

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Yitro)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Silence; so thick you could cut it with a knife. A silence of such magnitude and such power, I was sure that even the angels in heaven were standing still, in silent awe. I remember it like it was yesterday. The day after Shavuot, the festival commemorating that moment, three thousand years ago, when an entire people stood in silent awe at the foot of Sinai, when, on a road in Gush Etzion, time stopped.

An innocent drive home, on a beautiful road in the mountains of Judea, suddenly cut short by the horrible sounds of gunfire. And Sarah Blaustein, of blessed memory, mother, wife, and beloved neighbor, whose life was cut short so suddenly, would never have the chance to listen to the sweet sounds of her children again. That night, ten thousand people came to the cemetery in Gush Etzion to bid her farewell.

Ten thousand people make a lot of noise, but cemeteries have a way of making people quieter, and a funeral at night, under such painful circumstances, has a way of making time stand still. Suddenly, you just knew the Blaustein family had arrived, and Sarah's coffin had been brought in to the cemetery, because a hush fell over the entire mountain, all at once.

Muffled sobs and many tears, but no-one uttered a word as the coffin was carried to the freshly dug grave; it was as though everyone who had come to accompany Sarah on her final journey understood, that there were simply no words.

My wife and I were standing just behind Shaul Goldstein, the mayor of Gush Etzion. He was not up front on a dais, or in front of a microphone, he was simply there as a citizen of Gush Etzion, and a neighbor of Sarah's from the nearby town of Daniel, to pay his last respects. I doubt he even knew Sarah, especially as she had only immigrated to Israel a short nine months before, but we were all neighbors nonetheless, and he too, was there, silent, alone with his thoughts in the night.

And as Sarah's husband bid his own farewell to his beloved wife, and we listened to the painful words of his parting eulogy, we noticed that Shaul Goldstein was crying.

There were no cameras, it was not a 'photo-op', and I doubt anyone else even noticed, but it is a moment that has stayed with me. There, beneath the stars, in the shadow of the mountains of Gush Etzion, where twenty-two hundred years earlier the Macabees had fought the armies of the Greek empire, a politician cried. In the same valley where fifty years ago the Etzion bloc fell while the world was silent, a politician along with ten thousand of us, heard the pain of his fellow Jews, and just listened.

What does it really mean to listen?

This week we will read the portion of Yitro, and we will relive the experience of the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

In possibly the most important portion of the entire Bible (if any one portion can be more important than another), the portion that recounts the giving of the Torah, we would have expected to begin with the historic account of the Jewish people hearing the word of G-d. Or at least we might have assumed we would begin with the gathering of the people at the foot of the mountain.

But that is not how Yitro begins. Yitro begins with Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, who is not even a Jew, and his arrival at Sinai.

“Va’Yishma Yitro, Kohen Midian, Kohen Moshe, Et Kol Asher Asah Elo-him Le’Moshe, U’Le’Yisrael Amo’, Ki’ Hotzi’ Hashem Et Yisrael Mi’Mitzraim.”

“And Yitro, (High) Priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and Israel His Nation: that Hashem took Israel out of Egypt.” (Shemot 18:1)

*The story of the giving of the Torah at Sinai begins with the idea that Yitro, a non-Jew described as a Midianite Priest (and according to Rabbinic tradition even the High Priest of Midianite pagan idolatry), actually **heard**.*

The Talmud asks a fascinating question:

*“Ve’Chi Mah’ Shamah Yitro U’Vah’?”
“What did Yitro, who came (to Sinai) hear?” (Zevachim 116a)*

And the Talmud continues by suggesting a number of possibilities: he heard of the battle of the Jewish people with Amalek, (Amalek attacked the Jewish people from the rear at the end of last week’s portion, Beshalach.), or of the imminent giving of the Torah at Sinai, or, according to another opinion, of the splitting of the sea.

The question of the Talmud, however, does not seem to make a lot of sense, because the Torah makes abundantly clear exactly what Yitro heard:

“Yitro... heard all that G-d had done for ... Israel ... that Hashem took Israel out of Egypt.”

So if the Torah is so specific about what Yitro heard, one wonders what the Talmud’s question is?

Furthermore, it seems the Torah is suggesting that Yitro’s decision to come to Sinai is very impressive, especially as this portion is actually named after Yitro.

But what, after all, is so incredible about Yitro’s decision to come to Sinai? If you heard about the ten plagues, the great Exodus from Egypt without a shot fired, and the splitting of the sea, wouldn’t you come to Sinai? Who wouldn’t?

*Perhaps the Talmud is not really asking what Yitro heard; perhaps the Talmud is asking what Yitro heard that actually made him come. (“Ve’Chi Mah’ Shamah Yitro **U’Vah’**?”)*

After all, the entire known world, and certainly the nations of Canaan, heard of the splitting of the sea and the events surrounding the Exodus from Egypt. In fact, after the splitting of the sea the Torah is very clear:

“Then were all the generals of Edom gripped by fear, and all the inhabitants of Canaan trembled.” (Exodus 15:15)

And when the spies of Joshua arrive in Jericho for their clandestine mission of spying out the land forty years later, Rachav, who hides them, states very clearly (Joshua 2:9-10) that all the inhabitants of the land tremble before the coming of the nation of Israel, and that they have all heard of the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt.

So the Talmud's question is: since everyone heard of all that Hashem had done for the Jewish people in bringing them out of Egypt, what was it that actually caused Yitro to get up and come to Sinai, when everyone else didn't?

And, we might add, the real question would seem to be why everyone else didn't come?

Truth be told, it is no accident that this portion begins by mentioning what Yitro heard, because this portion is all about learning to listen. What does it mean to truly listen?

Most people are interested in what others have heard, and the assumption is that you hear things because you are listening. But that is not entirely true.

Some things you hear, because you are not really listening, and some things you will only hear if you are really listening.

Sometimes, in a conversation, you can really think you are listening to everything a person is saying; when you are really missing everything they are trying to say.

So often, we think we are listening, but we are not really hearing.

There is a well-known story about Rav Yisrael Salanter, the nineteenth century founder of the Mussar movement, whose goal was to bring Jews back to a deeper sense of Jewish ethics.

One year on the day before Passover, a woman came to Rav Yisroel's house with a halachic (Jewish law) question. She wanted to know if it was permitted to make a Seder on four cups of milk.

Rav Yisroel explained to the woman that the mitzvah of the Seder night is to have four cups of wine, as a symbol of freedom, and promptly gave her fifty rubles to go out and buy wine for the Seder.

His students were astounded by his actions, as fifty rubles was quite a considerable amount of money, and certainly far beyond what any bottle of wine would cost.

Upon asking Rav Yisroel why he had been so generous, he responded:

"You may have heard the woman's question, but you were obviously not listening to what she said. If a woman could ask whether it was permissible to have four cups of milk, she obviously has no money for meat (as milk and meat cannot be eaten together), so I understood that she really needed enough money for an entire Seder.

You see, everyone heard what Hashem had done for the Jewish people in freeing them from Egypt, but that does not mean they were really listening, because if they had really been listening, they would have joined the Jewish people at Sinai.

Perhaps the Torah is sharing a very important message here: before we are ready to receive the Torah, we have to learn how to listen.

And it is interesting to note that, indeed, the beginning of the portion of Yitro is all about listening:

*"And Yitro... **heard**..." (18:1)*

*"And now **hear** my voice (says Yitro) and I will advise you, and G-d will be with you." (18:19)*

*“And Moshe **listened** to the voice of his father-in-law....” (18:24)*

*“And now if you will **listen** and **hearken** to my voice,, and safeguard my covenant, and be to me a special nation...” (19:5)*

“And G-d said to Moshe, behold! I am coming in the thickness of the cloud, in order that the nation will hear when I speak with you, and will believe as well, in you (Moshe) forever.” (19:9)

And indeed, finally:

*“And they said to Moshe: **You** speak to us, and we will **listen**.” (20:16)*

The theme of the portion of the giving the Torah is all about learning to listen, and even Moshe, the greatest prophet that ever lived, listens to Yitro, a pagan priest, and creates the entire Jewish Judicial system based on his advice. (See 18:14-26)

And you have to wonder: how easy was it for Moshe to listen to Yitro? After all, he is about to go up on the top of Sinai, and essentially speak to G-d ‘face to face’, whatever that means. And who is Yitro, a pagan, to suggest to Moshe what to do? Especially as Yitro has been sitting in safety and comfort in Egypt all this time, while the Jewish people had to watch their babies tossed into the Nile River like so much garbage.

Moshe could have responded quite simply to Yitro’s suggestions by saying: “I listen to G-d!”

But Yitro, at the beginning of the portion is advising Moshe on how to appoint judges and set up the first Jewish judiciary in history, and what is the job of a judge if not to listen? So Moshe listens....

Before we are ready to listen to G-d, the Torah tells us we have to learn to listen to each other.

Hence the essence of Jewish faith: the Shema. Ever wonder why the verse Jews have perceived to be the most powerful and significant verse of the entire Torah, is:

***“Hear O’** Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One.” ?*

*Why not: ‘**See O’** Israel’, or ‘**Know, O’** Israel.’? Clearly our relationship with G-d begins with our ability to listen to each other. Indeed, one might read this verse as “Shema’, Yisrael”: ‘Hear Israel’; learn to hear your fellow human being, and only then will Hashem be our G-d. Only when we learn to hear each other will be ready and capable of developing our relationship with G-d.*

I learned a long time ago, that when people ask you questions, it isn’t always because they want answers; often it is because they want you to hear their questions, and most often, their pain.

Before we are ready to hear the voice of G-d, we have to learn how to listen to each other.

Note that in 19:5 Hashem says He will come in the thickness of the cloud (at Sinai) which means the Jewish people will not see G-d, they will only hear Him.

And ultimately, the difference between seeing and listening, is that I can choose where I wish to look, but unless I choose to block my ears and not hear at all, I have no choice in what I listen to; whatever sounds surround me, I will hear. Sounds I can hear, then, are coming at me all the time, but I have to choose whether to let them in.

Which is the essence of all relationships, be they with G-d or with one's fellow human beings. Ultimately, in order to have a healthy relationship with anyone, you have to be willing to let them in. And the secret to doing this is learning to listen.

And, incidentally, the greatest challenge is to learn to listen to your self.

So many catechisms that we have today are thrown about with little regard to what they really mean. For example, how often do we see an acquaintance and ask: 'How are you doing?' But do we really care how they are doing? Are we really waiting to hear about their lives? Or is it just one of those perfunctory rituals which has long since lost its meaning? Are we really ready to listen?

It is interesting, given how simple and indeed effortless listening would seem to be, just how difficult it seems to be for people to really listen to each other, and one wonders, since learning to listen to each other would seem to be such a natural thing to do, as well as so eminently logical, what prevents us, or at least holds us back from really listening?

Perhaps this is why Hashem comes in a cloud. Because when you see something so vividly, it is hard to really listen.

Once we see something, we automatically form an opinion, and even a judgment. And then it becomes very hard to hear what is really there.

I remember one of those special moments I shared a long time ago with our eldest son, Yonatan, outside our house. Yonatan, aged two at the time, was fascinated by a long line of ants making its way back and forth across the path in front of the house.

He pointed to an ant carrying what seemed to be an impossibly large twig and asked me what it was, to which I responded with the infinite knowledge only a parent can assume: "That's an ant."

And of course, confident in my role as an educating father and source of all wisdom on that afternoon, I proceeded to pronounce the word 'ant' a number of times, so Yonatan would 'get it'. ("Can you say 'Ant'?")

*Then he pointed to another ant and asked me what **it** was, and again I confidently explained it was an ant. Only this time he didn't seem to get it, so I again went through the same routine, of repeating the word so he would finally get it. But he kept pointing back to the first ant with the twig, until I finally realized that it was really me that wasn't getting it.*

I had gotten so used to the idea of the word 'ant' that I used that word for all ants, which are after all the same. And it took a two year old to point out to me that if one of them was 'ant', then the other one couldn't possibly be 'ant' as well. They were two totally different and separate living organisms. And if Hashem created each of them, then they are each much more than just the word 'ant'. They are each living, moving, instinctive and reactive creatures, and every single one of these living organisms that we just call 'ant', is really an entire world unto itself. We have gotten so used to calling them 'ant' we have forgotten what they were before they became the word 'ant'.

And our challenge is to re-discover the creation known as 'ant', the way we saw it before it was an 'ant'. And of course, this is not just about ants, because we do this with each other all the time. We love to place each other into convenient little boxes. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox; right wing or left wing, black or white.

And we need so desperately, as a people and as a world, to learn to see each other the way we were before we invented all these boxes. And since the boxes are very much a part of what and how we see, the way in which to break down all these walls is to learn to listen.

In fact, this is part of the reason that traditionally, when we say the verse of the Shema in prayer, we actually cover our eyes. Because we want to get back in touch with what it is really like to listen. And that, in the end, is how we bring One-ness back into the world. That is how Hashem becomes 'Echad': Hashem becomes One, on a certain level, when we are one. And Hashem at Sinai comes to us in a cloud so we can listen, and not be distracted (or overwhelmed) by what we see.

And it is fascinating to note that in the entire Torah, we are never commanded to listen.

Often the Torah tells us: "Im Shamoah' Tishme'u'..." "If you will listen", because the listening has to come from us. And the greatest challenge is to be able to hear people's pain before they have to say anything.

If you are a teacher, and one of your students is in pain, and you don't notice, something is wrong. And if you are a parent, and your child is in pain, and you don't know it, even before he or she does, something is wrong. And of course, this is true with all of our relationships. When I know my wife's question even before she asks it, then our relationship is growing.

And true friendship is all about hearing what a friend needs well before they ever have to ask. If love is all about giving, then true love begins when I know what I have to give to another, because I can hear what they really need.

And of course, this is the essence of our relationship with G-d. Am I listening to what Hashem really wants? Do I hear that still, small voice within, which is the part of G-d inside each one of us, and am I ready to listen to that voice?

How often do we give what we want to give, and not really what the other person needs to receive?

The afternoon of Sarah Blaustein's murder, my wife received a call from her sister-in law, Cheryl, whose daughter Aliza is one of Maayan (our daughter)'s closest friends. Aliza had made Aliyah a number of years earlier, straight into first grade, and their teacher, recognizing that Aliza knew not a word of Hebrew and needed help, paired her up with Maayan who took her under her wing. Every day after school they would get together and Maayan would teach her a couple of new Hebrew words. Gradually, the two had become best friends.

And on that terrible afternoon, after discovering her aunt had been killed, Aliza, absolutely beside herself, asked for Maayan. So her mother called to Doreet to ask if she could bring Maayan over. When they pulled up to the house and Maayan got out of the car, Aliza came running out and the two of them fell into each others' arms sobbing hysterically.

*I remember asking Maayan later what she had said to Aliza, and her response was: "Ein Milim."
"There were no words."*

Sometimes, there are no words to encompass what needs to be said; sometimes we are only able to listen, and to be there.

We hear of the terrible things going on in Israel today, but are we really listening? Do we hear the cries of our brothers and sisters in Israel? Do we feel their pain? How many children will sit at Shabbat tables this Friday night with no parent to make Kiddush for them? How many wives will sit alone during

the beautiful Eishet Chayil song traditionally sung on Friday night by husbands to their wives? If ten-year-old girls can be sobbing in each other's arms, and we are silent, then we are not really listening.

If we are truly listening, then none of them will be alone, because we will, each in our own way, be with them.

Over three thousand years ago, a world heard of the greatest miracles in the history of the world, but it didn't make a difference, because they weren't really listening.

Our generation has lived through some of the most incredible events in history.

We have seen the return of our people to their ancient homeland, and the re-birth of an independent commonwealth of the Nation of Israel, risen like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Holocaust, against all odds.

We have seen the return to Jerusalem, our holy city, in six days of creation, and we have witnessed the seemingly impossible salvation of the State of Israel, from its virtually assured destruction on Yom Kippur, in 1973.

We have seen scud missiles fall on the most densely populated area in Israel; without any direct casualties, and we have watched the crumbling of the Iron curtain and the return of millions of Jews in triumph against what had once been one of the mightiest empires of our day.

And we have even seen the return, after twenty-five hundred years, of what many believe to be the lost tribe of Dan, on the wings of eagles, in the most comprehensive and daring air rescue mission in modern history.

We hear of all these miracles, but we do not listen, because like the ancient Canaanites we do not come, and we are, most of us, still here in America and in England, in Switzerland, and in France, and even in Germany.

So here is one last thought for this week: as we listen to the Torah portion this week in our Synagogues, let us at least ask ourselves, how we can help to make the Jewish people a little bit more 'One'. Perhaps some of us have finally heard enough and are ready to go home. Ultimately that is where all our children will be.

And if for whatever the reason, some of us are not yet ready to do that, before we delve into re-affirming our relationship with the same Torah we received so long ago, let us first re-affirm our relationship with each other, as one people, without walls or boxes or boundaries, and find, all of us, new ways to learn to listen.

Shabbat Shalom,

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