Then he saw a second card. It said:

Douglas--I took your order. I work at the florist. I had leukemia when I was 7 years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley.

Douglas' spirit was revived and his depression was broken.

It's funny: Douglas Maurer was in a hospital filled with millions of dollars of the most sophisticated medical equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with medical training totaling in the hundreds of years. But it was a salesclerk in a flower shop, who -- by taking the time to care, and by being willing to go with what her heart told her to do -- gave Douglas hope and the will to carry on.

By all reports, Doug is now in remission, and doing quite well.

The above-stated teaching from Ethics of the Fathers (... I have not found anything better for oneself than silence) affirms that silence is indeed golden. But there are times when it is permissible and even desirable to speak. Maimonidies (Rambam) identifies three categories of acceptable categories of speech -- first and foremost, speaking words of Torah.

However, speech does not have to be about G-d and religion to be valuable. Even light speech may be worthy if it is an expression of caring and concern for others. Kibbitzing with another in order to befriend him or her, to show an interest in the other and to become a part of his life: All such speech is a form of using our Divine gift properly.

Some of you might have heard that the St. Louis Cardinals are in the playoffs.

The Cardinals -- a consistent success on the field -- are also a highly desirable destination for players throughout the league. The best fans in baseball create an environment where players from other teams jump at the chance to play in St. Louis. And once they sign with or are traded to the Cardinals, they typically improve or revitalize their careers.

Pitcher John Lackey said moving to the National League, where the pitcher bats, has made his job easier, but the supportive culture of St. Louis has helped, too. “It’s got to be the politest fan base I’ve ever been around,” Lackey said.

Even opponents get treated with respect. Last month, Michael Reed, a 22-year-old rookie outfielder for the Milwaukee Brewers got his first major league hit against the Cardinals at Busch Stadium. Fans gave him a rousing round of applause. Skip Schumaker, an unspectacular former Cardinal second baseman and outfielder, got a standing ovation when he returned with the Cincinnati Reds earlier this year.

Sports psychologists say Lackey and his teammates are benefiting from a phenomenon known as “social facilitation,” which is a person’s awareness and response to being observed by someone who appears to care about what they are doing. In one of the landmark studies in the field from 1983, 36 college-age runners were timed while running two, 45-yard segments of a path. Only runners who were observed by someone ran the second segment faster.

Psychologists call it "social facilitation." We call it "Nosay b'ol im chaveiro" (Ethics of the Fathers 6:6) -- sharing your friend's burden -- being caring, encouraging and supportive.

Perhaps the earliest source for this teaching is today's lesson from Genesis. In the context of the creation of man, Hashem teaches us that while a tree is a tree and a flower is a flower no matter what, a human being who has no use for other people's advice is not much of a human being. He is not a mensch. A mensch takes the time to listen and to care.

I'd like to share this final story.

Mr. Goldwasser, an elderly man, was in the witness box.

"How old are you?", asked the attorney.

"I am, kayn ahoreh, eighty two."

"What did you say?"

"I said I am, kayn ahoreh, eighty two years old."

"Please just give a simple answer to my question," said the attorney, "How old are you!?"

"Kayn ahoreh, eighty two." replied Mr. Goldwasser.

The judge then intervened, "If you don't want to be held in contempt of court, the witness will answer the question and only the question."

The understanding and sensitive defense counsel then got up and said to the judge, "Your Honor, may I ask the witness?" and turned toward the witness.

"Kayn ahoreh, how old are you?"

Mr. Goldwasser replied, "Eighty two!"

What ever happened to Mr Sisker's protege?

At the age of 17, the young man, while still working part-time at Sickser's, began his first semester at City College of New York. He fit in just fine with his many Jewish classmates. That was hardly surprising, considering that he already knew their culture and their language. But difficult classes in the engineering and geology courses he chose proved quite challenging. The young man would later recall that Sickser's offered the one stable point in his life those days.

In 1993, in his position as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, two years after he guided the American victory over Iraq in the Gulf War, General Colin Powell visited the Holy Land. Upon meeting Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Jerusalem, he greeted the Israeli with the words "Men kent reden Yiddish" (We can speak Yiddish).

As P.M. Shamir, stunned, tried to pull himself together, the-then U.S. Secretary of State continued chatting

in his second-favorite language. Colin Powell never forgot his early days working at Sickser's.

These days it seems that at least at times, nobody listens. Strive to be a caring, compassionate listener.