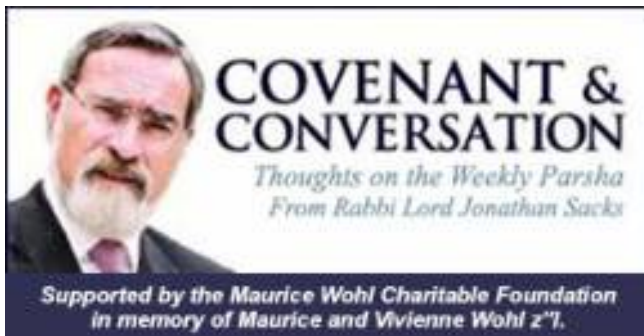


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## The Spirituality of Listening

It is one of the most important words in Judaism, and also one of the least understood. Its two most famous occurrences are in last week's parsha and this week's: "*Hear* O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," and "It shall come to pass if you *surely listen* to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul" - the openings of the first and second paragraphs of the *Shema*. It also appears in the first line of the parsha: "It shall come to pass, if you *listen* to these laws."

The word, of course, is *shema*. I have argued elsewhere that it is fundamentally untranslatable into English since it means so many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalize, to respond, to obey. It is one of the motif-words of the book of Devarim, where it appears no less than 92 times - more than in any other book of the Torah. Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, *Shema*: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what he wants from us. If you would only listen ... *Judaism is a religion of listening*. This is one of its most original contributions to civilization.

The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture. Its greatest achievements had to do with the eye, with seeing. It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture and architecture the world has ever seen. Its most characteristic group events - theatrical performances and the Olympic games - were spectacles: performances that were watched. Plato thought of knowledge as a kind of depth vision, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things.

This idea - that knowing is seeing - remains the dominant metaphor in the West even today. We speak of *insight*, *foresight* and *hindsight*. We offer an *observation*. We adopt a *perspective*. We *illustrate*. We *illuminate*. We *shed light* on an issue. When we understand something, we say, "*I see*."<sup>1</sup>

Judaism offered a radical alternative. It is faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented visually. The very act of making a graven image - a visual symbol - is a form of idolatry. As Moses reminded the people in last week's parsha, when the Israelites had a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no image; there was only a voice." (Deut. 4:12). God communicates in sounds, not sights. He speaks. He commands. He calls. That is why the supreme religious act is *Shema*. When God speaks, we listen. When He commands, we try to obey.

Rabbi David Cohen (1887-1972), known as the Nazirite, a disciple of Rav Kook and the father of R. Shear-Yashuv Cohen, chief rabbi of Haifa, pointed out that in the Babylonian Talmud all the metaphors of understanding are based not on seeing but on hearing. *Ta shema*, "come and hear." *Ka mashma lan*, "It teaches us this." *Shema mina*, "Infer from this." *Lo shemiyah lei*, "He did not agree." A traditional teaching is called *shamaytta*, "that which was heard." And so on.<sup>2</sup> All of these are variations on the word *shema*.<sup>3</sup>

This may seem like a small difference, but it is in fact a huge one. For the Greeks, the ideal form of knowledge involved detachment. There is the one who sees, the subject, and there is that which is seen, the object, and they belong to two different realms. A person who looks at a painting or a sculpture or a play in a theatre or the Olympic games is not himself part of the art or the drama or the athletic competition. He or she is a spectator, not a participant.

Speaking and listening are not forms of detachment. They are forms of engagement. They create a relationship. The Hebrew word for knowledge, *da'at*, implies involvement, closeness, intimacy. "And Adam *knew* Eve his wife and she conceived and gave birth" (Gen. 4:1). That is knowing in the Hebrew sense, not the Greek. We can enter into a relationship with God, even though He is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.

The Greeks taught us the forms of knowledge that come from observing and inferring, namely science and philosophy. The first scientists and the first philosophers came from Greece from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE.

But not everything can be understood by seeing and appearances alone. There is a powerful story about this told in the first book of Samuel. Saul, Israel's first king, *looked* the part. He was tall. "From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people," (1 Sam. 9:2, 10:23). He was the *image* of a king. But morally, temperamentally, he was not a leader at all; he was a follower.

God then told Samuel to anoint another king in his place, and told him it would be one of the children of Yishai. Samuel went to Yishai and was struck by the appearance of one of his sons, Eliav. He thought he must be the one God meant. But God said to him, "Do not be impressed by his

appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not see as people do. *People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jews and Judaism taught that we cannot see God, but we can hear him and he hears us. It is through the word - speaking and listening - that we can have an intimate relationship with God as our parent, our partner, our sovereign, the One who loves us and whom we love. We cannot demonstrate God scientifically. We cannot prove God logically. These are Greek, not Jewish, modes of thought. I believe that from a Jewish perspective, trying to prove the existence of God logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise.<sup>4</sup> God is not an object but a subject. The Jewish mode is to relate to God in intimacy and love, as well as awe and reverence.

One fascinating modern example came from a Jew who, for much of his life, was estranged from Judaism, namely Sigmund Freud. He called psychoanalysis the "speaking cure," but it is better described as the "listening cure."<sup>5</sup> It is based on the fact that active listening is in itself therapeutic. It was only after the spread of psychoanalysis, especially in America, that the phrase "I hear you" came into the English language as a way of communicating empathy.<sup>6</sup>

There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been

heard. They have not been listened to. We have not "heard their pain." There has been a failure of empathy. That is why the use of force - or for that matter, boycotts - to resolve conflict is so profoundly self-defeating. It may suppress it for a while, but it will return, often more intense than before. Job, who has suffered unjustly, is unmoved by the arguments of his comforters. It is not that he insists on being right: what he wants is to be heard. Not by accident does justice presuppose the rule of *audi alteram partem*, "Hear the other side."

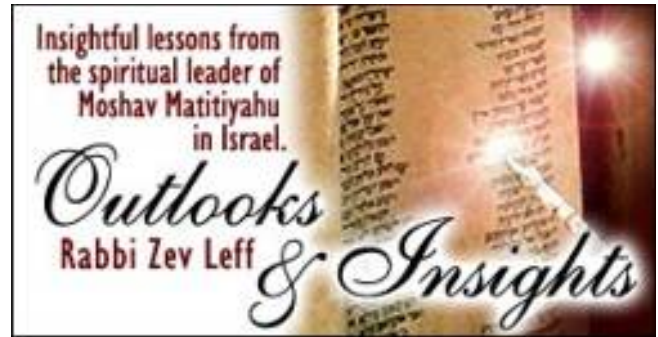
Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

In Judaism we believe that our relationship with God is an ongoing tutorial in our relationships with other people. How can we expect God to listen to us if we fail to listen to our spouse, our children, or those affected by our work? And how can we expect to encounter God if we have not learned to listen. On Mount Horeb, God taught Elijah that He was not in the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire but in the *kol demamah*

*dakah*, the "still, small voice"<sup>7</sup> that I define as a voice you can only hear if you are listening.

Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners. Whether between us and God or us and other people, listening is the prelude to love.

1. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.
2. This appears in the opening pages of his work, *Kol Nevuah*.
3. To be sure, the Zohar uses a visual term, *ta chazi*, "Come and see." There is a broad kinship between Jewish mysticism and Platonic or neo-Platonic thought. For both, knowing is a form of depth-seeing.
4. To be sure, many of the great medieval Jewish philosophers did just that. They did so under the influence of neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian thought, itself mediated by the great philosophers of Islam. The exception was Judah Halevi in *The Kuzari*.
5. See Adam Philips, *Equals*, London, Faber and Faber, 2002, xii. See also Salman Akhtar, *Listening to Others: Developmental and Clinical Aspects of Empathy and Attunement*. Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2007.
6. Note that there is a difference between empathy and sympathy. Saying "I hear you" is a way of indicating - sincerely or otherwise - that I take note of your feelings, not that I necessarily agree with them or you.
7. I Kings 19.



## The Benefits of Challenges

"And you should know in your heart that just as a father punishes his son, God punishes you."<sup>1</sup> In this short sentence the Torah is teaching us the most basic tenet of trust in God. Just as a father only punishes a son because of his love for him and for his ultimate benefit, so too any punishments that God sends to us also emanates from His great love for us and is only for our good. When a person finds himself in a painful or challenging situation he should realize that it is ultimately for the good.

However, there is another life lesson that we learn from this comparison of God to a father. A good father punishes his son in such a way that the son is intended to learn from his mistake and improve his behavior. If the son continues to err even after the punishment then he has not enabled the negative consequence to reach its desired purpose. So too, when God punishes us He is, in most instances, trying to show us that we need to improve in some aspect of our behavior.<sup>2</sup> This idea is not necessarily novel to many people, however it is usually discussed in a very vague way - that when bad things happen we need to repent or pray. This approach, whilst



## The Benefits of Challenges

text

commendable, often seems to be unproductive because of its vagueness. In this article, the role of 'yissurim'<sup>3</sup> in our lives will be discussed, and hopefully will provide a clearer picture of how we can best utilize them.

The Mashgiach of Slobodka, Rav Avraham Grodzinski, discusses the topic of *yissurim* at length in his work, *Torat Avraham*.<sup>4</sup> He writes that the main purpose of prophecy was to communicate to the people how they were erring. Even when, ostensibly they were doing nothing wrong, the prophet would delve deep into their hearts and pinpoint an area in which they were lacking. He asks, in the post-prophecy era how does God communicate to us to tell us what we are doing wrong? He answers that 'yissurim' are the replacement for prophecy. When a person is in pain, no matter how small, God is communicating to him in some way that he needs to grow. Thus, *yissurim* are a tremendous gift - they provide us with an opportunity to mend our ways. The Gemara says that suffering does not merely refer to great afflictions, rather even minor difficulties. It gives the example of when a person tries to take out three coins from his pocket and he only picks up two. In this way God is constantly communicating with us through *yissurim*. And the Gemara states further that it is a very bad sign if a person feels absolutely no suffering for forty days.<sup>5</sup> This is because God has given up hope for him to improve his ways, and therefore refrains from even trying to communicate with him.<sup>6</sup>

The obvious question that we are faced with is, 'How can a person know what message God is trying to tell him through the *yissurim*?' Of course

it is impossible to be certain but the Torat Avraham cites a principle from the Sages that God punishes a person measure for measure for his bad deeds. For example, the Mishna in Sotah tells us that Samson sinned with his eyes, therefore he was punished that the Philistines took out his eyes, and Avshalom, King David's rebellious son, was arrogant about his beautiful hair, therefore his hair was the cause of his death when it got tangled up amongst the branches of a tree.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is recommended that a person look for a cause that is somehow connected to the form of suffering. For example, if someone experiences pain in his mouth then perhaps he should first assess whether he transgressed in an area connected with speech.

There is, ironically a very good example of this idea in relation to Rav Grodzinski's life himself. He suffered from a noticeable limp and when a *shidduch* (match) was first proposed to Rav Ber Hirsch Heller's daughter Chasya, she rejected it because of his limp. Shortly thereafter she fell down the stairs to the cellar, breaking her leg. She concluded that this was a sign not to reject the match because of Rav Grodzinski's bad leg and they did indeed marry.<sup>8</sup>

However, more important than whether we find the 'correct' sin or not is that we search for it at all. In the previous example, if the person's pain in his mouth is connected to false speech but he works on guarding his speech, then he has achieved the main purpose of the *yissurim* - trying to grow. This is an extremely important point because there is a common trend that when a person experiences suffering he looks for



different *segulot* (charms) in order to end the pain. Rav Yitzchak Berkovits points out that this is somewhat missing the point. God does not send us *yissurim* merely so that we can perform some kind of *segula* (even if it is effective in ending the pain); rather, he wants us to grow. This does not necessarily mean that all *segulot* are negative but one should not forget the purpose of the *yissurim* - that God is telling us to grow.

There is a second point with regards to how we react to *yissurim*. When a person is in the midst of suffering there is a tendency to 'put his head in the sand' until the pain goes away and then resume his life. He may reconcile himself with the fact that we realize this is from God but we still wait for it to end so that we can 'resume' our lives. This is understandable but, just like a father does not want his son to react to punishment by moping, so too God does not want us to simply wait for the *yissurim* to end. We can continue to grow in our Divine service.

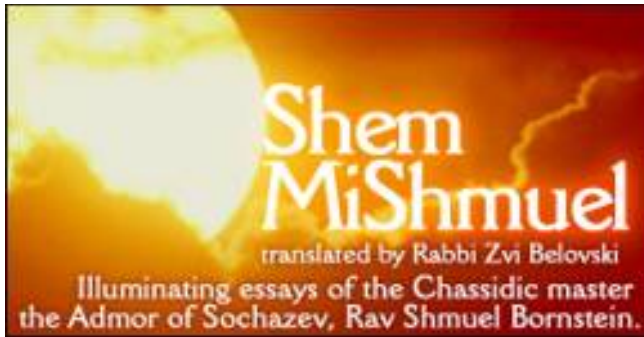
Rav Avraham Pam, the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaat, experienced the most difficult period in his life in his early twenties when he had no source of livelihood and had no idea what the future had in store for him. Did he regress in his learning in this time? On the contrary - Rav Yisroel Reisman once asked him when he learnt the section of Kodshim (about the Temple offerings). He answered that it was in this very period when his life was in such turmoil that he undertook to learn one of the most difficult sections of the Torah.

Indeed, times of *yissurim* are often opportunities to grow more than in more comfortable times. For

example, a person's prayers are often far more effective when he feels in need than when everything seems fine. Moreover, history has proven that many of the greatest works of our Rabbis were written at times of great suffering. This does not seem to be a coincidence; when a person is deprived of physical comforts his only refuge is in the spiritual, thus when our great ancestors were suffering from great poverty and oppression their learning reached new heights.

God loves us more than a father loves his son; when He deems it necessary to cause us suffering we often do not understand why we deserve such pain. In this world we may never know the answer but the one thing we can be sure of, is that God is communicating with us, He wants us to hear His 'voice' through the *yissurim* and use them to grow closer to Him.

1. Ekev, 8:5.
2. Needless to say, when somebody else is in pain, others around him should not focus on what wrong he is punished for, (indeed the *poskim* write that to do this is a transgression of '*ona'as devarim*', hurtful words). Rather, they should comfort him as much as possible. The attitude we are discussing is that with which a person should approach his own difficulties.
3. '*Yissurim*' is often translated as suffering.
4. Toras Avraham, pp. 14-26. He was the father-in-law of Rav Wolbe *zt"l* and Rav Kreiswert *zt"l* and the brother-in-law of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky *zt"l*. He wrote the sefer whilst living in Europe at the time of the Nazi rise to power. He was eventually murdered by the Nazis.
5. Arachin, 16b.
6. This explanation of the Gemara was heard from Rav Akiva Tatz *shlit"a*.
7. Sotah, 9b.
8. Rosenblum, 'Reb Yaakov,' p. 80.



## Mishpatim and Chesed

The Torah portion opens with the following exclamation:

And it shall come to pass, if you listen to these *mishpatim* and you guard them and do them, that the Lord your God will guard the covenant for you and the kindness which He swore to your forefathers. (Devarim 7:12)

The selection of *mishpatim* (social ordinances) by this verse is intriguing. The *mishpatim* are only one part of the Torah system. There are also sections of laws called *eidot* (testimonies) and *chukkim* (statutes). Why are these other sections not mentioned? Does the verse imply that it is only necessary to observe the *mishpatim* to ensure that God will guard the covenant? Surely *klal Yisrael* must diligently keep the whole Torah, not just parts of it. Secondly, three types of observance are mentioned here. Apparently, we must "listen," "guard," and "do" the *mishpatim*. What is the significance of this?

We will not be surprised to discover that these three means of observance cover the entire gamut of human experience. We have mentioned before that the *seichel* (intellect), *nefesh* (emotional

soul), and *guf* (body) represent the whole of our world. Everything that happens to us is either an intellectual, emotional, or physical experience, or a combination thereof. *Listening* corresponds to the intellect, for it is essentially a process of acceptance, an intellectual experience which takes place in the brain. *Guarding* corresponds to the emotional aspect of life, which is centered around the heart. The word for "guarding" which occurs here is *shemirah*, which means "to long for" or "desire." We see this in the following:

And his father guarded [*shamar*] the matter. (Bereishis 37:11)

Guarded the matter - he waited and yearned for when it would come about... (Rashi loc. cit.)

A feeling of yearning is of course an emotional experience. Indeed, even the word for the emotional soul, *nefesh*, can mean desire:

He said to them, saying, "If it is your desire [*nefesh*] to bury my dead..." (Bereishis 23:8)

Finally, it is clear that *doing* corresponds to the body, for action is the physical aspect of the mitzvos.

This said, it is hard to see what relevance desire and yearning have to *mishpatim*. A *mishpat* happens when, for example, there is a dispute between two parties who want clarification as to what to do. Punishments meted out for certain crimes may also be referred to as *mishpatim*. We understand that the *mishpat* has intellectual and active content, which accounts for the need for *listening* and *doing* as recorded by the verse.

However, in what way can one yearn (the *guarding* component) for *mishpat*? In fact, the opposite appears to be true - it would be preferable if there were never disputes or crimes which necessitated *mishpatim*.

### MISHPATIM ON HIGH

To understand this, we need to revise our picture of the extent to which *mishpatim* are relevant. As with all human activity on earth, *mishpatim* have a counterpart in the heavenly spheres. When *klal Yisrael* pronounce a judgment in a legal framework, this has ramifications in heaven, arousing Divine *mishpat*. If, for example, the terrestrial *beis din* deals with a monetary dispute, eventually allocating a sum of money to its rightful owner, this engenders a corresponding spiritual force on high. In practice, this means that any spiritually bad forces will not approach anything which does not belong to them. Although this is a deep mystical concept, the parallel at least is apparent.

This explains why Yisrael may indeed yearn for *mishpatim*. *Klal Yisrael* are supposed to direct all of their energies into serving God and to pay little regard to their own issues and circumstances. As such, they should actively yearn for *mishpatim* in order to ensure a suitable rectification on high, in which the domains of the forces of good and evil are clarified.

This helps us to understand why the verse chooses to emphasize *mishpatim* rather than *eidot* or *chukkim*. It is *mishpatim* particularly which accentuate the special character of Yisrael. A desire for *eidot* and *chukkim* does not show any particular level of self-abnegation on behalf of

Yisrael. Not so *mishpatim*, which, as we have seen, are not at all desirable at a normal human level. The fact that Yisrael nevertheless desire them, knowing the great spiritual rectification that they can effect, demonstrates a special quality present in the national character of the people.

We now appreciate why the Torah chooses desire for *mishpatim* to be the litmus test of Yisrael's commitment to God. With this, we can explain the end of the verse:

...that the Lord your God will guard  
the covenant for you and the kindness  
which He swore to your forefathers.  
(Devarim 7:12)

This is also difficult to comprehend, for it implies that the merit of the *Avos* will apply only when *klal Yisrael* perform the will of God. Our usual understanding of *zechus Avos*, the remaining merit of the Forefathers, is that it stands for Yisrael even when they are not at their zenith of mitzvah performance. Additionally, these words were addressed to the nation as they stood in the desert, at their peak of connection to God, at a moment when they probably did not need the merit of the *Avos* to maintain them.

An interesting *gemara* will help to answer this. Our Sages note that even an apostate will inherit his father's property upon his death. Despite the fact that he has cut himself off from the ways of his father, the Torah still allows him to inherit. This is deduced from Eisav, who was regarded as an apostate Jew but still warranted an inheritance:

...for as an inheritance to Eisav I have  
given Mount Seir. (Devarim 2:5)



This has substantial consequences, namely, that Eisav, despite his evil nature, has some claim to *klal Yisrael's* inheritance, for he is genuinely related to them. When God offers Eretz Yisrael to them on the basis of *zechus Avos*, Eisav can step in and claim a portion of the inheritance. He is, after all, a direct descendant of the *Avos*. But when Yisrael guard the *mishpatim* of the Torah and desire them, as we have described above, then they show their ability to direct everything, even the most mundane aspects of the physical world, toward God and to imbue them with spirituality. In response, God rewards them with the greatest possible good - closeness to Him. From this closeness, every manifestation of good in the physical world will flow. Since the origin of this good is in the spiritual, Godly realm, Eisav, who is a thoroughly coarse and physically oriented being, has no attachment to it at all. Through this, then, God guarantees Yisrael's permanent and unique relationship with Him. One may infer this from the wording of the verse. We are assured that God will "guard the covenant for you..." If *klal Yisrael* do everything as intended by this verse, then the covenant will, and can only be, between them and God, and with no other nation. As such, it will be "for you" and not for others.

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