In August, the news reported on the gruesome death of eighteen year-old Michael Brown, whom Officer Darren Wilson fatally shot six times in Ferguson, Missouri. The shooting caused civil unrest in the St. Louis suburb. Many believed that Brown, a young black man who was also unarmed, surrendered to Wilson, a white police officer. Unrest led to vandalism. Vandalism led to looting. Looting led to violence. And violence led to a militarized police response.

It was chaos in Ferguson, Missouri. The horrific scenes in Ferguson easily remind us of the Detroit Riots in 1963, and especially the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 where the Los Angeles black community rioted after a jury acquitted four police officers of the charge of assault with a deadly weapon and use of excessive force on Rodney King, an unarmed black man.

Michael Brown was only eighteen years old. He was going to be a freshman in college a week later. He wanted to be an engineer. He was a son. He was a brother. He was a cousin. And he was a friend. His death is a moment in life when we know that our words or thoughts can’t comfort his family. And this is surely a moment in life when our sacred literature can’t help his family make any sense of the tragedy. How do we as Jews comfort the Brown family? And, what is our proper response to this tragedy?

Our tradition calls for us to comfort the mourners. And, our tradition reminds us to investigate the facts before making a judgment. Pirkei Avot, “The Ethics of our Fathers,” teaches us that “The world stands on three things: on truth, on justice, and on peace, as it is said [in the prophetic book of Zechariah 8:16], ‘Execute truth, justice, and peace within your gates.’” And when it’s time to make a judgment after a critical examination of the facts, the Talmud states that, “A judge should always regard himself as though a sword were hanging over his head.”

And as our sacred literature instructs us to examine the facts before rendering a judgment, so too, does our American legal system. [As the Supreme Court ruled in 1895], “The law presumes that persons charged with a crime are innocent until they are proven by competent evidence to be guilty.” And in the Michael Brown tragedy, we count on the Missouri Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches to enforce its responsibility to investigate the facts objectively before deciding the next legal procedure. Officer Wilson rightfully deserves due process of the law. And Chal va-chomer, “All the more so,” do we expect members of the clergy to embody what our tradition instructs us to do in judicial matters: investigate the facts; don’t rush to judgment because we don’t know all of the facts about the Michael Brown shooting.

However, many media personalities, politicians, community leaders and the clergy already rendered a judgment before a formal investigation…before a grand jury…before an indictment…before a trial…and before a verdict: Officer Darren Wilson murdered Michael Brown! They protest and shout loudly, “Justice for Mike Brown!” Even the Governor of Missouri, Jay Nixon, said that, “A vigorous prosecution must now be pursued.” Shouldn’t the Governor have said, “A vigorous investigation must now be pursued?” Officer Wilson may have murdered Michael Brown. Officer Wilson may have murdered Brown because he was black.

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1 See Avot 1:18, cf. P. Ta. 4:2, 68a
2 BT. Sanhedrin 7a
3 Coffin v. United States, 165 U.S. 432 (1895)
And if a jury of his peers finds evidence against Officer Wilson, he, therefore, is guilty. But, the grand jury will continue to hear evidence until the middle of October. So how can Officer Wilson be guilty already in the eyes of so many?

The Michael Brown shooting reflects a human condition that remains present in our lives: We can be judgmental. And at times, it is easy for us to rush to judgment about others we know or do not know. And, when we don’t have the facts, or when someone disagrees with our politics or opinions, we can rush to judgment. Often times, when we meet someone for the first time, when we interview someone for a job, whenever we react to a new or controversial idea, whenever we are faced with making a decision quickly under distress, we can make a rush to judgment.⁴

See, the facts surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown remain largely unknown.⁵ Eyewitnesses are contradicting each other. One witness said that Wilson shot Brown with his hands in the air surrendering. Another witness said that Brown charged at Wilson. A recent Washington Post article reported that Wilson might have suffered an orbital bone fracture after a scuffle with Brown.⁶ [But] these accounts aren’t facts…they are simply rumors. We don’t know happened. So [then] how can so many people rush to judgment about this case? How can so many people, especially people in leadership and in clerical roles, sentence Officer Wilson without knowing the facts? What’s really going on here? What is the subtext behind this horrible tragedy?

Unfortunately, the subtext behind the Michael Brown shooting is that racial tension simmers and seethes beneath the surface in Ferguson, Missouri, Sanford, Florida, Los Angeles, California, New York, and many cities throughout our country. To understand truly the anger in Ferguson and in other American cities is to understand what lies beneath it – the anguish of a spiritually broken community – a community filled with anger, and a community filled with the presence of a militarized police. The subtext also teaches us to step back truly and to listen empathically to the pain of the black community in Ferguson and throughout America. And the subtext teaches to understand sincerely this tragedy from their standpoint: a recalling of LAPD’s beating of Rodney King. And the recalling of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed black man whom four New York Police Officers shot nineteen times.⁷

So, what do we do then? What do we take away from the Michael Brown shooting, especially if we have no connection to him and to his family? But most importantly, how do we respond to the current human condition that remains in our lives – we can make a rush to judgment? When we don’t have the facts, what should we do to prevent ourselves from rushing to judgment? When we disagree with someone’s politics, what should we do to see him or her…still as a human being and [not make a rush to judgment?] Maybe it’s really all about listening. Maybe it’s really about us becoming better listeners. And maybe it’s about us becoming empathic listeners. But, how do we become better listeners? And how, especially, do we become empathic listeners?

Anthropologists recently conducted a study about ethnic groups and listening. The study found that Native Americans have the longest wait time when answering a question. [See], Native Americans genuinely appreciate a person’s thoughts and words and want to respect the person when he or she speaks before answering. [The wait time was roughly 5-7 seconds]. On

⁵ See Joe R. Hicks, “What’s behind the Rush to Judgment in Ferguson Missouri?” The Jewish Journal
⁷ I would like to thank Rabbi David Frank for his suggestion here.
the other hand, Italians and Jews both have the shortest wait time when answering a question. [The wait time was negative 1-3 seconds – meaning, we interrupt]. We often hear the joke, “Two Jews, three opinions.” Perhaps this joke speaks to our poor listening skills. We need to become better listeners and empathic listeners. Then, we won't make a rush to judgment.

Stephen Covey, the late American educator, wrote that empathic listening entails us getting inside another person’s frame of reference. When we look out through another person’s frame of reference, we can see the world the way that he or she sees the world. We will be in the person’s shoes. [Or in other words, “Seek first to understand…then to be understood.”]

To get to know truly someone’s authentic emotions, someone’s authentic self – whether a spouse, a friend, a boss, and even a stranger, is to listen deeply to the words someone says patiently and without interruption. People want to be understood. And people really want to be understood when they experience adversities in life. Sometimes their emotions will bring the worst out of them. We must not make a rush to judgment. Rather, we must aspire to be empathic listeners who can read what is happening down deep fast. Empathic listeners who can show acceptance and understanding so that our friends and spouses can feel safe to open up a layer after layer until we can see the inner core where the problem really lies. When was the last time we truly listened to each other – when we listened with our hearts opened? Can we find the inner-strength to listen empathically all the time, especially when we experience our hardships in life? If we can do this, then we become discerning people, not judgmental people. We become a holy people by adding depth and meaning to our relationships.

And what if media personalities, politicians, community leaders and the clergy looked inside the frame of reference of Michael Brown and Officer Darren Wilson? And what if they saw how Michael Brown’s saw the world and the way that Officer Darren Wilson sees the world? Maybe they would not have added kerosene to the fire in Ferguson for their own political gain and agenda. And maybe they would have not have made a rush to judgment before a formal investigation…before a grand jury…before an indictment…before a trial…and before a verdict about Officer Darren Wilson.

But, it’s certainly hard for us to become empathic listeners. It’s difficult for us to put our selves in someone’s shoes in order to listen to the real message below the surface. This is a hard practice, but I think we can do it. In 5775, we must strive to become better and empathic listeners. And we when we can listen with our hearts, then maybe, we won’t make a rush to judgment.

And we are a tradition that embodies listening. On Rosh Hashanah, God commands us not to blow the shofar [for the sake of blowing it], but to listen to the sound of the shofar. And the Torah reminds us, “I give you today a blessing… The blessing, that you will listen [to] the commandments of Adonai, your God, which I command you today.” See…it’s really all about listening. Moreover, as Rabbi Frank taught us on Shabbat Shuvah, it’s not surprising that the most foundational prayer
in Judaism, the Sh’mah means “Listen.” We need to shut down the loud noise in order to listen to the softer noise – the noise of reason, the noise of empathy.

In 1 Kings 19, the Prophet Elijah went into hiding after Princess Jezebel threatened his life. Elijah was terrified. But, all Elijah needed to do was to listen truly to God’s voice for guidance. “And behold, Adonai passed by, and there blew a great and mighty wind, splitting the mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind – an earthquake, but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire, kol d’mama daka, the still small voice.”

Sometimes we don’t find the truth in the loudest or most strident voices of mighty winds, earthquakes, or even fires. Rather, we can find truth in the small voice of reason, where God’s holiness resides. In 5775, our challenge as human beings, as Americans, and especially as Jews is to listen truly - to seek out that still small voice. We must listen to that still small voice when the fervor of the moment – whether it’s from media personalities, biased politicians and the clergy who demand justice for Michael Brown without waiting for the facts, or when we find ourselves in a heated argument - drowns the voice. The Torah reminds us, “If you truly listen, you will be to me a treasured people, a light onto the nations.”

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16 1 Kings 19:11b-12
17 I would like to thank Rabbi David Frank for his suggestion here.
18 Cf. Ex. 19:5