

Parashah Yitro is all about hearing. Our ears take in an enormous amount of information, but most of it falls by the wayside. Even when we are being directly addressed, we do not always process what we hear in the way it was intended to be received. Isaiah 6:9-10 defines the often sad state of our capacity to hear with understanding: "And He (HaShem) said, Go and say to this people, 'indeed, you hear, but you do not understand; indeed, you see, but you do not know.' This people's heart is becoming fat, and his ears are becoming heavy, and his eyes are becoming sealed, lest he see with his eyes and hear with his ears, and his heart understand, and he repent and be healed." Isaiah's contemporaries are the descendants of those former slaves who in our parashah stand at the foot of the mountain to hear the words that are to instruct and guide every aspect of our lives. But because we still forget the promises and resolutions we make at the height of an emotional experience, we shouldn't judge our ancestors too harshly. It is instructive to note that in our parashah, the first one to comprehend all that HaShem had done is Moses' father-in-law Yitro, an outsider, and a pagan priest at that. Our midrashim teach that he had worshiped all idols known to him, and had learned through hearing that "...HaShem is greater than all the deities ..." (18:11) If he, who was not present when all this took place, is convinced, why are the Israelites, who experienced it all firsthand, unable to understand and follow through on the promise they so rashly made? Midrash Tanchuma Yitro 2 explains, "There are those who hear and lose, and those who hear and profit." From the outset, we see that with very few exceptions, the Israelites belong to the first category. But how can it be otherwise? Hearing with true understanding hinges upon being free enough to act on what has been heard, and as these newly freed slaves still must learn, physical freedom is only the beginning of a long, arduous process. The first thing they have to learn is that freedom does not absolve them from following orders. Last week's learning experience had to do with gathering manna and observing Shabbat, and some people chose to ignore the rules and were duly punished. HaShem's assessment of Isaiah's generation attests to the fact that true freedom remains an elusive concept, easily misunderstood and even more easily misused. Hearts becoming fat, ears heavy, and eyes sealed is the epitome of unfreedom. We see this today in the behavior of some people who are opposed to receiving the COVID vaccine as well as in the reactions of those who refuse to really listen to their misgivings. Remember that the word *kabeid*, which not only means heavy/hard/stubborn, but also means liver, describes the most lethal manifestation of Pharaoh's hardened heart. The liver is a heavy, dense organ that engages on multiple levels with the heart, and both are negatively impacted by fat. The ancients understood the heart to be the seat not only of physical life, but also of emotions and thought. A heart obstructed by fat is not free. Heavy ears and sealed eyes deflect the signals they receive, blocking understanding. Unlike Yitro, whose mind and heart are free enough to have processed all the information he had assimilated in his lifetime of spiritual searching, the Israelites, upon being told of their upcoming encounter with HaShem, blurt in unison, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do." (19:8) Their subsequent behavior over the next 40 years testifies to their inability to comprehend what they so exuberantly promised. The drama of that day of revelation momentarily opens all those closed passageways to understanding. After a three-day period of meticulous preparation, the people assembled at the foot of the mountain are overwhelmed by forces that, if we read literally, produce a synesthetic experience. "And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar. (20:15) Synesthesia does exist; people with tone-color synesthesia see colors when hearing music. But this is not the message here. The jolt of supernatural power does open their ears and eyes to the momentous impact of their encounter with the divine, but their hearts and minds are still not free enough to truly process the information. Dr. Ismar Schorsch teaches, "Miracles may alter the course of nature, but they leave human nature essentially unaltered. The Torah is wary of sudden conversions. A nation of slaves is not refashioned in an instant by a display of divine power." Learning how to listen with understanding takes time and effort. All we can hope for, even today, is that each tiny sliver of divine power that enters our senses enlarges the opening into the heart and mind of our deepest selves, that *kol d'mama daka* (the still, small voice) that Elijah finally discovers after seeking HaShem in the tumult of natural forces (I Kings 19:12). Finding that hidden place where we encounter in ourselves the divine spark that unites us to HaShem and all of creation requires utmost courage – the courage only a truly free individual can muster. That motley group of individuals standing at the foot of the mountain, traumatized not only by generations of slavery, but also by the momentous events of their escape, is in no position to process what they witnessed. Today we are still learning that Torah impacts us multidimensionally, engaging all our senses and sensibilities, opening our hearts and minds experience by experience, into the freedom to know what our eyes see and understand what our ears hear.

Shabbat shalom!