

Parsha Eikev
The Parsha of Hearing
Meytal Blumenthal-Gordon
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Twenty years ago, I had the honor and privilege of being the first Bat Mitzvah at the Shira Hadasha Synagogue in Jerusalem. I received an *aliya l'Torah* and read *Parshat Ekev* and its *haftara*.

I remember it as a uniquely powerful experience. For the first time in my life, I was privileged to join a "community of those committed to Torah and mitzvot" and I was able to be their "*shlichat tzibur*" in the literal sense – the community's messenger. Through the words, the poetry, and the musical notes I was the interface between the written word of the Torah and the community that hears those holy words.

This connection between hearing the words of the Torah and the obligation to observe its mitzvot is an essential part of this week's *parsha*. Thus, for example, the *parsha* opens with the words:

וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן, אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה... וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם

As a result of **hearing** these laws, you will **observe** and **perform** them. (Devarim 7:12)

Hearing God's commandments leads to keeping them. What is special about hearing, that we should consider it the first step in the path to keeping the mitzvot?

In the process of hearing, the sound waves entering through the ear are absorbed and converted in the brain into electrical signals that are processed to produce new information. That is, in order to derive understanding from what we hear, we must undergo internal processing and balance within ourselves. Indeed, in Hebrew, the word ear has the same root as the word balance (אָזן) and it is interesting that the balance system of the human body is also found in the ears.

Our ears, unlike the other sense organs in the human body, are unique in that they only bring information from the outside in, and the information is absorbed continuously. Whether we want to or not, we hear, even while sleeping. However, the meaning and insights we derive from the sounds depend on the internal processing we perform within ourselves.

An interesting reference to the importance of the sense of hearing can be found in the discussion of the laws of *nezikin* (damages). Damage to a person's sense of hearing is seen as more serious than to the sense of sight: "He who has blinded his fellow's eye gives him the monetary value of his eye, ... if he made him deaf, he gives him the monetary value of the whole body" (Talmud Bavli, Baba Kama 95b).

At first this surprised me because I would have thought that sight is the most important sense in connecting a person to the outside world. But, on further reflection, one can understand that in order to communicate with the world it is impossible to "see" without first listening, processing, and absorbing the surroundings into ourselves.

From this, it is clear that the ability to "hear" is the foundation for keeping the Torah and mitzvot, and perhaps that is why the basic concepts in the study of the Talmud are based on the root "to hear": "*Ta Shma*" (come and learn), "*Shma Mina*" (learn from it), "*Ka Mashma Lan*" (this teaches us), etc.

The *haftara* also provides a reference to the power of hearing:

ה' אלוקים נתן לי לשון למודים לדעת לעות את-יעף דבר יעיר בבקר בבקר יעיר לי אזן לשמע כלמודים:
 The Lord God gave me a skilled tongue, to know how to speak timely words to the weary;
 every morning he awakens me, he awakens my ear to listen like disciples. (Isaiah 50:4)

The prophet Isaiah admits that he was gifted with the ability to speak, that is, the talent to teach and convey God's prophecies to the people with his tongue, and with his ability to strengthen and encourage the weary. But even for him, as we learned in our parsha, there is a preliminary stage to speaking and that is **listening**. The prophet describes how God himself rouses his ear so that he is ready to listen to the words of the prophecy. Only after a prophet gets to hear for himself and process God's words within himself, can he speak God's words to others. It is this internal elaboration that gives each prophet his unique style. As we find in Sanhedrin 89a: "No two prophets prophesy in the same style." Maimonides, when describing prophecy, explains "that a person should feel as if something happened to him and another spirit passed through him that affected him and then he will speak words of wisdom or glory..." (Moreh Nevuchim, part 2, chap. 45).

The *shaliach tzibur* is like a prophet, producing from within deeper insights into the meaning of the words. And equally important, the congregation that hears his prayer, each individual in his or her own way, processes the words they hear and derives from them their own personal prayer. This is expressed by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple, in words that have become part of the liturgy of the *selichot*:

...לשמע אל הרנה ואל התפלה אשר עבדך מתפלל לפניך היום...
 "...to hear the joy and the prayer that your servant prays before you today" (I Kings, 8:28)

Today I understand that this is the special experience I had as a Bat Mitzvah. The privilege of listening and then transmitting the *parsha* that I had read and personally internalized allowed me to connect with my fellow Jews with a real sense of "קבלת תורה ומצוות", accepting Torah and Mitzvot.



Meytal Blumenthal-Gordon was born and raised in Jerusalem. She studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum and served in the IDF in the 8200 intelligence unit where she also volunteered to be responsible for religious services on the base. Meytal earned her Masters degree in Jewish Philosophy from Hebrew University, where she was a student in the "Revivim" program, which trains outstanding students to be educators for Jewish studies in Israeli secular schools. She taught Tanakh and Jewish philosophy at Haifa's "Reali" high school for the last several years, where she also served as coordinator of extended bible studies for the school, initiating and managing school-wide projects, seminars and workshops. Meytal also served as the Regional Pedagogical Advisor for the Israeli Ministry of Education for high school bible studies in the Haifa district. In

addition, she is the editor and project coordinator for the "New Israeli Commentary" book series on biblical texts, with authors Prof. Avigdor Shinan and Prof. Yair Zakovitch. While living in Haifa with her husband and son, she founded the first "partnership minyan" in the city. Currently she is living in Jerusalem and working for an Israeli tech company.