



## THE MITZVAH OF LISTENING

**T**he story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really listened to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to experiment. To each person who passed down the line, he murmured, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” The guests responded with phrases like, “Marvelous!,” “Keep up the good work,” “We are proud of you,” “G-d bless you, sir.” Only at the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, were his words finally heard. Unflinching, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, “I’m sure she had it coming.”

It may only be an urban legend, but the underlying point is profoundly true. People tend not to listen.

Rosh Hashanah is a tremendously special and powerful day. In what unique way are we supposed to serve Hashem at this auspicious moment? What is the *mitzvas hayom*? What is the unique call of the day?

The shofar. But what about the shofar? To blow it? Only one person sitting in shul blows the shofar, while everyone else simply listens. The bracha highlights listening as the key aspect of the shofar — *l’shmoah kol shofar* — to hear the sound of the shofar.

How surprising! That’s it? This holy and special day doesn’t have a unique and special mitzvah that we need to perform *b’kum va’asei* (actively)? We simply have a passive mitzvah of listening?

This suggestions is very surprising and

perhaps even challenging for some.

Let us try and think more deeply about listening. If that is the call of the day, then maybe there’s more to it than what it seems on the surface.

Perhaps the most famous passuk in the Torah is that of “shema Yisrael.” What do those words mean? Hear O Israel. Is it really sufficient just to hear the words Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad? That’s it? Just let those words bounce off your eardrums and you have fulfilled the biblical commandment?

The Rashba was asked a very simple, basic question: what *kavana* (intent) should we have when reciting the words shema Yisrael? He writes in a *teshuva* (5:55) that obviously the passuk means more than just physically hearing. Instead, based on

pesukim, the Rashba proves that there are three distinct definitions of the Hebrew root “*shin mem ayin*” in the Torah:

רק אנחנו חייבים לשמוע ולחקור אחר השמיעה והחקירה, שהחקירה האמתית תחויב ותכריע על ככה. והוא אומר: שמע ישראל. שמת: שמע; כולל ג' ענינים. הנחתה הא', היא שמיעת האזן. אזן שמעה ותאשרני. והושאלה, לדעת הרב: ונתת לעבדך לב שומע. והושאלה גם לקבלה, והאמונה בו: שמע בני מוסר אביך. אשרי אדם שומע לי. אם שמוע תשמעו אל מצותי. וכאן, ר"ל באומר: שמע ישראל; כולל ג' ענינים שנצטוינו לשמוע וללמוד, כי לולי שנשמע ונלמוד, לא נתבונן אליו. ואחרי השמיעה והלימוד וחקירה היטב: אם יש ראייה סותרת, חס ושלום. ואחר שנבא מתוך השמיעה אל החקירה באמת, תביאנו החקירה ותכריחנו הכרח אמותי, לקבל ולהאמין כי הוא ית' נמצא, וכן הוא משגיח על פרטי מעשנו.

*We have an obligation to listen and investigate what we hear and comprehend because true understanding requires this. This is what is meant by “shema Yisrael.” The word “shema” includes three ideas. The first is hearing with one’s ears ... This term is borrowed to apply to the Master: “You shall give to Your servant a listening heart.” It is also borrowed to refer to accepting and to believing [what was heard.] ... Here, when we say “shema Yisrael” it includes three ideas: that we are commanded to hear and to learn, for if not for hearing and learning, we will not look to Him. After hearing and learning we thoroughly investigate whether there is evidence that contradicts what we found, heaven forbid. After we go from hearing to complete understanding, the investigation will lead us to believe that He exists and He provides providence over all of our actions.*

The first is the simple meaning — literally to hear. The second, to understand, and the third is to accept. In truth, in the English language these same three definitions of hearing exist as well.

This explains how we can attribute hearing to Hashem. He has no ears, but He certainly is the *shomea tefila* (He Who hears our prayers), the *meivin umaazain mabit umkashiv lkol tekiaseinu* (He understands, listens and pays attention to the sound of our shofar blasts) — He understands and hopefully accepts both our verbal tefillos as well as the cries of the shofar we bombard Him with on Rosh Hashanah.

And with this understanding, we can appreciate a difficulty in the special Mussaf Shemoneh Esrei of Rosh Hashanah. There are three middle sections to the Shemoneh Esrei on Rosh Hashanah: Malchiyos (kingship), Zichronos (remembrance), and Shofros. Each section quotes ten pesukim that include the key word of that section. What

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is the last passuk of Malchiyos? *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad* — where is the mention of *melech*? The key word is missing!

The Gemara, *Rosh Hashanah* 32b, explains that this in fact is a dispute among the tannaim:

‘אמר רב הונא ת”ש שמע ישראל ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד מלכות דברי ר’ יוסי ר’ יהודה אומר אינה מלכות.

*R. Huna said come and listen [to a proof from a beraisa]: The verse “Shema Yisrael” is kingship. These are the words of Rabbi Yosi. Rabbi Yehuda says that it is not kingship.*

Rebbi Yosi says that *shema Yisrael* counts as a passuk of malchiyos while Rebbi Yehuda argues that it’s missing the key word.

Rebbi Yehuda is right — the word *melech* is absent — so why does Rebbi Yossi count it?

Perhaps now that we understand that *shema* means to accept, to be *mekabeil*, there is no greater declaration of Hashem’s kingship than *kabala*. The very essence of *shema Yisrael* is Malchiyos even if the root of the word itself does not appear.

The sense of hearing and the power of listening in our fast-paced, multitasking world is not often appreciated. I once read that good listening is like tuning into a radio station; you can listen to only one station at a time. Trying to listen to my wife while looking over an office report is like trying to receive two radio stations at the same time. I end up with distortion and frustration. Listening requires a choice of where I place my attention.

But is listening really so significant that it should be *the mitzvah* of Rosh Hashanah?

There are two statements of Chazal relating to *shemiah*, hearing, that stand out and must be better understood to give us an appreciation of the role of listening on Rosh Hashanah and beyond.

First, the Gemara in *Bava Kama* 85b says if someone blinds another person he has to make restitution by paying the value of his eye, which is the difference in price in the slave market between a two-eyed and one-eyed slave with all else being equal. However, if a person injures another causing him to become deaf — *nosein demei kulo* — he needs to pay the entire value of what the person would have been worth on the slave market if he was still able to hear. Why the discrepancy?

Second, the medrash in *Shemos Rabba* (27:9) states:

אם יפל אדם מראש הגג כל גופו לוקה והרופא נכנס אצלו ונותן לו רטיה בראשו וכן בידיו וכן ברגליו ובכל אבריו, נמצא פלו רטיות. אני אני קד, אלא רמ”ח אברים באדם הזה והאין אחד מהם, וכל הגוף מלקלף בעברות והאין שומעת וכל הגוף מקבל חיים, שמעו ותחי נפשכם, לקד אמר: שמעו דבר ה’ בית יעקב. וכן אתה מוציא בירתו שעל ידי שמיעה זכה לחיים, ששמע ונתגיה, שנאמר: וישמע יתרו את כל אשר עשה אלקים למשה ולישראל עמו וגו’.

*If a person falls off a roof and his whole body is injured, the doctor will place a bandage on his head, his hands, his legs and every other organ. His body will be completely wrapped in bandages. I [God] am not like that. A person has 248 organs and the ear is one of them. The whole body is dirty with sins, but if the ear listens, the whole body receives life, “Listen and your soul will live.” ... We find the same regarding Yisro, who through his listening merited life because he heard and he converted. As it states, “And Yisro heard all that Hashem did for Moshe and the Jewish people ...”*

The medrash contrasts a doctor, who

heals a person after a fall by putting a bandage on each individual injury, with Hashem, who can spiritually heal a person with one bandage — *shemias haozen* — the power of hearing — which is enough to spiritually repair the whole person. The proof is from Yisro, who heard about all that Hashem did for the Jewish people and was inspired to join them.

What is the ear’s special power that makes it so valuable and powerful? Several years ago, I attended a production at the NYU Skirball Theater called “Not By Bread Alone,” performed by the Israeli theater group Nalagaat, the world’s only blind-deaf professional acting ensemble. The actors communicate through touch, vibrations from a loud drumbeat, and occasional assistants. While the actors perform an earthy, tactile task — kneading and baking bread, with the aroma wafting up from the ovens at the back of the stage — they share their thoughts on subjects such as who they would most want to give their bread to (a kind soul, a hungry child) and what life is all about. Performer Itzik Hanuna’s searing depiction of being trapped with his own thoughts, not knowing if someone had entered his house, showcased the suffering and loneliness of someone who cannot hear.

At the crux of what Chazal are teaching us is that the *chush hashemiah*, the sense of hearing, is at the core of connecting to others and opening ourselves up to outside influences. Perhaps that is why a deaf-mute is halachically not considered to have the *da’as* necessary for certain halachic functions. [Parenthetically that also may be why there is so much more recent halachic discussions about whether the status of the *cheresh* has changed with sign language and other innovations

allowing the deaf to communicate.]

Simultaneously, part of the connection that hearing creates with the outside world demands that we take responsibility to let in only positive influences. The *Sefer Chareidim* enumerates nine mitzvos that depend on the ear, one of them, to take our fingers and stick them inside of our ears, as the Gemara, *Kesuvos* 5b, says:

אלא מה טעם משופות כיתידות שאם ישמע  
אדם דבר שאינו הגון יניח אצבעותיו באזניו  
תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל מפני מה אוזן כולה  
קשה והאליה רכה שאם ישמע אדם דבר  
שאינו הגון יכוף אליה לתוכה.

*Rather, what is the reason that [our fingers] are shaped like pegs? So that if someone hears something that is not appropriate, he should stick his fingers in his ears. The school of R. Yishmael taught: Why is the ear hard and the lobes are soft? So that if someone hears something that is not appropriate, he can fold the lobe into it.*

Our fingers are shaped as they are and our earlobes are soft so as not to hear lashon hara or inappropriate speech.

Our connections through listening take on several forms. To listen to others. To listen to criticism. To listen to G-d.

The great psychologist Viktor Frankl was once awakened at 3 a.m. by a female patient who was about to take her own life. He stayed on the phone with her for two hours and finally convinced her to come in the morning to his office to talk further. When Frankl met her in the morning, he asked her, “Could you please tell me, what was it that I said? What argument did I suggest that was persuasive enough to convince you to come here today?” She responded that it was nothing he said, but the fact that he was willing to listen to her in the

middle of the night, for so long, that made her realize there is value to living life on this Earth. The connection that listening, active listening, provides, is very real.

We read in the krias Hatorah of Rosh Hashanah the story of Yishmael being sent out of the house of Avraham with Hagar, and that Yishmael became ill and eventually healed. The medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah*, Vayera 53:8) records that the malachim said to Hashem, “Let him die. In the future his children will inflict so much damage on the Jewish people, end it now!” Hashem responded: No! A person is judged *ba’asher hu sham*, where he is right now, not based on what the future will bring. Right now, he deserves to live.

Is that rule really accurate? What about the *ben sorer u’moreh*, the wayward son, who is killed (Devarim 21), to which Rashi (Devarim 21:18) explains that it is better he should die now innocent than in the future when he is full of sin. What happened to “*ba’asher hu sham*”? Right now, he doesn’t deserve it?

Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht zt”l, *Asufas Ma’arachos* to Ki Seitzei, explained the distinction lies in two words: the *ben sorer u’moreh* is described as “*eino shomea*” he doesn’t listen, he is not willing to listen. If a person won’t listen, can’t connect to others, then his future is bleak. He has lost his chance to be judged on a “*ba’asher hu sham*” basis.

Rosh Hashanah is not only a time to focus on our relationship with Hashem, but on *bein adam lachaveiro* as well. Hashem acts with us as He sees us act. If we want our tefillos to be heard, in all senses of the word, if we want the piercing sounds of our mitzvas shofar to be heard, we need to

show Hashem how we listen. We need to commit ourselves anew to listening.

When that shofar sounds on Rosh Hashanah, it is not a passive mitzvah, but a mitzvah to listen actively, to pay attention, to accept on ourselves:

1) to listen to Hashem, to strengthen our commitment to mitzvos in areas that may have been weak. In a general sense to realize, become comfortable with and accept the yoke, the responsibility, but also the opportunity for mitzvos. To focus on at least one area where our listening to His Torah may be lacking.

2) to be willing to listen to criticism. One of the 48 traits necessary to acquire Torah is *ohev es hatochachos*, to love mussar, to love rebuke, to love criticism. It is hard to find fault in ourselves. It is very painful and many defense mechanisms are initiated when those raw nerves are struck. Try to be open to it, maybe someone else has a point, take criticism seriously. In the end we all gain.

3) to really listen to others. To give a spouse, a child, a friend, a coworker, the attention he or she deserves when needed. To put aside everything else and pay attention to people as we would want from them when we are speaking. We spend much of the time that others are talking to us thinking about what we are going to say, instead of listening to what is being said. We need to commit ourselves to serious listening every day at least for a few minutes, without any distractions.

*Shema koleinu Hashem Elokeinu* — Hashem please hear our tefillos, our wishes, our desires for the coming year. See how we are committed to listening to Your mitzvos and in that merit hear all of our tefillos, with mercy, so we all merit a *kesiva vachasima tova*.