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**Towards a Contemporary Canadian Jewish
Pedagogy of Listening**

Abstract

Listening as a field is relatively new, with little research into the teaching of listening or Jewish conceptualizations of listening. A Canadian Jewish framework for teaching listening can provide pathways towards healing from trauma, amplifying diverse perspectives in the context of multiculturalism, and advancing reconciliation. Furthermore, developing and implementing a Canadian Jewish pedagogy of listening could equip teachers, students, and their communities to better thrive in challenging environments, engage across differences, and feel appreciated. If deployed widely, these approaches have the potential to make a substantial impact beyond the Canadian Jewish community, both nationally and in the field of listening as a whole, at a time of rising disagreement, adversity, and tension.

Résumé

L'écoute en tant que domaine est relativement nouveau, et peu de recherches se penchent sur l'enseignement de l'écoute ou sur les conceptualisations juives de l'écoute. Un cadrage juif canadien pour enseigner l'écoute peut ouvrir la voie à la guérison de traumatismes, à multiplier les perspectives dans le contexte du multiculturalisme ainsi qu'à faire progresser la réconciliation. De plus, l'élaboration et la mise en œuvre d'une pédagogie juive canadienne de l'écoute pourraient permettre aux enseignants, aux élèves et à leurs communautés de mieux s'épanouir dans des environnements difficiles, de s'engager au-delà des différences et de se sentir appréciés. Si elles sont déployées à grande échelle, ces approches ont le potentiel d'avoir un impact substantiel au-delà de la communauté juive canadienne, tant à l'échelle nationale que dans le domaine de l'écoute dans son ensemble, et ce à une époque de désaccord, d'adversité et de tension croissantes.

Listening as a field is relatively new, research into the teaching of listening is limited, and Jewish frameworks—let alone Canadian Jewish frameworks—for listening pedagogies are scarce. In the face of this void, articulating and implementing Canadian Jewish conceptualizations of listening and listening instruction has the potential for tremendous impact. Situating explorations in an academic context, this article argues for the importance and value of a particularly Canadian Jewish way of thinking and teaching about listening, presents possible directions for deeper exploration, and suggests next steps in investigation and development.

Listening and Listening Pedagogy

Listening's relative novelty as an academic area means that both listening and methods for teaching it are emerging and evolving, with its growth in sophistication and prominence, in part, responses to increasing social and political polarization and

conflict.¹ Jewish perspectives on this topic dating back millennia are part of this unfolding, and are relevant to both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts.

Listening

Although speaking receives more attention, especially in curricula, listening plays a more significant role in communication.² Attempts have been made to stitch together a unified framework and common definition for “listening.”³ However, the past decade’s research has largely put aside this quixotic effort and accepted—and even welcomed—the diversity of definitions and metrics.⁴ Indeed, no fewer than sixty-five distinct methods for analyzing listening exist, and the diverse disciplines associated with listening demand a certain flexibility.⁵

Nestled among these various strains is interpersonal listening, “an interactive process that occurs between people as they exchange and create messages, collaboratively and interdependently, through an interwoven combination of verbal and nonverbal behavior.”⁶ Notably, listening is a co-constructive and interdependent venture, with listeners and disclosers affecting each other’s behaviour to partner in generating meaning.⁷ As such, influential conceptualizations for interpersonal listening incorporate relevant situational and personal context.⁸

Regardless of definition or measurement method, effective interpersonal listening impacts all involved. Disclosers feel reduced anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and defensiveness, demonstrate increased creativity, and have a stronger sense of identity, while listeners are regarded as more trustworthy, attractive, and professionally effective.⁹ Listening’s impact is also held by the listener and the discloser *together*, deepening their connection, bolstering mutual trust, and strengthening relationships in communities and organizations.¹⁰

Because of the personal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal nature of the activity, listening encounters are tied to the participants themselves.¹¹ More specifically, individuals have preferred listening styles, with culture, identity, gender, and personality traits playing a role.¹² For this reason, researchers have drawn attention to intercultural listening’s complexities and the importance of navigating intercultural listening with care, especially given power discrepancies among listeners and disclosers.¹³

Listening Pedagogy

Just as listening is under-surveyed, examinations of listening pedagogy are few; although most communication centres on listening, it receives disproportionately little curricular attention, far less than the amount of time devoted to speaking.¹⁴ A century ago, listening education was typically entwined with classroom management and student behaviour. Its overriding aim was to compel pupils to listen to and obey

their teachers.¹⁵ Dewey criticized this as problematic and instead emphasized listening education as essential to building and maintaining a democratic society.¹⁶ In contrasting dialogue and banking learning, Freire channeled Dewey to label the latter as a system where “the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly.”¹⁷

In the late twentieth century, listening education became an increasing part of curricula, and its positive effects lead to advocacy for its increased instruction across formal and informal settings.¹⁸ Recognizing the limitations of unidirectional listening in the classroom, universities began incorporating teacher listening into pre-service curricula to enable educators to understand and respond to students’ needs.¹⁹ Today, listening instruction is increasingly found in fields as far-ranging as business, fundraising, healthcare, and family relationships.²⁰ With its spread, listening pedagogy has become increasingly nuanced; curricula address affective, behavioral, cognitive, and ethical dimensions, and individual listening strategies, processes, and resources serve as a basis for classroom listening instruction.²¹

Jewish Listening and Listening Pedagogy

Given the extent of Jewish civilization, it is unsurprising that Jewish perspectives on listening abound, with an overwhelming number of traditional and modern sources lending themselves beautifully to explorations of listening. Among the attributes essential for learning listed in the second century’s *Pirkei Avot* are “careful listening” and “moderation in speech.”²² As a more metaphorical and mystical example, the all-encompassing nature of God’s presence originally left no room for an independent universe and hampered creativity, and engaging in *tzimtzum* (“contraction” or “limitation”) was a prerequisite for substance that could be molded into the existing universe; Jewish thinkers encourage individuals to engage in their own *tzimtzum* through listening instead of speaking, thus restraining themselves from monopolizing conversational space and allowing others to share of their own selves.²³

Even beyond Jewish circles, scholars delving into the philosophy of listening cite modern Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.²⁴ In Buber’s transformative “I–Thou” relationships, listening is key because “the relation between speaking and listening is one of reciprocity and mutual dependence and . . . listening plays an essential role in initiating many dialogues by creating a space in which two people can embrace each other as complete individuals.”²⁵ Listening also plays a significant role in Levinas’s attention to “the Other”: when a person actively attends to the Other and sets aside some degree of their own consciousness in an ethical act of vulnerability, “listening not only contributes to an ethical response to suffering, but—through its capacity for attentiveness . . . is itself an ethical response,” an “invisible and inaudible enactment of the ethical relation itself.”²⁶ This encounter reveals “the holy and divine dimension in human beings” and provides “a testimony to the glory of the Infinite.”²⁷

In a related vein, researchers in Jewish education have investigated listening in the context of *havruta* (self-directed paired) learning, noting the listening's importance to holding multiple perspectives, attending to one's partner, heeding one's own voice, and absorbing the text itself.²⁸ Successful listening "enables (learning partners) to build a pool of ideas and to forge collaborative relationships" as part of the learning process.²⁹

A Canadian Jewish Pedagogy of Listening: Potential Explorations

Rather than conclusively delineate a Canadian Jewish pedagogy of listening, this discussion intentionally generates more questions than conclusions (befitting a Jewish pedagogy). More specifically, this section briefly describes milieu- and culture-based pedagogies, suggests contours of a contemporary Canadian Jewish pedagogy, and points towards roles in Jewish communal settings and listening education.

Milieu and Cultural Contexts

The broader setting in which learning takes place can inform a particular pedagogy and learning approach. Labels attached to this vary. Schwab discusses curriculum-making as grounded in part in a student's milieu, which includes "the family, the community, the particular groupings of religious, class, or ethnic genus."³⁰ Milieu can take on especially noteworthy attributes when an individual transitions, either temporarily or for an extended period of time, from one milieu to another, bringing the two into contact—and perhaps conflict.³¹ Recognizing the breadth of what milieu can mean empowers educators to acknowledge and respond to "dictates from out-of-classroom places spilling over and shaping what happens in in-classroom places," as well as the ever-evolving constellation of "person, places and things, all of which are in relationship."³²

In recent decades different approaches have blossomed, such as cultural studies-based research, and theories that articulate and present minoritized perspectives in the face of dominant narratives. Culturally relevant pedagogies, where teachers are "non-judgmental and inclusive of the cultural backgrounds of their students in order to be effective facilitators of learning in the classroom," are increasingly common, as are diverse forms of multicultural education grounded in various communities and identities.³³ Parallel to this, educational research has increasingly welcomed and honoured "funds of knowledge," defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being," especially from minoritized communities.³⁴ This openness has empowered education professionals to mold epistemologies and pedagogies that both flow from and benefit specific communities, even as they aim to ensure marginalized experiences have a place in more influential spheres and are positioned to fundamentally transform society.

These factors are especially relevant in listening and listening pedagogy. As noted above, listening depends on the identities, cultures, and experiences of the process's participants.³⁵ For example, young adults in Israel, Germany, and the United States have distinct communication styles, and their varied preferences in listening style are among the marks of cultural distinction.³⁶ These differences extend to divergent perceptions of listening cognitions, with implications for listening across the board.³⁷ It therefore follows that attributes of learners and teachers, individually and communally, are related to the manner in which listening is taught. As such, a pedagogy of listening grounded in a particular worldview, culture, or bundle of experiences is influenced, at least to some degree, by those characteristics. For current consideration, a Canadian Jewish pedagogy of listening would: be informed by the community's attributes, identities, experiences, and perspectives; present as accessible to and resonant with the community; contribute back to the community; and be able to exert its influence beyond the community.

A Contemporary Canadian Jewish Pedagogy of Listening: Potential Aspects

Implicit in crafting curricula and pedagogies are considerations of value and worth. As any educator knows, limited time compels choices to include—or exclude—particular topics from learning consideration as an axiological articulation of their relative importance.³⁸ As such, independent of its particular content, the existence and deployment of a Canadian Jewish pedagogy of listening would indicate that developers, teachers, learners, and users consider listening to be valuable and worthy of attention. Set against the relative dearth of regard for listening overall, this would be no small statement.³⁹

Any contemporary Canadian Jewish approach to listening pedagogy must be rooted in the communal ethos. However, several prefatory caveats are in order. First, this is not a comprehensive inventory of all aspects of Canadian Jewry, and some Canadian Jews may find that the spotlighted attributes do not reflect their individual experiences or identities. In addition, these attributes are not unique to Canadian Jews—or even necessarily to Jews or Canadians.

Given the multiplicity of Canadian Jewish experiences, a pedagogy of listening situated in this cultural milieu could head in any number of directions. Selecting from this array of possibilities, this section speaks to what Canadian Jews collectively could contribute to both their own community and communities of listening practitioners, educators, and researchers broadly through three potential dimensions of a Canadian Jewish pedagogy of listening—trauma and healing, multiculturalism and multivocality, and reconciliation—and sets out questions for deeper consideration.

Trauma and Healing

Trauma of various types and responses to it are palpable among Canadian Jews. Holocaust survivors represent over a quarter of Canadian Jews over sixty-five, and many of their descendants carry some degree of transgenerational trauma; indeed, some of the earliest studies on intergenerational trauma were based in Canada, and Holocaust remembrance continues to play a monumental role in Canadian Jewish life.⁴⁰

Beyond survivors and their families, Israeli Jews and Jews from the former Soviet Union—groups that carry the weight of their own brushes with trauma and adversity—are also well-represented among Canada's Jews.⁴¹ In addition, the Montreal Jewish experience with violent antisemitism starting in the 1970s contributed to the steep demographic decline of what was once Canada's largest Jewish community. These experiences reinforced past personal and communal experiences with antisemitism and added a dimension of proximity, recency, and imminence around antisemitism in Canada that is less salient in many other large Jewish communities today.⁴² As a compounding menace, recent surges of antisemitism have raised alarm in Canada and globally.⁴³ These illustrations portray a community carrying trauma from diverse sources and in diverse ways.

Being listened to can play a healing role for a discloser who has experienced trauma. This aligns with the finding that open communication in Holocaust survivor families reduces secondary traumatic stress in second- and third-generation descendants.⁴⁴ Accordingly, a stronger emphasis on listening itself could impact the Canadian Jewish community, bringing with it healing, reflection, and a better understanding of our shared history.

But listening is not entirely intuitive and requires intentional education, even under the easiest circumstances.⁴⁵ Reflecting on challenges in listening to Holocaust survivor testimonies, Simon and Eppert note, "As modes of instruction, such accounts carry the injunction 'listen and remember.' Yet how such listening is to be accomplished and what remembrance might mean when mediated through testimony entail pedagogical, ethical, and epistemological considerations?"⁴⁶ If listening is to be a part of a communal response to trauma, an intentionally crafted pedagogy of listening—one that speaks to differing identity-based trauma responses and to Canadian Jewish culture—is necessary.⁴⁷

Developing a listening pedagogy for trauma-affected individuals and communities can be dicey, and any Canadian Jewish iteration must anticipate and respond to the potential effects of trauma. First, research on listening, and teaching listening to those who listen to survivors of trauma, including Holocaust survivors, examine a discloser—not a listener—who has experienced trauma.⁴⁸ Indeed, while a discloser experiencing trauma may benefit from their sharing, the listener may experience

adverse effects from the encounter, a response made more likely if the listener—like much of the Canadian Jewish community—carries the impact of their own traumatic experiences.⁴⁹ Thus, it is less straight-forward to teach listening to those who carry or have themselves experienced trauma, and one can easily imagine numerous challenges that might arise in doing so. It is therefore necessary to incorporate specific techniques to minimize adverse impacts and defensiveness.⁵⁰

Listening to trauma narratives also sparks ethical duties, and pedagogy preparing listeners for such encounters must incorporate this. As one example, in teaching students to listen to survivors of genocide, Low and Sonntag caution against the perils of a listener over- or under-identifying with the discloser and their traumatic episode, encouraging listeners towards Simon and Eppert's "chain of testimony" concept.⁵¹ Under this approach, the relationship between the testifier and witness obligates the witness to "shar(e) that account, testifying to the next witness who then testifies in turn to another..."⁵² Responsibility may weigh especially heavily here as Holocaust survivors pass away, yielding concerns about how younger generations recall—or fail to recall—the Holocaust.⁵³

Incorporating the obligation of listeners to share trauma narratives with additional audiences has parallels in Jewish listening pedagogy. The Haggadah, the central text of the Passover meal, itself translates literally to "telling" and serves to fulfill the obligation of communally reciting, hearing, and teaching about the trauma of slavery in Egypt and subsequent liberation. Similarly, the annual (and, to many, troubling) practice on Shabbat Zachor of listening attentively to narratives about the Amalekites' attack on the Israelites is biblically obligatory and requires the passages' reader to intend to fulfill the listeners' obligations.⁵⁴ While these may not be particularly Canadian in nature, they reflect a Jewish approach that hews closely to a chain of testimony practice and are relevant for the instant purposes.

None of this need be done in a vacuum. Numerous trauma-informed pedagogies currently exist, and other marginalized communities have developed listening approaches as a response to trauma.⁵⁵ Rooting a trauma-informed listening pedagogy in Canadian Jewish particularities can both contribute to and learn from these efforts.

Some key questions that arise in this context:

- How does trauma affect listening for both the discloser and the listener?
- How do the effects of trauma shift how listening can be taught in Canadian Jewish contexts and more generally?

- What are the implications of teaching listening to a community that has experienced and is experiencing trauma, especially at a time when threats are palpable and growing?
- How do we articulate obligations that listening to trauma narratives imposes and cultivate them in listeners?
- How might a Canadian Jewish pedagogy appropriately draw from listening practices in other communities that have experienced trauma and Jewish-grounded resources?

Multivocality and Multiculturalism

Jewish tradition speaks of the seventy faces or interpretations of the Torah, and the catalogue of traditional and modern commentaries that discuss diversity of Jewish thought and practice, along with the importance of disagreement and debate, is lengthy.⁵⁶ Whether hearing the Ten Commandments or tasting manna, each person perceives and understands according to personal capacity and orientation.⁵⁷ This embrace of contradictory perspectives—even if they do not necessarily hold equal merit or validity—is encapsulated in the often-quoted heavenly response to a rabbinic debate: “Both these opinions and those opinions are the words of the living God.”⁵⁸

Jewish tradition’s embrace of intellectual and philosophical diversity meshes with Canadian multiculturalism, which is enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as official government policy.⁵⁹ This has laid groundwork for investment in cultural programs and encouraged “the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins.”⁶⁰ The policy has critics from many directions, but has also been elevated as a global exemplar.⁶¹

Jewish experiences in multicultural Canada are positive overall. Although reality is often more complicated, Jews have been held up as “poster children for multiculturalism” and described as “successful in comfortably integrating into the larger Canadian society while retaining a vibrant internal Jewish religion and culture.”⁶² Further evidencing the value of diverse perspectives, these achievements have been attributed to Canadian Jewish diversity, the inherent tensions of differences, and “a workable synthesis of opposites.”⁶³

Accomplishments of these types—where individuals create community across differences and in heterogeneous national settings—require strong listening skills and an ability to navigate cultural communication differences as diverse as the individuals who hold them. Culture is a “primary determinant” in listening and preferred listening styles, and friction in listening styles can contribute to negative perceptions of

others.⁶⁴ Because abilities to listen to and integrate multiple perspectives provide benefits, the accumulation of listening research has brought with it increased attention to teaching intercultural listening, including an awareness of how listening includes attention to discloser tone, facial expressions, eye movement, and hand gestures.⁶⁵

Jewish educational practices can be important contributors to teaching listening content and style in multicultural and multivocal environments. A form of minority pedagogy, *havruta* learning is structured to educe different and often conflicting perspectives from participants and the text itself, ultimately demanding that participants listen to, hold, and evaluate multiple perspectives.⁶⁶ Holzer and Kent's investigations establish how students' listening abilities develop in ways that "reduce their tendencies to subconsciously project meanings onto the text" and elevate "the importance of listening to a text on its own terms, before rushing in with premature assumptions or forcing it to conform to their own expectations."⁶⁷ Moreover, such engagement in intrapersonal and interpersonal listening "provid(es) students with the skills to examine different interpretations and distinguish between more and less compelling ones."⁶⁸

Beyond listening for content, common Jewish conversational patterns are also instructive in crafting inclusion definitions of "good" listening itself.⁶⁹ Although there has not been examination of Jewish listening preferences, Jewish speech tendencies include cooperative overlapping and high-involvement conversations, practices often interpreted as interruptive, impatient, or rude.⁷⁰ Many of these tendencies more than just differ from standard approaches; they stand substantively at odds with conventional wisdom on effective listening and how listening is typically taught.⁷¹ In fairness, encouraging listeners to interrupt disclosers might be odd pedagogy, especially given gender and other dynamics that interruptions can reflect and reinforce.⁷² That said, to be truly inclusive and integrate Jewish listening tendencies, listening pedagogy must include, explore, and validate listener responses contrary to dominant expectations.⁷³ Doing so produces the following questions, among others:

- How can listening pedagogy enable students to listen to, hold, learn from, and evaluate amongst conflicting perspectives and interpretations?
- What might we learn from Jewish sources about pluralism and multiculturalism that inform how we listen to and include diverse perspectives?
- What can Jewish pedagogies like *havruta* teach us about intrapersonal and interpersonal listening, as well as how to treat texts as a partner to "listen" to?
- How does one determine, listen for, and teach about boundaries on content, method, and manner of communication?

- How might Jews advocate for inclusion of marginalized listening styles to be part of multicultural listening pedagogies?

Reconciliation

Reconciliation between Indigenous peoples on the one hand and the government and non-Indigenous populations on the other has been a long-standing effort in some corners of Canada. With the publication of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), this topic has taken on greater societal prominence, even as there is much critique of the gap between Canadian leaders' words and actions.⁷⁴

It goes without saying that listening plays a critical part in reconciliation.⁷⁵ TRC hearings included honorary witnesses who ensure that stories are "validated and provided legitimacy" in what Dohle calls "witnessing as an agonistic form of listening" and re-share these stories themselves.⁷⁶ In this context, listeners bear witness as "part of a process of coming to know the event, to acknowledge it, and to understand it more fully. The listener to the testimony then comes to understand the event in new dimensions through the process of hearing the testimony."⁷⁷ Moreover, the TRC Final Report and Calls to Action includes dozens of appeals to readers to listen to Indigenous stories and voices, noting that "reconciliation cannot occur without listening, contemplation, meditation, and deeper internal deliberation."⁷⁸ Listening to survivors' testimony serves as a catalyst "to think deeply about what justice really means in the face of mass human rights violations."⁷⁹

While an essential component of reconciliation, listening is not necessarily instinctive or free from difficulty. Simon lays out oft-occurring challenges when non-Indigenous Canadians listen to narratives shared by survivors of Indian Residential Schools, many of which reinforce all-too-common "damage narratives" of Indigenous communities.⁸⁰ Shifting perceptions of victimhood to appreciation of resilience takes intentionality, effort, and an emphasis on empathic, affective, and ethical listening pedagogies.⁸¹

Canadian Jewish relationships with Indigenous peoples and reconciliation are complex. Overarching themes of interactions and conversations include suffering and sovereignty, with encounters featuring Jewish relationships with the Land and State of Israel, articulations of Jewish Indigeneity, and an acceptance of reconciliation as obligation coupled with equivocation on Jewish positionality vis-à-vis settlement and colonialism.⁸² Indeed, Jewish reconciliation efforts often preference Jewish communal education over relationships with Indigenous communities.⁸³ Against a reconciliation landscape, the vast majority of Canadian Jews thus play dual roles as a marginalized diaspora and settlers on Indigenous land, with self-perception focusing more on the former than the latter.⁸⁴

In this Canadian context, Jewish concepts like *teshuvah* (literally, returning, but also repentance) can provide a framework for teaching listening. Like reconciliation, Judaism's extensive development of *teshuvah* dedicates significant attention to listening and action.⁸⁵ Lévinas discusses *teshuvah* as a requirement for interpersonal reconciliation, and others have discussed communal *teshuvah* in the context of racial reconciliation, including with Indigenous nations.⁸⁶ Ruttenberg's recent publication on practical repentance and *teshuvah* includes repeated references to reconciliation, laying the groundwork for further efforts in this area and a more robust pedagogical approach.⁸⁷ While the saying that Judaism is a religion of action more than one of belief may be overly simplistic, an emphasis on instruction in active listening as part of action in *teshuvah* resonates with reconciliation efforts.⁸⁸

The following are some questions that may emerge in exploring listening pedagogy around reconciliation:

- How might listening education be incorporated into Jewish efforts towards reconciliation and enable Canadian Jews to be better partners in reconciliation?
- What can be learnt from Indigenous–Canadian Jewish encounters about teaching those who have experienced trauma to listen to others' stories of suffering?
- How are listening and *teshuvah* intertwined, and how can they be effectively taught and modeled together?
- With emphases on human and personal accountability, how can paradigms for *teshuvah* become a part of listening for reconciliation by, for, and with Jews and others?

Conclusion

This outline is a set of suggestions and a potential starting point. If the Canadian Jewish community were to prioritize teaching listening, it would be necessary to engage in communal conversations and develop appropriate curricula, all premised on an agreement for implementation. Doing so would benefit Canadian Jews through improved attention to listening and stronger listening skills, as well as elevate Canadian Jewish perspectives in the listening world. Moreover, explorations of listening in contexts involving trauma, the role of listening in healing, listening in multicultural and intercultural settings, and centering listening in reconciliation could have a substantial impact beyond the Canadian Jewish community at a time of rising disagreement and tension.

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