

Hearing the flow of the Shema (*VaEtchanan*)

According to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (*Avot* 6:2), every single day a heavenly voice (*bat kol*) emanates from Mount Horeb to stir the Jewish nation to cleave to the Torah. The question we must ask is: Can this voice be heard? And if so, who can hear this voice?

To answer the first question, I would like to quote from Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Pollonye's *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* commentary (on *Parshat Vayikra*) who explains that when we are discussing a voice, it is not a physical voice speaking audible words. Instead, it is an internal 'voice' that is 'heard' as inner thoughts which encourages us to repent and to cleave to God and Torah.

On this basis we may assume that this voice is heard by us all. However, according to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Berditchev in his *Kedushat Levi* commentary (on *Parshat VaEtchanan*), this voice is specifically heard by the *tzaddikim* (the righteous) through the words of *Shema Yisrael* – 'Listen, Israel' (*Devarim* 6:4). This suggests that *Shema Yisrael* speaks to the righteous and instructs them to speak to the rest of the Jewish world to come nearer to God and Torah.

Undoubtedly, there are those who connect deeply to the idea that *tzaddikim* can hear a heavenly call when reciting the *Shema*. However, maybe due to the fact that I am not a *chassid* (meaning that my spiritual worldview does not see *tzaddikim* as unique, flawless or supernatural beings*), and maybe due to the fact that the days and weeks after October 7th prompted so many less observant Jews to connect deeply to Judaism through the *Shema Yisrael*, I am less comfortable with this approach.

Given this, I would like to share an alternative interpretation to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching as offered by the Maharal in his *Derech Chaim* commentary to *Avot* 6:2, who says as follows:

'Even though the *bat kol* (heavenly voice) can't be heard, it is still felt and it still leaves an impact in this world amongst those who are not engaged with Torah. And while this *bat kol* is not heard, it's *mazal* is nevertheless heard, and its *mazal* can most certainly inspire such people to connect to the Torah.'

In direct contrast to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak who believes that the *bat kol* which emanates from Mount Horeb is heard through the *Shema* only by *tzaddikim* who are engaged in Torah, the Maharal understands that this *bat kol* is heard by those who are not engaged in Torah whom God is beckoning to reconnect. Still, what does the Maharal mean when he says that the 'mazal' of the *bat kol* is heard?

While, as Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman explains in his remarkable commentary, this idea seems to be an adaptation of a teaching found in *Megillah* 3a, I would like to explain it while stepping back and exploring the meaning of the word *Mazal*.

Quoting the Radak (*Sefer HaShorashim, Shoresb Nazal*), the Ari ז"ל (as cited by the *Erchei HaKinuyim, Erech Mazalot*) and the Vilna Gaon (*Yabel Obr* on the *Zohar Bereishit 43b*), Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (*Siftei Chaim: Emunah V'Hashgacha* Vol. 1 p. 187) explains that while many associate the word *mazal* with 'luck', it actually comes from the Hebrew word *nazal* which refers to liquids that flow (see *Devarim 32:2*).

Based on this definition, when the Maharal speaks about hearing the *mazal* of a *bat kol*, it means that we each have the capacity to catch the drips and hear the flow of a divine voice which calls upon each of us to connect.

As mentioned, it is just Rabbi Levi Yitzchak who associates the *bat kol* with the *Shema*. However, I believe that if we combine his insight with the approach of the Maharal, we can come to better understand some of the events that we have witnessed over the past 10 months, and the incredible way in which the *Shema Yisrael* has become so prominent in the consciousness of so many Jews around the world.

As we know, the Jewish people suffered a horrific attack on October 7th, and on that bitter day there were Jews hiding in safe rooms, cupboards, forests and kindergartens, as well as soldiers battling in tanks, in streets and in kibbutzim, who each found themselves connecting to the *Shema* in ways that they'd never previously done so. In those moments, they felt plugged into a flow of energy that was greater than themselves and which went back all the way back to Mount Horeb. And when they said *Shema Yisrael*, what did they express? That they knew who they were as a Jew. That they were connected to that voice from Sinai. That they knew that the land of Israel was promised by God to the Jewish people. And that whatever was happening around them, they believed in God and believed that God was with them.

Ultimately, *Shema* isn't just a prayer. Instead, it is a pipeline to Sinai, and whenever a Jew says the words of the *Shema*, they have the capacity to open that pipeline and either hear the *bat kol* or feel and hear its flow. And in that moment, the *Shema* connects us to who we are and what we most value as members of the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom!