

Parshat Ki Tissa

The Rebellious Listener and the Unicorn: Moshe's Gift to the Jewish People

Adina Roth

In Parshat Ki Tisa, we encounter one of the most significant lessons of leadership in the Torah. The lesson appears in an interchange between Yehoshua and Moshe, with such imperceptibility that one might actually miss it. The interchange is about listening, and how the ways in which we listen can influence the destiny of those being heard.

Moshe has just been told by God that Israel has sinned by crafting and worshipping a golden calf. As he and Yehoshua return to the camp, they hear the voice of the people and Yehoshua pronounces, 'a sound of war in the camp.'

Moshe responds in three sentences, characterised by Robert Alter as triadic verse:

אֵין קוֹל עֲנֹת גְבוּרָה	<i>Ayn kol anot gevurah,</i>	Not the sound of crying out in triumph,
וְאֵין קוֹל עֲנֹת חַלוּשָׁה	<i>ve'ayn kol anot chalushah,</i>	And not the sound of crying out in defeat,
קוֹל עֲנֹת אֲנָכִי שִׁמְעֵ	<i>Kol anot, ani shomeia,</i>	I hear the sound of voices.

(*Shemot 32:18*)

Where Joshua hears something definite, Moshe's rhythmic poetry is punctuated by indefinites. The double use of the word 'Ayn' 'This is not', reinforces a sense of absence and opacity. 'This sound is not victory... nor is this sound defeat,' he asserts. In Moshe's disavowing the two possible outcomes of war, Moshe also refuses duality or dichotomous thinking. Even though God has already told him what the people have done, Moshe rebels against this possibility and refuses to hear a sealed fate in the voices of the people.

In a fascinating elaboration of this dialogue between Moshe and Joshua in the Jerusalem Talmud (Ta'anit, 4:5), we uncover that Moshe was surprised at the manner in which Joshua jumped to conclusions, 'a man who in the future will rule over 600,000 does not know to distinguish between sound and sound!'

Moshe's response in Taanit gives us an indication that a certain quality of listening is essential for leadership. According to this interpretation in Taanit, Moshe is worried that Yehoshua does not distinguish between 'kol' and 'kol'. The beauty of this Aggadatan is that the word 'kol' is identical. To distinguish between the seeming sameness of 'kol' and 'kol' requires a capacity for a kind of subtle listening, a deeper listening, a listening that resists prior expectations. The radical gesture of Moshe's listening and leadership is that Hashem had already told him what was going on in the camp. Yet Moshe challenges his own prior knowledge and assumptions and enters the space of *kol anot!* Translators have struggled to translate the word *anot* in the third line: what was it that Moshe heard? The JPS translates *anot* as 'singing,' while Robert Alter translates it as 'crying' and Artscroll translates it as 'distress.' This third '*anot*' in Moshe's chant is characterised by indeterminacy. In contrast to the first two *anot* which are attached to fixed descriptors, the third *anot* remains hanging. Rashi picks up on the indeterminacy and invites a play on words; the *anot* of the people was

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'*me'anin et hanefesh*,' a sound that tormented the soul. Neither victory, nor defeat, according to Rashi's empathic reading, the sound was fraught, a kind of soul-torment.

For those few moments, when Moshe is still descending the mountain, Moshe listens with the leadership of wholehearted indeterminacy. It is easier to jump to fixed notions of what we know about people, but in order to hold infinite possibility in mind for a person, or a people, one needs to listen with the patience of uncertainty. Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his Sonnets to Orpheus about the unicorn, '*they fed him not with corn, but only with the possibility of being.*' As long as Moshe is filled with this openness to sound, where multiple interpretations hover, the Jewish people are still, like Rilke's unicorn, in the realm of being and becoming. We too are offered a space where we might still become whomever we were born to be.

It is just a few minutes later that Moshe arrives and moves from hearing to seeing. The space of radical possibility is over and Moshe smashes the *luchot*. The completion of his time with Hashem is undone and a new story needs to be written from the dust of the *luchot* that lie at his feet.

In a continuation of the discussion in the Yerushalmi, Rabbi Yesa said, '*There is no generation in which there is not an ounce of the sin of the Calf.*' In Rabbi Yesa's reading, the sin of the Calf becomes part of who we are. We are always close to the possibility of sinking into idol worship, of committing grave errors. However, Moshe's rebellious act of listening accompanies and even counters Rabbi Yesa's pronouncement. The possibility of the *Egel* is inscribed in each generation. However, Moshe's '*kol anot*' gives us the gift of alternate pathways and indeterminate outcomes in every generation too, alongside the spectre of the *Egel*.

In Moshe's listening to our '*kol anot*,' and being surprised at Yehoshua's listening skills, Moshe teaches us something about leadership and relationships. If we listen differently, we don't just hear different possibilities, we actually help to create them. In listening differently, we open up different potentials in our spouse, our friend, our community, our world. In listening rebelliously, openly, against the grain, we 'save a space,'¹ where we can always write a new set of *luchot* and start again.

Shabbat Shalom



Adina Roth is a Jewish educator and Clinical Psychologist in Johannesburg, South Africa. She holds a Masters in Contemporary Literature comparing Hassidic and Post-Modern readings of Bereshit as well as a Masters from New York University on a Fulbright scholarship where she did her thesis on post-colonial and psychoanalytic readings of Shemot. Adina is the founder of B'tocham Education, an after-school programme for B'nei Mitzvah and has taught extensively in adult education. A co-founder of the Jozi Partnership minyan, Adina also works as a Clinical Psychologist and lives in Johannesburg.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, Book II, Number 4