

Parsha Va'etchanan

Before I begin my D'var Torah, I would like to reiterate some of the parting remarks of our dear Rabbi Netter that concluded last week's Sabbath service. There will be nobody who delivers a Drash as he does. His message was so clear and meaningful and spiritual that none of us can duplicate his powerful sermons. But in Pirkei Avot 2:21, Rabbi Tarfon says "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either. Meaning for me, that with our dear rabbi no longer with us in the Temple, we will not only persist but with outstanding congregants in this Synagogue, we will prevail. As Rabbi Netter concluded his sermon last week, he stated the highest form of human life is to create a society built on justice, equality and peace. As a congregant and as a student of Torah, it is my wish to deliver a message that will be meaningful and interesting.

This week's Parsha has so many important commandments such as to love God (6:5), to study Torah (6:7), to tie tefilin on the arm, to place tefilin on the head (6:8), to affix a mezuzah on the doorpost of our house (6:9), a repetition of the Ten Commandments, and so forth. But perhaps the most important commandment in this Torah portion is to recite the Shema every morning and every evening and to believe in the unity of God. Ben Zoma, when asked what is the most important verse in the Torah, answers the Shema Yisrael.

There are 2 subjects that I have chosen to discuss. The first is to briefly look at the Shema prayer on page 1024 and look at the enlargement of the Ayin at the end of the word Shema and the enlargement of the Dalet at the end of the word Echad. They spell the word Aid which means witness and therefore we as Jews give testimony to the unity of the one God. But there is another interesting idea provided in the book entitled *The Shema*, written by Rabbi Norman Lamm, prominent Orthodox scholar. He has another interesting interpretation of the enhancement of these Hebrew letters in the first and last words of the Shema. If one were to hear the word Shema and thought that the last letter was an Aleph rather than an ayin, the word would mean *maybe* or *perhaps*. This would give the reader of the word Shema the possible thought that only perhaps or maybe is this a prayer expressing the unity of the one God. If the letter Dalet was erroneously misinterpreted as a Reish, the meaning of the word would be Achar which means *other* or *another* which might indicate another god or even idolatry.

The word Shema to most people means Hear but that word and its derivatives can also mean a variety of English words as listen, listen to, observe, perceive, obey, understand, gather, and accept. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, suggests that in the Tanakh, there is no word for obey. The word for obey is a derivative of the verb shema and is found 92 times in the Book of Devarim as compared to only 6 times in the book of Leviticus.

If Rabbi Norman Lamm can write an entire book about the Shema, we would be here for weeks. Let me conclude this part of my Drash by simply stating that the Shema is the central core of Judaism and the watchword of the Jewish Faith. Every new chapter of the Talmud begins with the words Ta Shema, come and hear. This prayer is the first one we teach to our children and it is the last we whisper before we die.

Because the simple meaning of the Hebrew word Shema is to hear, and because in my study of Judaism as a lay person and as a Doctor of hearing, I would like to now focus on the concept of the tremendous importance of hearing in Judaism, and to compare in depth the difference between Hellenism, which focused its culture on the eye and visual perceptions such as art and sculpture, and Hebraism or Judaism, which focused on hearing and the transfer of knowledge from the mouth to the ear. The Oral Torah could not have been passed down for thousands of years without the sense of hearing. Comparing Greek civilization and Judaism has been the subject of Rabbi Jacob Leiner (1814-1878) in his treatise, *Bet Yaakov*. It could be stated that if the Israelites were all deaf 3 millennia ago, Judaism would not have survived. Hearing is the source of knowledge, music, speech, poetry, and cognitive thinking. I would like to focus on 1.) The Torah and hearing, 2.) The words of the Prophets in regard to hearing, 3.) The focus of Psalms and hearing and 4.) finally, the significant differences between the Greek civilization and Judaism in regard to hearing.

First some important ideas on the significance of hearing and Torah.

The Sinaiatic revelation is singular in that it takes place before a whole people, who then act upon what they have seen and "heard" (Exodus: 19,20). No other people with a historical memory has set down such an experience for

subsequent generations to read and relive. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8) was a commitment which later generations understood to have bound them as well. It was a covenant, not merely for those who had witnessed its conclusion, "but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us this day", that is, with our descendants yet unknown. (Deut 29:14). The foundations of Judaism as we have come to know them rest firmly on the tradition that the Lord of history revealed himself to one particular people who *heard* him and that in consequence of this revelation, the people of Israel saw itself forever in the grasp of divine obligation. (Rabbi Sacks, 2007). Of primary importance, then, is that "Sinai" in the sense of God revealing himself with the sensation of sound and being heard, became the fundamental experience of the Jewish people, similar to their deliverance from Egypt. What was unique to this covenant? After all, there had been other covenants between unequals. "For the first time morality was represented as a prophetic revelation to a whole people and they in turn became answerable for the terms of the covenant" (Kaufmann).

In summary, in every religion some charismatic person says "I had a communication with God." Either you believe him or you don't. He is either a charlatan or he is having hallucinations.

At Sinai, God spoke to the children of Israel directly and they heard Him talk directly to Moses (Gemarah). Therefore, if revelation at Sinai is one of the cornerstones of Judaism, then the importance of hearing is that the approximately 3 million Jews at the base of Mount Horeb (Sinai) 3300 years ago heard God. (Traditional view)

Now a few ideas on the Oral Torah. The oral law (sheb'al peh) is the authoritative interpretation of the written law. Many consider the Oral Law to be as important as or even more important than the Written Torah. The survival of the Jewish religion depended on transmission of the Oral Torah and this took place over thousands of years by word of mouth from the revelation at Sinai to the writing of the Mishna by Rabbi Judah HaNasi in the second century. And in order for this transmission of Oral Law to take place you had to be able to Hear.

Following the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, and the destruction of the first Temple, Jews were transported to Babylonia. The development of the Sopherim (scribes, men of letters). Most famous of them were Ezra and Nehemiah.

Historically, there was a resurgence of teaching of Torah. The rallying point around a nation in exile was revitalization of law and the rekindling of the oral law. Again hearing was critical for the Jews in exile.

Following this was the period of Tannaim or teachers.

There was then the development of Rabbinic schools (Zugoth or Pairs) such as Hillel and Shammai and Akiva and Ishmael. Teacher and student relationship depended on the ability to hear. There was no great scholar in the Jewish religion who depended on text alone. In the thousands of years of oral law, communication between scholar and pupil and between Moses, Aaron, the sons of Aaron, the elders of Israel and the masses was by word of mouth and the ability to *hear*. The result of this probing, seeking, listening and questioning finally as mentioned is codified by Judah Ha-Nasi in the second century C.E. as the Mishnah. The Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmuds are finalized in the 4th century and the 5th century respectively.

Now a brief review of the Prophets and hearing. Isaiah says "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken.....Hear the word of the Lord you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God; you people of Gomorrah!"

(Isaiah 1:2). The verse is the great opening of the Book of Isaiah. The verse contains no visual imagery. What Isaiah "sees" is a call, sounds, speech, proclamation, not a sight or scene, or symbol. Yet again the key words are "hearing" and "listening."

In the first chapter of Jeremiah, the following verse occurs.

"The "word" of the Lord came to me: What do you see Jeremiah? "I see the branch of an almond tree", I replied.

“You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that My word is fulfilled.” Jeremiah “sees” an almond tree. This really is a visual image. Jeremiah “sees” but God teaches him to listen. Indeed, the text begins and ends with a reference to “word”—“The word of the Lord” and “My word is fulfilled.”

In the Book of Psalms, the psalms of David are particularly filled with sound, music, words, and communication between man and God. One example is Psalm 19, verses 2, 3, 4, 5 and most significantly vs 15. Verse 2: “the heavens *declare* the glory of God, the sky *proclaims* his handiwork.

Verse 3, Day to day makes *utterance*, night to night *speaks* out. Verse 4, there is no *utterance*, there are no *words* whose *sounds* goes unheard. Verse 5, their *voice* carries throughout the earth, their *words* to the end of the world.

And perhaps most importantly verse 15 which is often sung and is often the end of the Amidah.

Verse 15, “may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

But what of the deaf person or the deaf mute in early Judaism. If hearing was vital to the transmission of the Jewish religion throughout the ages, then it is logical to consider that a person who was profoundly deaf and could not speak and therefore could not learn or communicate was considered no better than an imbecile.

The deaf-mute (chayereish) He was exempted from all legal transactions and could not perform mitzvot. But in modern times a deaf-mute who could be trained to speak and communicate is not exempt from being a witness and is entitled to all the privileges of a normal hearing person.

In conclusion, those who possess minimal hearing and can speak are not subject to any halakhic restrictions which apply to deaf-mutes.

In the laws of personal injury, the Talmud sets a scale for how much must be pain for damaging different parts of the body. The Sages (Rabbi Moshe Greene) say that if one causes someone to become deaf, he must pay him the same amount as if he had killed him. For blinding a person, he must pay the value of the eye alone. The Talmud justifies this by stating that the ear is our primary receptacle for wisdom. Growing and changing come from being able to hear a new insight. If one can hear, and is receptive to new ideas, he can grow. If he unable to hear then he will remain the same. If a person is deafened, he is in essence cut off from humanity (Baba Kama 85b).

Before concluding this D’var Torah, I would very briefly like to review the ideas of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on hearing.

“God is to be found not by looking but by listening. He lives in words he spoke to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, prophets, priests, and ultimately in the Torah itself—the words through which we are to interpret all other words.

Why is God revealed in words? Because words are what makes up persons. Language makes Homo sapiens unique.

Because we have language, we can think.

We can ask questions. Human beings are the only species in the universe capable of asking the question, Why?

Because of language and only because of language, we are free and morally responsible agents.”

I conclude with a comparison between Greek culture and Judaism in regard to the eye and the ear as described by Matthew Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy*, a series of essays published as a book in 1869. The 4th chapter compares Hellenism and Judaism. The political philosopher Leo Strauss spoke of them as Athens and Jerusalem. We know them best as ancient Greece and Israel. Greece between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE was in many respects the greatest culture of antiquity. It excelled in art, architecture, sculpture and the theatre---the VISUAL arts. In these it achieved a greatness never surpassed. The Renaissance in Italy was essentially a rediscovery of the world and skills of ancient Greece.

Judaism excelled in none of these things. The reason is that its interest lay altogether elsewhere, not in sight but in SOUND, not in seeing but in hearing.

The pagan perceives the Divine in nature through the medium of the eye, and becomes conscious of it as something to look at. The Jew who conceives God as being outside nature and prior to it, the Divine manifests itself through the will and the medium of the ear. He becomes conscious of it as something to be heeded and listened to. The pagan beholds (sees) his God, the Jew hears Him that apprehends His will (from Heinrich Graetz, 19th century Jewish historian).

When Solomon asked God for the greatest gift He can bestow upon him, he says “grant your servant a *Listening Heart (lev shomea)* to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. (Kings 1, chapter 3 vs,6-9).

The Zohar is the chief work of Jewish mysticism and goes beyond the realm of the rational and logic to the world of the supernatural and the hidden. Seeing is the sense that can arouse our emotions to a great reaction and the Zohar’s main function is to strengthen our passions and emotions for our soul and spirit (taken from a commentary on the Parashah Re’eh, Deut: 11:26-16:17 by Rabbi Boruch Leff).

In conclusion, hearing in Judaism is critical for communication between people. But it is also important in prayer between man and God. In contrast, seeing is an individual experience between man and God and is much greater in the spiritual realm.

I will conclude my remarks with the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his *Covenant and Conversation* on July 26th, 2007, which are absolutely poetic.

“In the silence of the desert (midbar) the Israelites were able to hear the word (davar). And one trained in the art of listening can hear not only the voice of God but also the silent cry of the lonely, the distressed, the afflicted, the poor, the needy, the neglected and the unheard. For speech is the most important of all gestures, and listening the most human and at the same time the most divine of all gifts. God listens and asks us to listen.

That is why the greatest of all commands - the one we read in this week’s sedra, the first Jewish words we learned as children, the last words of Jewish martyrs as they went to their deaths, are Shema Yisrael, “Listen O Israel”. And now too as we understand as we say these words, we cover our eyes - to shut out, if only for a moment, the world of sight, so that we can more fully enter the world of sound, the world not of creation, but of Revelation, not of God’s work, but of his world, the world we cannot see but which, if we create an open attentive silence in the soul, we can hear.

Shabbat Shalom.