



Can You Hear Me Now?

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“Can you hear me now?” Who would have imagined this classic catchphrase from a decade-old cellular service commercial would roar back as the most-repeated phrase of 2020? Paralleled only by: “Unmute. You’ve got to unmute.”

Our digital tools have worked modern miracles, enabling many to work from wherever we are, allowing children to go to school in their pajamas, helping us see friends and family face to digital face through the long and lonely landscape of COVID-19, and even making it possible to come to shul tonight. But they have also caused no end of frustration. There is a verse that we rabbis often recite: “*Kol omer kra v’amar ma ekra?*” “A voice says cry out and I say, what should I cry?” Apparently: “Can you hear me now?”

The more often I have heard that phrase, the more it has haunted me. “Can you hear me now?” is not just a tech-check; it is the foundational cry of every heart: Can you hear me? Is anyone paying attention? Do I matter?

It also calls attention to a fundamental truth of our world: we so often experience the same things in very different ways.

On *Rosh HaShanah*, at our first-ever remote High Holiday services, we asked each honoree, “How are you doing?” For so many, the answer was some version of, “Actually, pretty well.”

I got a call right after *chag* from a young woman in our community who said that moment was tough for her. “That’s not me,” she said. “I don’t feel that. I feel lost. I feel alone. My whole life has been pulled out from under me. What do they have that I am missing?”

We could say it is a matter of perspective – some who have a positive attitude that others lack. But coronavirus in some ways has been a tale of two cities. While some of our lives have been irrevocably torn – struggling with isolation, illness, loss, coming undone trying to juggle pandemic parenting squeezing in 1,000 different zoom links and distance learning apps while meeting our own deadlines, or missing major milestones – for others, this pandemic has been full of silver linings. I hear things like: “We never used to eat dinner together; now we sit down together every night.” “My son or daughter would have been out of the house, grown and flown.” “We’ve learned to bake, sew, interior decorate.” “We’re remote from the Cape, the Berkshires, Maine...honestly things have never been better.”

I was shaken earlier this year when my sister shared with me an image attributed to author Damian Barr. People say we are all in the same boat. “We are not all in the same boat,” he writes. “We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.” The point hit me powerfully. Since then, I have sometimes wondered whether we are even in the same storm.

The facts on the ground are shared – we are all facing a pandemic, we are all sharing the same air, the same government, the same environment. But how we share them is a modern midrash on, ironically, the Torah we were reading exactly as the young woman who reached out to me was struggling with the troubling duality of parallel but partitioned pandemic lives.

Remember back with me – all the action and attention of the second day *Rosh HaShanah* Torah reading are on Abraham and Isaac, the main characters contending with the cosmic catastrophe of the *Akeida*.

But actually, four people set out on that journey through the desert. As Abraham and Isaac are immersed in ultimate trauma, echoing through eternity, there are two characters muted off screen – the youths that Abraham and Isaac left waiting at the bottom of the mountain.

I have spoken of them before as the Torah's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the minor characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet brought to life by Tom Stoppard's inventive imagination as he pulls the spotlight onto them wondering what kind of a story they would tell.

I want to unmute them tonight. What is their experience as the trauma rages? A beautiful breeze. A good meal shared in the sunshine. A bit of boredom.

And what about Abraham and Isaac – are they aware of the youths?

Both the mountain and below are worth exploring – especially on this *Kol Nidrei* night when we commit to leave behind what has limited us in this past year and reach toward the best version of ourselves – because their disconnect is our disconnect.

When we are experiencing trauma, when two weeks turns into two months turns into who knows how long – the whole world can feel like we are bound on the mountain. Similarly, when we build our bubbles in our own little patch of sunshine, it can be hard to connect with the struggles going on just out of view.

Imagine re-reading the Torah to put the four who started the journey in sight of each other. Imagine if awareness of the youths could lend Abraham and Isaac the strength to believe in a world beyond the knife's blade. Imagine if the youths, hearing the undertone of fear in Abraham's voice, could use some of their quiet expansive time to prepare ways to help Abraham and Isaac heal.

What if instead of focusing on what this moment is for me, we reached for a deeper question: what in this moment is asked of me?

Tonight, if you're the youth at the bottom of the mountain weathering the pandemic in relative ease, then the challenge of Elie Wiesel, that "wherever [someone suffers], that place must – at that moment – become the [moral] center of the universe," calls out to you.

And if you find yourself as Abraham and Isaac on the mountain, focus fixed on the terror of the knife's gleaming blade, look up for the ram – unmute the possibility of a world beyond this moment.

Unmute beyond our homes to our neighborhood, our country, and our world. See and join the struggle for more equitable opportunities, for racial justice, for a cleaner, fairer, and safer world. Unmute our elders and the vulnerable among us who are still sheltering behind closed doors, still watching the world between the same four walls, hearing, “We’re all in this together,” and feeling “Yeah, right.” Unmute the joys of celebrations even more precious for how fleeting they are. Because the truth is, most of us are not only Abraham and Isaac on the mountain or only the youths in the sunshine below. We all have ways the pandemic has set our lives on a path we never would have imagined and never would have ordered up.

What if we resolved, tonight, to answer each other's existential call – “Can you hear me now?” by leaning in toward each other? In some ways that is a monumental ask. But in other ways it is something each of us has the power to do no matter where we find ourselves every single day.

I know because it happened to me – in the most unexpected of places. Do you remember those first days back in March? Shutting down so quickly that snow-pants and lunchboxes still hung in cubbies at empty schools – and the doors of the shul shut for the first time in our history.

With seven people in my house, within a few days our groceries needed to be replenished. Try as I might to get delivery, no matter which site I searched, there were no spots. So, out I went – masked, gloved, and anxious – to Trader Joe's. There I found, stretched around the block, a completely silent line.

Everyone I passed as I went to take my place was disconnected, with the same somber look – almost as if you could see the pit in their stomachs in their focused and fearful eyes. There were no friendly greetings exchanged; everyone was here on a mission.

And so it went, step by slow chitchatting step, six feet away from each other in the cold March air. Until from the pocket of a man halfway down the line a phone rang. I nearly jumped as the ring tone shattered the silence.

Incongruously, he started chitchatting with whoever was on the other side about an interview he had been preparing for, and yes, that was cancelled, but yes, he was still doing his vocal exercises, and yes, in a few weeks, when things got back on track, he would be ready. I was several people back from him, but in the ambient stillness, we all heard every word.

Standing in the middle of the parking lot, maybe 12 feet away, was a Trader Joe's employee whose job it was to monitor the line. He started toward the guy who had answered his phone. I thought he was going to ask him to keep it quiet or get off the line. Instead he asked, "You sing? Will you sing for us?"

"I haven't warmed up," the man protested, putting away his phone. "No worries," the attendant replied, "Just sing."

The man looked up, cleared his throat behind his mask and sang: "The most beautiful sound I ever heard..." His soaring voice lilted with emotion. "Maria, Maria..."

Suddenly we were transported. Suddenly the line was breathing again. Suddenly we were no longer just scared and separate souls set on securing our own supplies. Our shared humanity shifted into focus. He unmuted us to each other. As he finished, people smiled under their masks at each other. We looked each other in the eye.

One part of one song. One moment – barely a moment. And off we went to gather our groceries. But with more courage, more calm, more capacity.

That song has stuck in my soul ever since. Because there is nothing inevitable about that moment. It happened because a line attendant took an interest. A line attendant leaned in with an invitation – unmute.

There was nothing inevitable about that moment. It happened because a guy out buying groceries was able to answer the question, “Can you hear me now?” with his song.

While we cannot control whether the pandemic puts us in Abraham and Isaac’s or the youths’ shoes, we all have opportunities to do what the line monitor did: to reach out with a warm invitation to unmute someone’s song.

We do that when we pick up a phone and check in on someone we have not heard from in too long – when we ask, “How are you?” and open ourselves to answers beyond, “Fine.” We do that when we reach beyond ourselves to answer Isaiah’s call from tomorrow’s Haftarah: “Share your bread with the hungry... and offer solace to an afflicted soul.”

When we unmute each other, a whole world of mutual connection snaps into focus. Suddenly, I am not seized with existential suffering while you are having the time of your life. Suddenly I am not standing in the sunshine while you face the trauma of the mountaintop alone.

We can reach toward each other, change each other, by offering what may, even for us, be a simple thing, a reminder that we are part of a community of connection no matter where we are.

There is a whole world calling out tonight, “Can you hear me now?” Now is the time to unmute. Now is the time to sing your song.

Shanah Tovah u’G’mar Chatimah Tovah.