Eikev (5774) – To Lead is to Listen

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**To Lead is To Listen, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

“If only you would listen to these laws …” (Deut. 7: 12). These words with which our parsha begins contain a verb that is a fundamental motif of the book of Devarim/Deuteronomy. The verb is *sh-m-a*. … It appears no less than 92 times in Devarim as a whole.

We often miss the significance of this word because of what I call *the fallacy of translatability*: the assumption that one language is fully translatable into another. ..Languages are only partially translatable into one another.[1] …

This is particularly so in the case of the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a*. Listen, for example, to the way the opening words of this week’s parsha have been translated into English:

*a.If you hearken to these precepts …b. If you completely obey these laws …c. If you pay attention to these laws …d. If you heed these ordinances …e. Because ye hear these judgments …*

There is no single English word that means to hear, to listen, to heed, to pay attention to, and to obey. *Sh-m-a* also means “to understand,” as in the story of the tower of Babel, when God says, Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand [*yishme’u*] each other” (Gen. 11: 7).

As I have argued elsewhere, one of the most striking facts about the Torah is that, although it contains 613 commands, it does not contain a word that means “to obey.” When such a word was needed in modern Hebrew, the verb *le-tzayet* was borrowed from Aramaic. The verb used by the Torah in place of “to obey” is *sh-m-a*. This is of the highest possible significance. It means that *blind obedience is not a virtue in Judaism*. God wants us to understand the laws He has commanded us. He wants us to reflect on why this law, not that. He wants us to listen, to reflect, to seek to understand, to internalize and to respond. He wants us to become *a listening people*.

Ancient Greece was a visual culture, a culture of art, architecture, theatre and spectacle. For the Greeks generally, and Plato specifically, knowing was a form of *seeing.* Judaism, as Freud pointed out in *Moses and Monotheism*, is a non-visual culture. We worship a God who cannot be seen; and making sacred images, icons, is absolutely forbidden. In Judaism we do not see God; we hear God. Knowing is a form of *listening*. Ironically, Freud himself, deeply ambivalent though he was about Judaism, in psycho-analysis invented the *listening cure*: listening as therapy.[2]

It follows that in Judaism listening is a deeply spiritual act. To listen to God is to be open to God. That is what Moses is saying throughout Devarim: “If only you would listen.” So it is with leadership – indeed with all forms of interpersonal relationship. Often the greatest gift we can give someone is to listen to them.

Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz and went on to create a new form of psychotherapy based on “man’s search for meaning,” once told the story of a patient of his who phoned him in the middle of the night to tell him, calmly, that she was about to commit suicide. He kept her on the phone for two hours, giving her every conceivable reason to live. Eventually she said that she had changed her mind and would not end her life. When he next saw the woman he asked her which of his many reasons had persuaded her to change her mind. “None,” she replied. “Why then did you decide not to commit suicide?” She replied that the fact that someone was prepared to listen to her for two hours in the middle of the night convinced her that life was worth living after all.[3]…

The deep truth … is that listening is the key virtue of the religious life. That is what Moses was saying throughout Devarim. If we want God to listen to us we have to be prepared to listen to Him. And if we learn to listen to Him, then we eventually learn to listen to our fellow humans: the silent cry of the lonely, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the people in existential pain.

When God appeared to King Solomon in a dream and asked him what he would like to be given, Solomon replied: *lev shome’a*, literally “a listening heart” to judge the people (1 Kings 3: 9). The choice of words is significant. Solomon’s wisdom lay, at least in part, in his ability to listen, to hear the emotion behind the words, to sense what was being left unsaid as well as what was said. It is common to find leaders who speak, very rare to find leaders who listen. But listening often makes the difference.

Listening matters in a moral environment as insistent on human dignity as is Judaism. The very act of listening is a form of respect. The royal family in Britain is known always to arrive on time and depart on time. I will never forget the occasion ­– her aides told me that they had never witnessed it before – when the Queen stayed for two hours longer than her scheduled departure time. The day was 27 January 2005, the occasion, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The Queen had invited survivors to a reception at St James’ Palace. Each had a story to tell, and the Queen took the time to listen to every one of them. One after another came up to me and said, “Sixty years ago I did not know whether tomorrow I would be alive, and here I am talking to the Queen.” That act of listening was one of the most royal acts of graciousness I have ever witnessed. Listening is a profound affirmation of the humanity of the other.

In the encounter at the burning bush, when God summoned Moses to be a leader, Moses replied, “I am not a man of words, not yesterday, not the day before, not from the first time You spoke to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue”(Ex. 4: 10). Why would God choose to lead the Jewish people a man who found it hard to speak? *Perhaps because one who cannot speak learns how to listen*. A leader is one who knows how to listen: to the unspoken cry of others and to the still, small voice of God.

[1] Robert Frost said: “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Cervantes compared translation to the other side of a tapestry. At best we see a rough outline of the pattern we know exists on the other side, but it lacks definition and is full of loose threads.

[2] Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim) famously described Freudian psychoanalysis as “the talking cure,” but it is in fact a listening cure. Only through the active listening of the analyst can there be the therapeutic or cathartic talking of the patient.

[3] Anna Redsand, *Viktor Frankl, a life worth living*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006, 113-14.



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