

*Shema!* One of our most ubiquitous words, it is a call to order that demands our full attention. Basically, hearing is the passive act of perceiving sound through the ear. However, *shema* is hearing with understanding, actively listening and reacting. It means putting our own thoughts aside and focusing deeply on what we are hearing, as we do when we traditionally cover our eyes for the opening words of *shema Yisrael*. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l pointed out, unlike the Greeks, who were visually oriented, we are aurally oriented. Our invisible God communicates through speech. Therefore we are strictly prohibited from making any sort of likeness of whatever images of HaShem our minds may conjure up. This is why Moses now reiterates the sin of the golden calf (9:12-21). Learning to listen with full concentration requires diligent practice, and in his final days Moses is doing everything in his power to help the people develop this valuable habit. As we have seen time and again, it is an uphill battle. Anyone who has raised teenagers knows how difficult it is to get and hold their undivided attention. Emotionally, most of the Israelites are still teenagers, constantly testing boundaries and challenging authority. Hoping to find a way to make them truly listen, Moses opens his next discourse with עִקֵב (*eikev*), a seldomly used word with many different meanings. As a verb, it means to heed, follow, track, or trail; to watch, observe, pay attention; to circumvent, attack insidiously, and deceive; to reward, punish, or bring consequences; to investigate and reveal. As a noun, it means heel, trace, footprint, cheater (Jakob), and rear of a troop. As an adjective, in addition to insidious it can also mean steep, or hilly. Here, as an adverb, it means because of, as a consequence. Knowing the history of the Israelites, it is easy to see a common thread. Used wisely in moderation, these concepts contain tools for success, but they carry dire consequences if taken to excess. Jakob, named for the heel of his twin brother Esau, which he emerged from the womb grasping, was the trickster who first had to suffer mightily at the hands of his equally devious uncle Laban before he was mature enough to understand his mission and earn his new name in that nocturnal wrestling match: *Yisra-el* – one who strives with HaShem. Rabbi Arthur Waskow calls us “God-Wrestlers” – an apt name indeed. We struggle with Torah and halacha, with discerning right from wrong, and with our relationship to and with HaShem as we move through life with all its unpredictability. Like our ancestors with one foot in the desert and one foot pointed toward the Promised Land, we often stumble, usually because we are too preoccupied with the business of living to stop, count our blessings, and just be quiet and listen. Moses continues retracing the people’s steps, reminding them of their obligations in light of all HaShem has done for them. It sounds quite easy: “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you? Just to fear (respect, be in awe of) the Lord, your God, to walk in all his ways and to love him, and to worship the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul,” (10:12) We have heard these words in similar variations before and they will appear time and again, urging us to truly listen with the deep understanding that moves us to obey them to the best of our ability. Moses then admonishes the people to “Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, therefore, and be no more stiff-necked.” (10:16) The root עָרַל (*aral*) means uncircumcised, and also implies insensitive or inattentive. In other words, the channels to what Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l called “the God-sense within you” are blocked. In Exodus 6:12, Moses questions his ability to convince Pharaoh by saying he has “uncircumcised lips,” i.e., he lacks the necessary eloquence. In the ensuing 40 years, he has obviously overcome this perceived handicap! Now, he is intent on helping the people overcome their own obstructions. What enters their ears must now penetrate their hearts and inspire them to obey the commandments. His words are intensified in what has become the second paragraph of the *shema Yisrael* (11:13-21). Its encapsulation of the blessings and curses that Moses continues to reiterate lays out the dire consequences of following “the false gods of your own desires,” as I like to call this egoistic disregard of the commandments. Our Torah teaches us that we are sojourners on HaShem’s earth, and we have the responsibility to use its resources wisely. The earth is well able to support us if we are good stewards, but we dare not take its bounty for granted. In context, this warning pertains to the land the Israelites are about to settle, but its message is universal and timeless. These “*elohim acharim* – strange gods” are the figments of our own desires, those addictive, elusive, and ultimately lethal cravings of the ego-driven who have forgotten where they came from and how they got there. Rashi teaches that these gods are strangers to their worshipers. “The worshiper cries out to it, but it does not answer him; consequently, it becomes to him as a stranger. (Sifre) In short these people have lost their sense of gratitude. Moses has continually emphasized how gratitude can “circumcise the heart” and open it to the necessity of obeying the *mitzvot*. *V’achalta v’savata, uverachta et Adonai elohecha al ha’aretz asher natan-lach*. And you will eat and be sated, and you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land He has given you (8:10, which is also the end of the first Table Blessing). We live dangerously indeed if we lack gratitude. Our prayers help us to remember our origins, to remember our covenant with HaShem, and to remember to be grateful for all we have. Let us always remember to bless HaShem for blessing us in our uniquely Jewish way of expressing gratitude.

Shabbat shalom!