

“The Spirituality of Listening”

(This is the title of a of a d’var Torah by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l on Parshat Ekev 5776 <https://rabbisacks.org/eikev-5776/>)

1) Rabbi Sacks:

It is one of the most important words in Judaism, and also one of the least understood. Its two most famous occurrences are in last week’s parsha and this week’s: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” and “It shall come to pass if you *surely listen* to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul” – the openings of the first and second paragraphs of the *Shema*. It also appears in the first line of the parsha: “It shall come to pass, if you *listen* to these laws.”

The word, of course, is *shema*. I have argued elsewhere that it is fundamentally untranslatable into English since it means so many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise, to respond, to obey. It is one of the motif-words of the book of Devarim, where it appears no less than 92 times – more than in any other book of the Torah. Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, *Shema*: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what he wants from us. If you would only listen ... *Judaism is a religion of listening*. This is one of its most original contributions to civilisation.

The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture. Its greatest achievements had to do with the eye, with seeing. It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture and architecture the world has ever seen. Its most characteristic group events – theatrical performances and the Olympic games – were spectacles: performances that were watched. Plato thought of knowledge

as a kind of depth vision, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things...

Judaism offered a radical alternative. It is faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented visually. The very act of making a graven image – a visual symbol – is a form of idolatry. As Moses reminded the people in last week's parsha, when the Israelites had a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no image; there was only a voice." (Deut. 4:12). God communicates in sounds, not sights. He speaks. He commands. He calls. That is why the supreme religious act is *Shema*. When God speaks, we listen. When He commands, we try to obey....

2.

אֶחָד ה־יְהוָה לִהְיוֹ-אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע

Hear, Israel: Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Blessed is God's glorious Name, God's sovereignty is eternal.

Pshat and drash

2) Rabbi Sacks:

This may seem like a small difference, [understanding based on seeing not hearing] but it is in fact a huge one. For the Greeks, the ideal form of knowledge involved detachment. There is the one who sees, the subject, and there is that which is seen, the object, and they belong to two different realms. A person who looks at a painting or a sculpture or a play in a theatre or the Olympic games is not himself part of the art or the drama or the athletic competition. He or she is a spectator, not a participant.

Speaking and listening are not forms of detachment. They are forms of engagement. They create a relationship. The Hebrew word for knowledge, *da'at*, implies involvement, closeness, intimacy. "And Adam *knew* Eve his wife and she conceived and gave birth" (Gen. 4:1). That is knowing in the Hebrew sense, not the Greek. We can enter into a relationship with God, even though He is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.

3) Gen 16:1-16

וְשָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ וְלֵהָ שָׂפְחָה מִצְרַיִת וְשָׂמָה הָגָר:

Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

הֲלִי מִלְדָּת בְּאִנְיָ אֶל־שָׂפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה -וְהָיָה וְתֹאמַר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּה־נָא עֲצָרְנִי ?
וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי:

And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son^a *Lit. "be built up"* through her." And Abram listened to Sarah's voice. (heeded her request)

ותלך שרי אשת-אברם את-הגר המצרית שפחה מקץ עשר שנים לשבת אברם בארץ
כנען ותתן אתה לאברם אישה לו לאשה:

So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after
Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her
husband Abram as concubine.

ויבא אל-הגר ותהר ותרא כי הרטה ומקל גברתה בעיניה:

He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she
had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.

ותאמר שרי אל-אברם חמסי עליך אנכי נתתי שפחתי בחיקך ותרא כי הרטה ואקל בעיניה
ה ביני וביניך:-ג-ה-ישפט ?

And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself
put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am
lowered in her esteem. The LORD decide between you and me!"

ויאמר אברם אל-שרי הגה שפחתך בידך עשיליה הטוב בעיניך ותענה שרי ותברח מפניה:

Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you
think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

ה על-עין המים במדבר על-העין בנרדף שור:-ג-ה-וימצאה מלאך ?

An angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness,
the spring on the road to Shur,

ויאמר הָאֵל שפחת שרי אי-מנה באת ואנה תלכי ותאמר מפני שרי גברתי אנכי ברחת:

and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where
are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress
Sarai."

ה שׁוֹבִי אֶל־גְּבֻרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַחַת יְדֵיהָ: וְהִיא אָמְרָה לָהּ מִלֶּאֱנָה ?

And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.”

ה הִרְבָּה אֶרְבֶּה אֶת־וֹרְעֶךָ וְלֹא יִסְפֵּר מְרַב־יְהוָה וְהִיא אָמְרָה לָהּ מִלֶּאֱנָה ?

And the angel of the LORD said to her,
“I will greatly increase your offspring,
And they shall be too many to count.”

ה אֶל־יְהוָה הִגִּיד הַרְהוּ וְיִלְדוּת בְּנוֹ וְקִרְיַת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה וְהִיא אָמְרָה לָהּ מִלֶּאֱנָה ?
שְׁנֵי:

The angel of the LORD said to her further,
“Behold, you are with child
And shall bear a son;
You shall call him Ishmael,^b*I.e.*, “*God heeds.*”
For the LORD has paid heed to your suffering.

וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פָּרָא אִדָּם יָדוּ כְּכֹל וְיָדוּ כָּל בֶּן וְעַל־פָּנָיו כָּל־אֶתְיוּ יִשְׁכֹּן:

He shall be a wild ass of a man;
His hand against everyone,
And everyone’s hand against him;
He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.”

ל רָאִי כִּי אָמַרְתָּ הַגֵּם הַלֵּם רָאִיתִי אַחֲרַי רָאִי: הֲהִדְבַּר אֵלַיָּה אַתָּה אֶן־הִיא וְהִיא קָרָא שְׁמִי?

And she called the LORD who spoke to her, “You Are El-roi,” “*God of Seeing.*” by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!”^d

עַל־כֵּן קָרָא לְבְּאֵר בְּאֵר לַחַי רָאִי הִנֵּה בֵּין־קַדֵּשׁ וּבֵין בְּרֵד:

Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; “*the Well of the Living One Who sees me.*” it is between Kadesh and Bered.—

וַתֵּלֶד הַגֵּר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָם שְׁם־בְּנֵוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָהּ הַגֵּר יִשְׁמָעֵאל:

Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael.

וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־שְׁמֹנִים וָשֵׁשׁ שָׁנָה בְּלִדְת־הַגֵּר אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם: {ס}

Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

4) Jeremiah 25: 1-14

The word which came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, which was the first year of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon. This is what the prophet Jeremiah said to all the people of Judah and to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

From the thirteenth year of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, to this day—these twenty-three years—the word of the LORD has come to me. I have spoken to you persistently, but you would not listen.

Moreover, the LORD constantly sent all his servants the prophets to you, but you would not listen or incline your ears to hear when they said, “Turn back, every one, from your evil ways and your wicked acts, that you may remain throughout the ages on the soil which the LORD gave to you and your fathers.

Do not follow other gods, to serve them and worship them. Do not vex Me with what your own hands have made,^a*i.e.*, *idols*. and I will not bring disaster upon you.”

But you would not listen to Me—declares the LORD—but vexed Me with what your hands made, to your own hurt. Assuredly, thus said the LORD of Hosts: Because you would not listen to My words,

I am going to send for all the peoples of the north—declares the LORD—and for My servant, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all those nations round about. I will exterminate them and make them a desolation, an object of hissing^b ruins for all time.

And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride, and the sound of the mill and the light of the lamp.

This whole land shall be a desolate ruin.

And those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

When the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation and the land of the Chaldeans for their sins—declares the LORD—and I will make it a desolation for all time.

5) Sh'ma Koleinu – commentary from *My People's Prayerbook*

BRETTLER (BIBLE)

"Hear our voice" This general prayer interrupts the triad of blessings on the theme of restored Jerusalem. The next blessing is about sacrifice, however, so this one may be intended to remind us here that prayer replaces sacrifice. It is an extended plea to God to "hear" the people's prayers, since God is a prayer-hearing deity. The opening call for God to listen has several biblical parallels (e.g., Ps. 5:4), reflecting anxiety, common in the psalms, that God may not be listening to prayer that is about to be offered and must be

a s k e d explicitly to pay attention (Pss. 4:2; 54:4; 143:1). Not all the authors of our psalms share this anxiety; the writer of Ps.

65:3 makes a point of calling God *shome'a t'fillah*, "the one who hears prayer," a description that is borrowed here. Our prayer may open with anxious hope that God is listening, but it closes with certainty that God will do so.

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

"For You hear the prayer of your People Israel" The particularism of God's hearing only Israel's prayers disturbed Isaac Mayer Wise as well as the authors of *Ha'avodah Shebalev* and *Va'ani T'filati*, who universalized the phrase by substituting the Sefardi "every mouth" (*kol peh*) for "your People Israel" (*amkha yisrael*). *Ha'avodah Shebalev* and *Siddur Lev Chadash* adopt Wise's wording, and *Gates of Prayer* evokes the same universalistic sentiments by saying simply, "For You are a God who hears prayer and supplication."

(See below "Grant peace.")

16. T'FILLAH ("PRAYER")

תְּפִלָּה

¹ Hear our voice, Adonai our God, ² Have pity and mercy on us, and accept our prayer with favor, for You are the God who hears our prayers and supplications. ³ Do not turn us away from You, our ruler, empty-handed, for You hear the prayer of your People Israel in mercy. ⁴ Blessed are You, Adonai, who hears prayer.

LANDES (HALAKHAH)

"Hear our voice" This is the summary blessing of the *Amidah*, reminding us that we too must hear the cry of others if we are to emulate God. It comes at the end of all the middle blessings to teach us that before we move on, we are welcome to pour out our hearts to God in personal petition beyond what the individual words of the *Amidah* have to say. I commented above (see "Heal us") that personal insertions into the blessings are always in order but that they should be on the theme of the blessing

in question, such as a prayer that someone we know be healed, added to the blessing on healing (=8). Here, however, we have a general

benediction affirming God's readiness to hear prayer in general, so we may insert a prayer for anything we like and only then continue with the prescribed wording of the *Amidah*.

L. HOFFMAN (HISTORY)

THE LAST OF THE MIDDLE BLESSINGS LOOKS BACK UPON ALL THE OTHERS, SEEING THEM AS A SINGLE EXTENDED PRAYER FOR HUMAN DELIVERANCE, BEGINNING WITH KNOWLEDGE AND REPENTANCE, AND ENDING WITH THE JUST SOCIAL ORDER THAT WE CALL MESSIANIC. OUR THEME HERE IS THE PETITION THAT GOD WILL HEAR OUR PRAYER.

"You hear the prayer of your People Israel in mercy" The Spanish-Portuguese version is more universalistic: "You hear

the prayer of everyone" (literally, "of every mouth," *t'fillat kol peh*).

שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ. ² חוּס וְרַחֵם
עָלֵינוּ וְקַבֵּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרַצוֹן אֶת־
תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלּוֹת וְתַחֲנוּנִים
אַתָּה. ³ וּמִלִּפְנֵיךָ מִלִּפְנֵי רִיקָם אֵל
תִּשְׁיִבֵנוּ, כִּי אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלַּת עַמֶּךָ
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרַחֲמִים. ⁴ בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ שׁוֹמֵעַ
תְּפִלָּה.

J. HOFFMAN (TRANSLATION)

"You are the God" "You" is emphasized in Hebrew, conveying the same effect as if it were in italics or boldface.

"Empty-handed" Literally, "empty."

My People's Prayerbook
Vol 2: The Amidah
Edited by
Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman
pp. 146-147

6) Rabbi Sacks:

There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been heard...

Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads.