

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

## From Rav Binny Freedman

### Portion of Ekev

(2014)

*Silence; total and absolute silence; no one moves; eight soldiers in the middle of the night, actively listening, straining for the slightest sound that might signify something out of the ordinary; a velcro patch; a clink of metal, the sound of a body moving on earth, an AK-47 machine gun slowly being cocked or, worst of all, the pin of a grenade being pulled ....*

That was how ambushes always began; Israeli soldiers are trained to work, especially at night, in silence, learning to pick up the sounds one often might take for granted; sounds which, if heard, can make all the difference between life and death.

How many thousands of soldiers, in how many trenches back alleys and abandoned houses in Aza had to stop to listen these past weeks?

And in this war civilians too were on the front lines, ever listening for the wail of a siren signaling incoming rockets, giving them scant seconds to make it to shelter...

This week, the portion of *Ekev* begins (Deuteronomy 7:12) with the promise that all will be well, if we will but listen.... Which of course follows last week's portion (of *Va'etchanan*) containing the ultimate injunction to listen: the Shema.

*"Hear O' Israel, Hashem is our G-d; Hashem is One."* (ibid. 6:4)

For thousands of years this statement has been the ultimate source of faith; indeed, countless martyred Jews over the ages died with the words of the Shema on their lips.

So why is our faith all about listening? Interestingly, Moshe asks (in last week's portion) to cross over and see the land of Israel; so, what is the relationship between seeing, and listening?

When we were given the Torah at mount Sinai, the entire mountain was enshrouded in a cloud (Exodus 19:9) suggesting that we needed to hear G-d when He spoke to us. Yet at Sinai, it appears the Jewish people somehow *saw* sound!?! (ibid. 20:15) and after all, as everyone knows, *seeing is believing*, right?

It is interesting to note that ancient idolatry and pagan worship was all about the worship of nature; they *saw* beauty and cruelty, power and majesty in the world around them, and they worshipped these forces of nature. In ancient Greece and Rome, which so glorified the body through art and sculpture, worship was visual.

Judaism came into the world and suggested that it was not enough to see the world, because seeing is really *not* believing; we had to *hear* the voice of G-d hidden in Nature. Avraham's original premise for which he was so challenged was that G-d cannot be seen; He must be experienced, and felt. Hence, we are forbidden to fashion idols and make graven images.

Even more, if we are listening to the word of Hashem (G-d), Judaism believes we can communicate and thus develop a relationship with Hashem; something that is certainly lacking in the majestic awe of the beauty and power of the forces of nature, which are to be perceived, but are far from personal.

Today, in the world of the Internet and the iPhone, images flash across our screens so quickly and so constantly, we seem to have lost the capacity to fully understand them, much less develop a meaningful and full relationship with their sources. It is no wonder so many have such difficulty relating to an unseen, omnipotent G-d, viewing Him as a force they cannot see.

Judaism suggests we need to learn to listen. Hashem is so much more than an invisible force; Hashem is very much the ultimate, and even only, audible reality.

So, what does it mean to listen?

While certainly we physically hear sound (as in Genesis 3:10, when Adam and Eve somehow hear G-d in the garden...) hearing in the Torah means so much more. It means to contemplate, and internalize and even to decide to act.

When G-d tells Avraham (Genesis 21:12) to listen to Sarah his wife, (regarding her concerns about Yishmael) clearly the intent is much more than just hearing her audible voice; he is meant to take her words to heart, to internalize them, and even to do as she says.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in an article a number of years ago on the Shema, points out that there is no Biblical word for obedience; indeed, the closest word in the Torah which means to obey is actually to listen! This is nothing short of incredible, especially given that the Torah is a book of commandments (mitzvot). Suggests Rabbi Sacks, perhaps this is because Judaism was never meant to be a religion of blind obedience; we are meant to try & understand, and even develop a relationship with the word of G-d. (Though this does not mean our actions are dependent on such understandings; but rather that we are missing a critical piece of Judaism if we do not make such attempts...)

Interestingly, Moshe's story begins with sight; he is born and his mother *sees* that he is good (Exodus 2:2) and then later saved by the daughter of Pharaoh who *sees* his basket on the Nile river. In fact, the Torah tells us she *sees* that the child is crying (ibid.2:6); one would have expected her to *hear* the baby's cries; ancient Egypt also, was all about the pagan preoccupation with seeing the Gods of nature...

Later, Moshe will begin his Divine journey by *seeing* the burning bush (ibid. 3:2-4) and G-d will teach him that redemption is not about seeing; it is about learning to listen and speak. Despite describing himself as 'not being a man of words' (ibid. 4:10), he will become the ultimate communicator....

In our Western, visual society, we speak of understanding with terms like 'insight', 'hindsight' and 'foresight'.

But the terminology of the rabbis in the Talmud speaks of listening:

“Ta Shma” (Come and listen) meaning to study and understand, and Shma Mina, meaning to conclude; all about hearing and listening.

This war we are fighting here in Israel, whose recent battle ground has been the Gaza strip, is very much about the difference between sight and sound, seeing and hearing. Hamas wants the world to believe what they see: painful images, flashed across laptop screens of terrible scenes full of dead and wounded, innocent civilians, and bombed schools and medical clinics. But to arrive at the truth, one has to hear a much broader story, of civilians used as human shields, unprovoked and indiscriminate missile fire, and slaughtered Israeli teenagers....

And these opposing armies too, have completely different rules of engagement; Hamas’ mission is to strike fear into the hearts of the most innocent and pure, with images of masked terrorists emerging from tunnels armed to the teeth, in search of civilians in kindergartens and synagogues, plastered across the internet, whilst Israeli soldiers are focused on the near impossible task of discerning, in the midst of urban warfare, the difference between friend and foe, innocent and perpetrator, schoolyard and missile storage facility. This cannot be done simply by seeing the picture, it requires the ability to hear the larger story...

In normal combat (if combat can ever be called ‘normal’) things are much simpler: us vs. them; friend vs. foe, black and white.

But in places like Beit Chanun and Beit Lahiya, Jebalya and Sajeyyah in the Gaza strip, it is much more complicated, and Israeli soldiers are expected not just to hear and obey their orders, but to understand and be responsible for their implications as well.

Three thousand years ago, the Jewish people came to teach the world that it is not enough to see the suffering widows and orphans, one must hear their pain and thus be motivated to act for change. And it is not enough to see the light of creation; one must hear the voice of G-d as its creator.

And whatever the world may think and say, we should consider ourselves truly blessed to live in a generation that has produced a Jewish army that does not just shoot on sight, but hears the pain even of those who would seek to destroy us

Wishing us all, truly, a Shabbat Shalom

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