

Erev Rosh Hashanah, September 22, 2025

Our Community as an Orchard: Seeing the Depth in Each of Us

I want you to imagine that you're walking through an orchard. As you walk through the rows of trees, you can feel the sun on your face, hear the birds chirping, and feel the earth under your feet. In this orchard, there are pomegranate and fig trees, grape vines, and beautiful olive trees. You keep walking and come upon a garden. You notice the rows of roses and dahlias, their bright colors inviting you closer. As you get closer to the flowers, you notice small insects slowly crawling up their stems. You can smell the fragrant roses and the pungent earth that is beneath them. As you continue through the garden, you find rows of vegetables—tomatoes, celery, and kale. You notice that some of the tomatoes are half-eaten, as if a small animal came and took a bite. Eventually, you sit down on a bench in the middle of this orchard, in the middle of this paradise, and notice all the different parts of this orchard that make it so beautiful.

As you imagined that orchard just now, it might have sounded like a bit of paradise, an ideal place to sit and to just be. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for orchard is *pardes*, which happens to be where the English word for paradise comes from.<sup>1</sup> When we think about an orchard, it conjures images of life, of sustenance, and of growth. An orchard can be a lovely metaphor for growth and putting down roots. Just as the plants put down roots in an orchard, so do we each put down roots in our community.

This congregation, our community, is an orchard. Our congregation becomes a nourishing, fruitful place *because* of all that each of us brings to it—the diversity of our

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<sup>1</sup> "The Orchard of Interpretation," by the Sefaria Education Team,  
<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/182569?lang=bi>

backgrounds, of our lived experiences, and of our personalities. Of course, all of this beautiful diversity also means that we bring our varied opinions and beliefs to the community, and we are not always going to agree with each other.

This could not have been more evident to me than it was last May when we offered a series called Courageous Conversations. I had the honor of co-leading and teaching these sessions with our congregant Rachel Wegner, who is an expert educator and a member of our Board of Directors. Fourteen people committed to meeting for two hours a week for four weeks to practice being in conversation across lines of difference, learning how to sit with the discomfort that accompanies discussions about difficult topics.

I want to commend the people who were a part of this cohort because it is not easy to acknowledge the places where we might be out of alignment with those whom we are in community with. We were able to create a sacred space where people could talk about difficult, emotional topics like antisemitism on the Left and Right, the Israel/Palestine conflict, and the question of democracy in America. We were able to create this space for discussion even though it is easier to stick to topics that feel safe, rather than delve into areas in which we are uncertain about whether our beliefs are similar to those around us. I'm proud of the work the people in this cohort did because they chose to engage with each other, to be vulnerable in a new group, to share their thoughts and listen to others even in moments of ideological disagreement and difference. Through their work in this class, they tried to lay the foundation for remaining a part of our diverse community.

Part of listening is letting go of the impulse to have the perfect response or the desire to be right or to try to change someone's mind. PAUSE. Rather, as author and business consultant

Simon Sinek explains, true listening is about making others feel heard.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Sharon Brous illustrates this in her book, *The Amen Effect*. She tells a story about the time she sat next to a politician on a long flight. The man sitting on the other side of the politician berated the politician the entire flight, insulting her work, her policies, and blaming her for a multitude of issues. At the end of the flight, the man turned to the politician, who had just quietly listened to his barrage, and said, “Thank you for listening to me. This is the first time I feel heard.”<sup>3</sup>

I tell this story not because I condone this man’s appalling behavior; he acted out of pain, projecting his own hurt onto someone else. There are times when we cannot or should not listen. But this story speaks to the power of staying at the table and listening, when we can, if we can, *because* there is such power in listening. Listening without trying to solve, fix, or argue with the other person changes the dynamics of our interactions. Listening is, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l says, one of the holiest things we can do.<sup>4</sup> Listening is the foundation of the orchard, it is the soil that nourishes the plants and feeds the insects. Listening is the key to remaining in community even when we have profound differences. PAUSE.

I want you to go back to that orchard you imagined at the beginning of my sermon because there is another meaning of the word *pardes*. Yes, this means orchard, the orchard that includes not just the beautiful flowers and fruit, but also the bugs, the sun, and water needed to keep the plants alive. The orchard includes the elements that lie just below our line of sight. It includes the things that we have to look more closely at and choose to see and understand their

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Sinek, “The Art of Listening,” [https://youtu.be/qpnNsSyDw-g?si=1WhHmYsvJZG\\_DNcr](https://youtu.be/qpnNsSyDw-g?si=1WhHmYsvJZG_DNcr)

<sup>3</sup> Brous, Sharon. *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024, 189.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/eikev/the-spirituality-of-listening/>

importance in the ecosystem of the orchard. Sometimes, we have to dig a little deeper to fully understand what we are looking at.

One way that we can do that is through a technique for understanding Jewish texts. This word, *Pardes*, is also an acronym, which stands for: pshat, remez, drash, and sod. This is a tool that is used in Jewish tradition for understanding the Torah and symbolizes the depth and richness of Torah study. It is also a tool for listening to, learning about, and understanding others around us. So, *Pardes* stands for the following: *Pshat*: is surface level of the words.

*Remez*: is what is hinted at by those words, or what allegory is suggested by the text.

*Drash*: is an expansion or commentary on the text. For example, the Torah tells us that we must follow the commandments, but the Rabbis expand the teachings of the Torah to mean we can't fulfill commandments without community.

*Sod*: is the secret, mystery, or deeper meaning of the text. An example of this is the mystical idea that when we love others, we touch the divine spark in them.

Just as Torah has layers, so do people. To be in community is to notice the plain truth, the hints, the depth, and even the mystery in one another.

I want to share my own story of how I've experienced this transformation from only seeing the surface, the *pshat*, of my interactions with someone to getting to a deeper understanding, or the *sod* of another person. When I was in rabbinical school, I had a classmate I'll call Ben. From the very beginning, our interactions were difficult. In class he regularly challenged my viewpoints, often with a sharpness that felt dismissive. He made sarcastic remarks, and I quickly concluded that he had no interest in truly hearing me, much less in forming any kind of relationship. While many of my friends counted him as part of their circle, I

intentionally kept my distance. In the classroom, I learned to tune him out; I told myself it wasn't worth listening because his words only irritated me.

Then, one summer, our paths converged in an unexpected way. We were both accepted into the chaplaincy internship at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Suddenly, we were side by side—forty hours a week—in a program designed to stretch us emotionally and spiritually, requiring us to be vulnerable with each other in order to serve patients with integrity and compassion. To be honest, I was apprehensive, even anxious, about what the summer would hold.

However, as the program went on, and the more I got to know Ben, I came to realize that my initial assumptions were incorrect. Before that summer, I had assumed that Ben's sarcasm and jokes were at my expense. As I got to know him, I realized he was laughing with me and not actually at me. As we worked together, I learned that what I perceived to be stiltedness was perfectionism, something we both struggled with and could bond over. This experience allowed me to get to know Ben, learn about him, and understand him better, and we became close friends. I would have missed out on having this supportive, smart, and kind person in my life if I hadn't been able to look past the *pshat*, the surface, of our interactions.

We were given the opportunity to connect because of our internship. Regardless of what brought us together, this experience was powerful. I saw first-hand how important it is to not dismiss people based on our initial interactions, and to try to keep looking for their inner light. This profound shift in my relationship with Ben marked a turning point in my life and changed how I interact with others. I'm grateful for this gift and opportunity to dig deeper, beyond the surface of my interactions, so that we could get to that deeper level of knowing and understanding each other. Without it, it would be easier to continue to jump to conclusions with

people based on my surface interactions with them. Now, I have more practice pausing and listening to get past the surface and fully listen to others to understand their perspectives and what they are saying.

On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, after the month of Elul in which we began the process of doing our own *cheshbon ha nefesh*, accounting of our souls, we dive into the process of thinking about the new year. In this time, when we think about how we want to improve ourselves in the coming year. We want to acknowledge where we missed the mark and how we can learn from what we've done in the past to do better in the future and strive to become our best selves. One way to do that is to practice listening and remaining in dialogue and conversation even when we encounter the inevitable reality of disagreement and difference.

It is crucial to listen and to bear witness to each other. During the High Holy Days, we are obligated to *lishmoa kol shofar*; listen to the voice, or to the call, of the shofar. We are not all commanded to be the one to sound the shofar, but we *are* all commanded to listen to its sound, to let the sound awaken us and allow ourselves to be open to what it is telling that we need to work on in the new year. Each time that we recite the Shema as a community, we begin with the words *shema yisrael*: listen, Israel. We remind ourselves of the importance of listening to each other and of our connection to each other as *am yisrael*, the Jewish people. For us to stay in community with one another, we cannot disregard the importance of listening. It is crucial that we stay in conversation and try to see past the *pshat*, the surface. We do this so that we can continue to create the orchard of our community, creating a thriving place with diversity and beauty in both our shared values and experiences as well as in our differences.

In this new year, as we imagine how we want to cultivate the orchard of our congregational community, or of our family, school, and workplace communities, we can keep in

mind this acronym of *pardes*. We can go through the steps of *Pardes*, remembering to look past the *pshat*, the surface. We can pause and inquire with non-judgmental curiosity about the words and beliefs of those around us. As Rabbi Sharon Brous notes, “curiosity is the birthplace of compassion.”<sup>5</sup> We can then move towards making connections between what the person in front of us is saying and own thoughts and beliefs. And we can practice trying to get ourselves to be able to listen, so that we can get at and understand the underlying concerns or needs of the person we’re in conflict or conversation with.

Our challenge in the new year is to look past the surface words and surface interactions, to push ourselves to not be reactive to what others say, but rather to pause and listen so that, together, we can lay the foundations for new growth in our orchard through listening and remaining in community.

May this new year be a year of listening, a year of undertaking the task of being in community, and a year of appreciating the diversity of our orchard. Shanah tovah.

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<sup>5</sup> Brous, *The Amen Effect*, 155.