



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

כי תבוא תש"ף
Ki Tavo 5780

**Be Silent
and Listen**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Praying is not just about speaking, it is also about listening



PARSHAT KI TAVO IN A NUTSHELL

In Ki Tavo Moses reaches the end of his speech explaining all the details of the covenant. The last set of commands he discusses involve bringing first fruits to the central Sanctuary, as well as the various agricultural tithes (like taxes), giving 10 per cent of all produce to the poor, the Levites, or bringing the food to Jerusalem to eat. These rules rotate around a seven-year cycle).

Moses then reminds the Israelites again that a covenant is a two-way promise between the people and God. The people are to give God their total loyalty. God, in turn, will always have a special relationship with the people.

The Torah now turns to the next feature of ancient covenants: the blessings and curses that will result if the people are faithful on the one hand, or disloyal on the other. The parsha ends with Moses summoning the people, at the end of their forty-year journey and in sight of the Promised Land, to renew the covenant their parents made with God at Mount Sinai.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think it was important to remind the Israelites about the covenant and to renew their promises before they entered in the land?



THE CORE IDEA

In one of his essays in *Beit Yaakov*, Rabbi Yaakov Leiner, son of the Ishbitzer Rebbe (Rabbi Mordechai Leiner), makes a fascinating comment on a phrase in this week's parsha, *hasket u-shema Yisrael* (Devarim 27:9), "Be silent and listen, Israel. You have now become the people of the Lord your God." He says there is a fundamental difference between *seeing* and *listening* and what each communicates. Seeing tells us about the surfaces and externalities of things. Listening tells us about internalities, depths and truths.

Rabbi Leiner's comments are echoed by one of the great 20th century scholars of technologies of communication, Walter J Ong, who spoke about "the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the senses." He added, "This relationship is important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself." In other words, it is through sound, especially through speaking and listening, that we are

present to one another as subjects rather than objects. By listening, we encounter the depth-dimension of reality.

When we listen, we are personally engaged far beyond the way we participate when we simply watch. Ong regards this as one of the special features of the Hebrew Bible. God creates the universe through words. He reveals Himself to His people in words. He makes a covenant with them in words. The last and culminating book of the Torah is called Devarim, "words." Ong notes that the Hebrew for "word," *davar*, also means an event, a happening, something that generates momentum in history. If the greatest thing God does is speak, then the greatest thing we can do is listen.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is listening more powerful than seeing?
2. How can we listen to God today?



Under the reign of King Ahab and his Queen Jezebel, Ba'al worship had become the official cult of the Land of Israel. God's Prophets were being killed. Those who survived were in hiding. Eliyahu responded by issuing a public challenge to be held at Mount Carmel. Facing four hundred of Ba'al's representatives, he was determined to settle the question of religious truth once and for all.

He told the assembled people to choose one way or another: were they for God or for Ba'al? They must no longer hedge their bets and worship both. Truth was about to be decided by a fiery test. If it lay with Ba'al, the fire would consume the offering prepared by its priests. If it lay with God and His Torah, fire would descend to Eliyahu's offering. First the Ba'al priests tried to call for fire but after many hours, nothing happened.

Eliyahu poured water over all of his altar and then, before the eyes of the people, fire devoured his offering. There was no doubt that he had proven his point, and the people cried out, "The

Lord, He is God.' The priests of Ba'al were defeated. But the story does not end there. Queen Jezebel wanted revenge, and she issued a warrant for his death. Eliyahu escaped to Mount Horeb and hid there. After 40 days he stood at the mountain and received a strange vision. He witnessed a whirlwind, then an earthquake, then a mighty fire. But he could not find God in these things. Then God spoke to him in a 'still, small voice'.

A voice you can only hear if you are listening.

(A retelling of I Kings, Chapters 18-19)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think we can learn from the way Eliyahu found God in the still, small voice?
2. Why did Eliyahu need this vision?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There is a difference, between *hearing* and *listening*, often concealed by the fact that the Hebrew verb *Shema* means both. But they are very different. Hearing is passive, listening is active. Hearing needs no special concentration, but listening does. It involves attention, focus, and openness to the other. One of the greatest gifts is finding someone who really listens to us. Sadly, it happens all too rarely. In conversation we are often so focused on what we are going to say next, that we don't really listen properly to what the other person is saying.

And so it is with prayer. Someone once defined prayer as *listening to God listening to us*.

There are some profound stories about listening in the Torah and Tanach. Take for instance the fraught episode in which Jacob takes his father's blessing, intended for Esau. The story eliminates sight as a dimension, for Isaac is old and cannot see. Yet he has persistent doubts as to whether the son who visits him is indeed Esau. He tries the various senses. He *tastes* the food his son has brought. He *smells* his clothes. He *touches* his hands. He concludes: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau" (Bereishit 27:22). How much anguish might have been spared had he followed the evidence of his hearing rather than his taste, smell and touch.

The names of Jacob's first three sons were all cries for attention on the part of their mother Leah. She called the first, Reuben, saying, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." The second she called Simon, saying, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, He gave

me this one too." She called the third Levi, saying, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Was Jacob listening to her cries? We don't know. But the plain sense of the text is that he was not. And we know from Jacob's deathbed blessings that his relationship with these three sons was fractured.

Then there is the strange choice of Moses as the man chosen to be the voice of God's word to Israel for all time. Moses kept protesting that he was not a man of words, he could not speak, he had "uncircumcised lips." The Torah is surely telling us several things, but might one of them have been that, finding it hard to speak, Moses had learned to listen? Certainly Moses *heard* God better than anyone in history.

Then there was the drama on Mount Horeb where Elijah went after his spectacular victory over the prophets of Ba'al, having called down fire from heaven at Mount Carmel. God showed him a powerful wind, an earthquake, and a fire, but God was in none of these things. Instead He was in the *kol demamah dakah*, the "still, small voice" that I believe means "a sound you can only hear if you are listening."

Look at the stunningly beautiful lines of Tehillim 19 that we say on Shabbat mornings, telling us that "the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands," despite the fact that "There is no speech, there are no words." Creation sings a song to its Creator, which we might hear if we listen attentively enough. I was reminded of this throughout the pandemic, when there was little noise from traffic and none

from aeroplanes overhead, and we could hear the birdsong and other sounds of nature more vividly than ever I remember.

Listening is a primary theme of Moses' speeches in Devarim. The root *sh-m-a* appears no fewer than 92 times in the book, an astonishing number. *That is what I hope we gained from this distressing time of isolation: the ability to slow down our prayers and listen to them, letting their poetry penetrate more deeply than at other times.*

During our first Coronavirus lockdown, there was one question I was asked more than any other: What about prayer? Just when we needed it the most, we found ourselves unable to participate in *tefillah be-tzibbur*, public communal prayer. Our most sacred prayers, *devarim she-bi-kedushah*, are communal. They require a minyan. There was an argument between Rambam and Ramban as to whether, originally and essentially, the command of prayer was directed to individuals or to the community as a whole. But there was no disagreement between them as to the importance and value of praying as part of a community. That is supremely how we, as Jews, come before God, not primarily as "I" but as "We." How then were we to find spiritual strength without this communal dimension?

My answer was, this is indeed a terrible privation. There is no point in minimising the loss. As Rabbi Yehuda ha-Levi said in the *Kuzari*, individual prayer is like protecting yourself by building a wall around your house. Collective prayer is like joining with others to maintain the wall around the city. The wall around the city protects everyone, not just me. Besides which, when I pray for myself, I may pray selfishly, asking for something that may directly benefit me but might also be harmful to others. If I sell ice-cream, I want the sun to shine, but if I sell umbrellas, I want the rain to fall. Praying together, we seek the common good, not just personal help.

Communal prayer is more than an expression of community. It is also a builder of community. Hence the psychological cost of

the pandemic lockdown. We are social, not solitary beings. We long, most of us, for company. And even the wonders of all the social media options, TikTok, Twitter, Zoom, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facetime, Facebook etc.) cannot compensate for the loss of the real thing: face-to-face encounters.

But there was one gain to our praying in isolation. *Tefillah be-tzibbur* involves going at the speed of the congregation. It is hard to slow the pace so as to be able to meditate at length on any of the prayers themselves – their meaning, music, rhythm and structure. Prayer is essentially a kind of counterpoint between speaking and listening. But communal prayer often involves more speaking than listening. The lockdown meant that we could listen more to the poetry and passion of the prayers themselves. And prayer is about listening, not just speaking.

Rabbi Yaakov Leiner, whose reflections on listening started us on this journey, said that the tragic month of Av is a time when it is hard to see the presence of God. We lost two Temples. It seemed to many that God may have abandoned His people. But precisely when it is hard to see the Divine presence, we can focus on *listening*.

I believe that listening is one of the greatest arts. It opens us to God, our fellow humans, and the beauties of nature. For me one of the gifts of this strange, difficult time has been the ability to slow down the prayers so that I am able to listen to them speaking to me. Praying is as much about listening as speaking. And faith itself is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why is it important to slow down and listen? What do we need to listen to?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Most civilisations have been cultures of the eye. Judaism, with its belief in the invisible God who transcends the universe, and its prohibition against visual representations of God, is supremely a civilisation of the ear. The patriarchs and Prophets did not see God; they heard Him. Hence, the key verb in Judaism is Shema, "listen".

The Koren Sacks Siddur, p.471



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the difference between hearing and listening and why is listening more important?
2. How does regular life sometimes get in the way of real "listening"?
3. How and why is Judaism a "civilisation of the ear"?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Until this point the Israelites had continual communication with God, through Moses. All their needs and concerns were directly addressed. The Covenant of the Torah represents the relationship they will have once they enter the Land of Israel, when they will enter a new stage of independence and “normalisation”. Now is the time to remind them and renew their commitment to this covenant. The message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* adds another dimension to this need, at this moment in history. From now on the Israelites will have to stop and intentionally listen to feel and hear God. So Moses was giving them one last reminder of the future relationship that will be established once they enter the land, before their relationship with God would become solely their own responsibility.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Seeing tells us about the surfaces, the externalities of things. Listening tells us about internalities, the depths. The phrase “don’t judge a book by its cover” captures this idea also. Don’t judge on external appearances. Spend some time actually listening to find the real depths of a person or subject.
2. Listening to God in an age where there are no Prophets directly communicating God's word is a challenge. It means we need to be more deliberate in listening for Him in nature, history, people, and within ourselves.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Eliyahu performed a great public exhibition to show God’s power and greatness. But God is not only to be found in the dramatic miraculous demonstrations of His will and power, in biblical miracles such as this and like the other miracles found in the Torah (for example the Ten Plagues and the splitting of the Red Sea). God can also be found in the quiet, natural spaces in our world, if we just take the time to look and listen for Him there.
2. Eliyahu chose to challenge the prophets of Ba’al in a dramatic and very public demonstration of God’s power on mount Carmel. It was important to show the people that religious truth lay with Eliyahu and not the prophets of Ba’al. The fire descended from heaven and consumed Eliyahu's offering in a visually impressive and powerful demonstration of God's power. However, God does not want this to be the only expression of His presence in the world, and He needed to remind Eliyahu (and all future generations) that God can also be found in the still, small voice, wherever that is found, if we only listen for Him.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Our lives are hectic and busy and full of “noise”. If we don't slow down and take a step back to “listen” we will miss the truth and beauty all around us. We need to actively listen to hear these things. They are all around us. In nature, in other people, in ourselves. The voice and spirit of God is present, if we only slow down and focus our attention, to really listen.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Hearing is passive and it often happens when you are focused on something else. Listening is active, it requires careful focus, trying to listen and understand or connect with the source of the noise. Listening for something shows engagement and an interest in relationship of some sort.
2. Regular life is busy and full of “noise”. This noise can get in the way of listening – actively looking to engage in what is important in life. The example Rabbi Sacks brings here is tefillah. Sometimes even the format of a minyan can prevent us from “listening” to our tefillot, as we struggle to match the pace of the community. The tragic impact of being prevented from praying with a minyan in shul does have a positive element - the chance for us to take the time to actually listen to the tefillot in a way we may find difficult in minyan in shul.
3. This is a quote from the commentary in the Koren Sacks Siddur (see “*From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*” on page 3). Rabbi Sacks brings several stories from the Torah to illustrate this, including Jacob tricking Isaac to acquire Esau’s blessing, the names given to Jacob’s first three sons, the choice of Moses for leadership, and the themes of Moses’ speeches in the book of Devarim. In his siddur Rabbi Sacks also speaks about the importance of the key verse “*Shema Yisrael*” (“Listen Israel”) and what it tells us about Jewish faith.