

Na'aseh Venishma: On Being Hearing Impaired



Rabbi Avi Weiss

Rabbi Avi Weiss is the Founder of YCT and the IRF, Co-Founder of Maharat, and Rabbi in Residence of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale-The Bayit.

Na'aseh venishma is one of the best-known phrases related to the Shavuot holiday. Standing at Sinai we declared, “*na'aseh*”—we will do, and “*nishma*,” from the word *shema*—we will hear.

More recently, the term *shema* has been understood differently. It is not “to hear” as much as it is “to listen,” as there is a difference between the two. Hearing is external, superficial, and yes, simple; all one does is take in the physical sounds.

Listening is more complex. It is internal—requiring full concentration to deeply absorb and integrate the words being said.

The challenge to understand *shema* as “listen” rather than “hear” is one that I have often shared over the years. In this process I didn't pay much attention to *shema* as hearing. I viewed it as a natural phenomenon, a mundane activity that requires little or no effort.

No more. Things for me have now changed. I have come to recognize that the gift of hearing is not a given. It's not simple.

It all started when I boarded a plane in London a few years ago. My hearing was then perfect. Upon landing in New York, I noticed that my hearing in my left ear had diminished. By the time I received ENT help, I was told an infection had developed and nothing could be done. So far, all of the hearing aids I have tried have not helped.

I am not alone. Loss of hearing is now commonplace. Nearly 25% of those aged sixty-five to seventy-four, and 50% of those seventy-five and older are hearing-impaired.

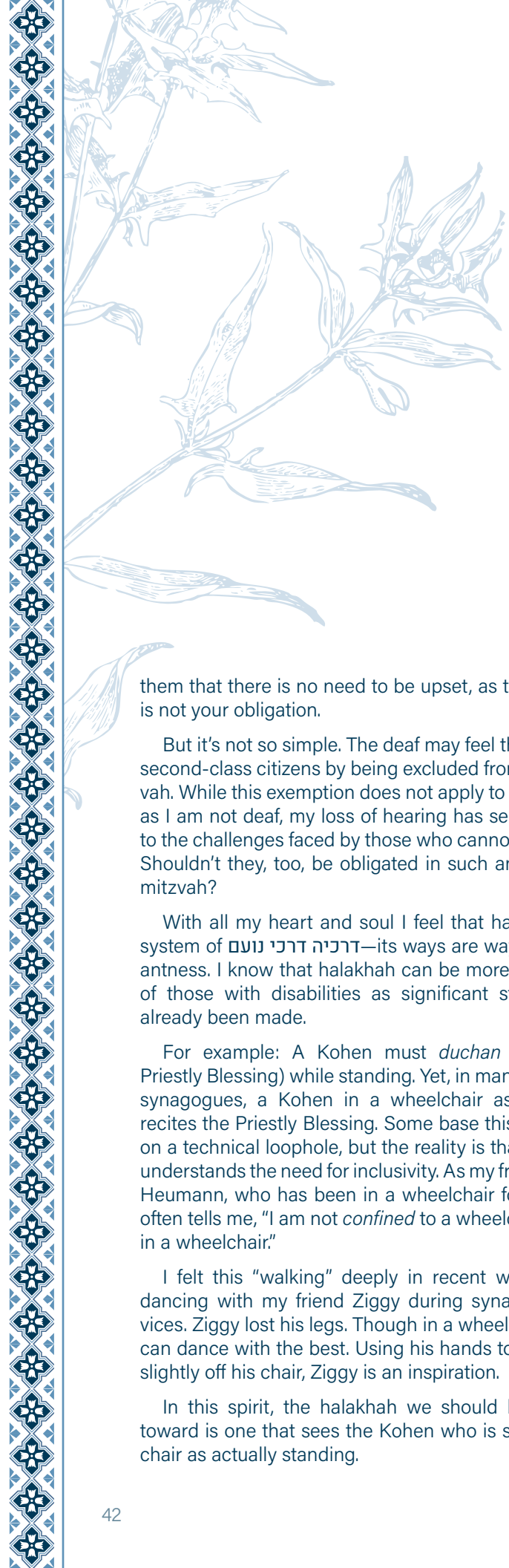
At the onset, I made light of my problem. Once, my wife Toby shared with me that there was an “ugly” woman in shul. I had never heard Toby use that word about anyone, and questioned her. She responded: “I didn't say she's 'ugly,' I said she's 'lovely.'”

Most recently, while in Israel, the Jerusalem basketball team beat Maccabi Tel Aviv. No small feat. At the end of the game, the stands erupted with the song “*Mashiah Mashiah, ay yay yay*.” I turned to my daughter Elana and said, “People are so holy—even in a basketball victory they sing about Mashiah!” She looked at me astounded, “Abba, they are not singing 'Mashiah,' they are singing '*gaviah, gaviah*' (trophy).”

But the comical has now become much more serious. I recognize that I often look lost. When people speak to me, especially in a crowd, I cannot hear. Often I respond to a question with an answer that has nothing to do with the issue presented. At other times when I do not respond, people may feel I'm upset with them. It is not uncommon for me to feel shut out; what is before me seems to be passing me by. Even when I am in a room with others, it's almost as if I am somewhere else.

My feelings of exclusion are now exacerbated when I come across halakhot which declare that one who is deaf is exempt from mitzvot dependent upon hearing. For example, a deaf person is exempt from the mitzvah of megillah, which must be heard.

The rabbis may have instituted this law to make life easier for the deaf. If obligated, the deaf would come up short, as they cannot fulfill mitzvot that involve hearing. The intention of the rabbis was to calm the deaf, telling



them that there is no need to be upset, as this mitzvah is not your obligation.

But it's not so simple. The deaf may feel that they are second-class citizens by being excluded from this mitzvah. While this exemption does not apply to me directly, as I am not deaf, my loss of hearing has sensitized me to the challenges faced by those who cannot hear at all. Shouldn't they, too, be obligated in such an important mitzvah?

With all my heart and soul I feel that halakhah is a system of דרכיה דרכי נועם—its ways are ways of pleasantness. I know that halakhah can be more embracing of those with disabilities as significant strides have already been made.

For example: A Kohen must *duchan* (recite the Priestly Blessing) while standing. Yet, in many Orthodox synagogues, a Kohen in a wheelchair ascends and recites the Priestly Blessing. Some base this allowance on a technical loophole, but the reality is that halakhah understands the need for inclusivity. As my friend Danny Heumann, who has been in a wheelchair for decades, often tells me, "I am not *confined* to a wheelchair; I *walk* in a wheelchair."

I felt this "walking" deeply in recent weeks when dancing with my friend Ziggy during synagogue services. Ziggy lost his legs. Though in a wheelchair, Ziggy can dance with the best. Using his hands to lift himself slightly off his chair, Ziggy is an inspiration.

In this spirit, the halakhah we should be working toward is one that sees the Kohen who is sitting in his chair as actually standing.

Similarly, for many poskim (decisors of Jewish law), those who hear through a hearing aid are, actually, hearing. The aid is not considered an impediment to fulfilling the mitzvah.

My hope is that halakhah will reach even further, and that the definition of "hearing" will be expanded. In its broadest sense, hearing in halakhah should be understood as any form of reception.

Perhaps this is the meaning of the Biblical text we read on Shavuot that describes the Jewish people at revelation as "רואים את הקולות"—seeing the voices. Everyone knows that one *hears* voices—one doesn't *see* voices. But maybe, just maybe, *seeing* voices is a way to say that even the deaf are able to experience sounds through reading lips or sign language, or seeing the emotion of the moment, or viewing words on a screen as they are being voiced.

Minimally, I am hopeful that the Tzomet microphone developed in Gush Etzion, and approved by great rabbis for use on Shabbat, will be accepted in synagogues around the world. It is already used in some Orthodox synagogues around the world.

I recognize that more acceptance in this area is complicated when considering recent history. Back in the 1950s, using a microphone was second to mehitzah in distinguishing an Orthodox synagogue from a Conservative synagogue. The distinction became sharper when Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in the 1950s, permitted the use of microphones, but under pressure, retracted. If he did so then, the argument goes, he would do so now.

We are living, however, seventy years later. There are no halachic barriers to the Tzomet microphone, as it does not involve the direct use of electricity. I do not believe use of it is a *bedi'avad* (post facto accommodation), but a *lekhat'hilah* (an optimal fulfillment of halakhah).

When Paul Simon wrote "The Sound of Silence," he seemed to be speaking about the importance not only of hearing, but of listening. And so he wrote, "people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening."

But for me, these days, "The Sound of Silence" has a different meaning. It refers to sounds that I know are being made but I cannot hear. Literally, sounds of silence.

Interpreting *nishma* as "listening" is important, but it is only part of the story. *Na'aseh venishma* as "we will do and we will hear," is equally relevant, and should never be forgotten. ❁

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