

Are we really listening, or are we just hearing sounds floating by our ears?

Near the end of Parashah Vayelech, which we read together with Parashah Nitzavim last week, HaShem commands Moses, "Write for yourselves this song and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for Me as a witness for the Children of Israel."

Why a song, why must the Israelites sing it? Many of us have experienced the power of music, not only for itself, but also for its use in supporting intellectual, social, and psychological development, and as a powerful therapeutic tool. Because the effect of music is so strong, Moses is commanded to address the Israelites in the form of an epic song-poem that depicts the turbulent history of HaShem's relationship with them. It is a song of admonition they must hear, learn, and memorize – in other words, they must internalize it so that it may be transmitted from generation to generation.

The song-poem is full of rhythmic parallel language, beginning with the first verse in which Moses commands the heavens to "give ear" – to listen, and adds, "Let the earth hear." In biblical poetry, parallel language and rhythm are often used for emphasis: Listen – hear; drip like rain – flow like dew; remember – reflect; devoid of counsel – no understanding. Doubled imagery reinforces the message through repetition, which is an essential component of learning, memorization, and habit forming. We all know the power of a catchy phrase or tune – those pesky "ear worms" that pop up unexpectedly and repeat incessantly until they finally fade away. And most of us know a few songs and poems so well that we can repeat them spontaneously. We likely learned the alphabet and basic arithmetic through songs and rhymes, often taught us by our parents. Most of these are rhythmic and repetitive, both in word and melody. How fitting then, that Moses should be commanded to couch his final message in song and verse.

But why does Moses use the word *ha'azinu* rather than the more common *shim'u*? Let's look at the subtle, but crucial difference between these two verbs: The first derives from the root א - ש - נ , which forms words such as *ear*, *to weigh*, *to listen*. The root ש - מ - ע means *to hear with understanding*, *to let the voice be heard*. This is hearing through the intellect, implying obeying. In Parashah Yitro, as we receive the Torah, we hear and obey. But there are other differences as well: Essentially, hearing is merely perceiving sound through the ear; it happens passively. On the other hand, listening is active. We must make a conscious effort to listen to what we are hearing, and this is usually reflected in our body language. We instinctively know the difference between being listened to and simply being heard, and we have experienced how hurtful it can be when we perceive that the person to whom we are speaking is not really listening. Learning to listen takes concentration and practice. It means we have to put our own thoughts aside and focus deeply on what we are hearing. Especially now, when we are constantly being bombarded by information from a huge variety of sources, we must hone our listening skills, so we are able to communicate with our fellow human beings respectfully, even if we sharply disagree. *Shema Israel* is our point of departure. We hear and understand the commandments; now, we must apply them by really listening to what they tell us about living today in our complicated, dangerous, uncertain world. We can start by really listening first to ourselves: Does the chatter in our minds drown out that still, small voice that connects us to HaShem, or are we aware of a Greater Presence that guides us? Then, are we really listening to those closest to us, giving them the gift of our full attention? And are we really listening to our acquaintances and colleagues, and to the strangers with whom we interact, or are our minds distracted? Finally, are we really listening to our Earth and all her creatures, or are we too preoccupied with ourselves to notice?

We have taken stock of our actions during the month of Elul, intensified our soul-searching since welcoming the new year, and focused intensely on *teshuvah* yesterday on Yom Kippur. Did we listen? Did we hear words of apology, and forgiveness? And did we hear our own inner voice admonishing us to offer words of apology and forgiveness to others? Yom Kippur ends with the promise of forgiveness, but being human, we will certainly continue to be less than perfect. However, if we remain inspired by this time of introspection, our ears will remain open to really listen, keeping our minds opened to truly understand, and our hearts opened to sincerely empathize.

Shabbat shalom and gmar chatimah tovah!