

Lesson 3 - Responsibility, Shema, Listening, and Being Small

Parashat Va'ethanan contains some of the most sublime theological passages in the whole of Judaism. Moses tells the people that their laws and history are unique, and will be seen as such by other nations. Their laws were given by God; their history was written by God – there is no other nation of which either can be said.

The Meanings of Shema

The Mosaic books are, among other things, a set of commandments, 613 of them. The Torah is not fundamentally about the salvation of the soul. It is about the redemption of society. It is about how to construct a social order that will honor the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of life, and the twin imperatives of justice and compassion.

Torah is the source of the three great love commands in Western civilisation:

1. you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, might, and soul;
2. you shall love your neighbour as yourself;
3. you shall love the stranger for you were once strangers.

There is no verb in biblical Hebrew that means to obey. This is an astonishing fact. So the Torah itself uses a quite different word, namely, shema, meaning, "to hear, to listen," and several other things besides. It conveys a wide range of meanings, clustered around five primary senses:

1. to listen, to pay focused attention, as in "Be silent, Israel, and listen [ushema]" (Deut. 27:9);
2. to hear, as in "I heard [shamati] Your voice in the garden and I was afraid" (Gen. 3:10);
3. to understand, as in "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand [yishme'u] each other" (Gen. 11:7);
4. to internalise, register, take to heart, as in "And as for Ishmael I have heard you [shmatikha]" (Gen. 17:20), meaning, "I have taken into account what you have said; I will bear it in mind; it is a consideration that weighs with Me";
5. to respond in action, as in "Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you [shema bekolah]" (Gen. 21:12).

It is this last sense in which shema comes closest to meaning "to obey." Psychotherapists nowadays sometimes speak of "active listening," and this is part of what is meant by shema. Without a context Shema is untranslatable – understandably so since it belongs to biblical Hebrew, the world's supreme example of a culture of the ear.

Biblical Israel, despite its intense focus on divine commandments, is not a faith that values blind, unthinking, unquestioning obedience. An arbitrary ruler demands blind obedience. God is not an arbitrary ruler; therefore He does not demand blind obedience. Instead, He wishes us as far as possible to understand why He has commanded what He has commanded. Therefore a society based on Torah must be just, compassionate, generous.

Shema Yisrael does not mean "Hear, O Israel." It means something like: "Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of God your most focused attention. Strive to understand. Engage all your faculties, intellectual and emotional. Make His will your own. For what He commands you to do is not irrational or arbitrary but for your welfare, the welfare of your people, and ultimately for the benefit of all humanity."

In Judaism faith is a form of listening.

Yeshua was very familiar with Deuteronomy and the Shema. He quotes Deuteronomy in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:27).

²⁵ An expert in *Torah* stood up to try and trap him by asking, "Rabbi, what should I do to obtain eternal life?" ²⁶ But Yeshua said to him, "What is written in the *Torah*? How do you read it?" ²⁷ **He answered, "You are to love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbor as yourself."** ²⁸ "That's the right answer," Yeshua said. "Do this, and you will have life.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6

4Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. **5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** 6Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.

The Art of Listening

Rabbi Jacob Leiner (1814–1878), leader of the hasidic community in Radzyn, Poland, . Rabbi Jacob wrote a commentary of his own, called Beit Yaakov, and in the course of a sermon on the month of Av made a profound point about the differences between the senses:

From a human perspective it often seems as if seeing is a more precise form of knowledge than hearing. In fact, however, hearing has a greater power than seeing. Sight discloses the external aspect of things, but hearing reveals their inwardness. The aspect of God which prevails is "Be silent, Israel, and listen" (Deut. 27:9). The idea of being silent is that the person practices a self-imposed limitation on his senses, no longer looking at the events in this world, and he is then able clearly to understand that "you have now become the people of the Lord your God"

Though God cannot be seen, argues the Beit Yaakov, He can still be heard, and hearing represents a depth encounter more intimate and transformational than seeing. Perhaps without intending to, the Beit Yaakov has provided us with a point of entry into one of the most important and least understood differences between the two great civilizations of the West (ancient Greece and ancient Israel). Greece of the fifth to third centuries BCE was in many respects the greatest culture of antiquity. It excelled in art, architecture, sculpture, and theatre – in short, the visual arts. Jews excelled at none of these things, yet their contribution to the West was no less great. The reason is that their interest lay altogether elsewhere, not in sight but in sound, not in seeing but hearing. Judaism is the supreme example of a culture not of the eye but of the ear. That is why the key word of Judaism is shema. God is not something we see, but a voice we hear. This is how Moses put it elsewhere in Parashat Va'ethanan, describing the supreme revelation at Mount Sinai: "Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12). This has deep implications for the whole of Judaism. Its way of understanding the world and relating to it is fundamentally different from that of the Greeks and of the philosophical tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, by contrast, instead of saying that someone thinks, the verse will say that he "said in his or her heart." Thought is not a form of sight but of speech.

For the Greeks, truth is what we see. For Jews, it is what we hear. A world confined to the visible is an impersonal world, deaf to our prayers, blind to our hopes, a world without overarching meaning, in which we are temporary interlopers who must protect ourselves as best we can against the random cruelties of fate. Judaism, by contrast, is the supreme example of a person-centered civilization – and persons communicate by words. They speak and listen. Conversation joins soul to soul. We communicate, therefore we commune.

Hence the prohibition against graven images, visual representations, and icons. Consider the great encounter between God and the prophet Elijah at Mount Horeb:

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still, small voice. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. (I Kings 19:11–13)

You can watch a storm, a fire, an earthquake, but you cannot see a still, small voice. Indeed the Hebrew is more pointed still: the words kol demama daka actually mean "*the sound of a thin silence*" a voice you can hear only if you are listening.

The book of Isaiah opens with the words,

"The vision of Isaiah," but it continues: "Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!" (Is. 1:2). The parasha known as Re'eh begins with the words, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26), but then immediately continues: "The blessing if you listen to the commands of the Lord your God...the curse if you do not listen to the commands of the Lord your God" (11:27–28). Even seeing, in Tanakh, is a form of listening.

Faith in Judaism is not about ontology (what exists?) or epistemology (what can we know?) but about relationships – about the people with whom we converse.

The emphasis on listening lies at the heart of the unique intimacy Jews feel with God. In terms of power, there is no possible relationship between an infinite Creator and His finite creations. Because there is speech, there is relationship. Between two beings who can communicate with one another there is connection, even if the One is infinitely great and the other infinitely small. Words bridge the metaphysical abyss between soul and soul. We can now also understand one of the strangest sayings of the rabbis: "If a person is taking a walk while reciting Mishnaic teachings, and interrupts his studies to say, How beautiful is that tree, or How fine is that field, it is as if he had committed a mortal sin". The sin is that such a person abandons the world of sound (Mishna, i.e., "Oral Torah") in favor of the world of sight.

Words are engraved on the Jewish soul, Shema Yisrael, "Listen, Israel." And now we understand why, as we say those words, we cover our eyes, to shut out, if only for a moment, the world of sight, so that we can more fully enter the world of sound, the world not of Creation but of Revelation, not of God's work but of His word. The world we cannot see but which, if we create an open, attentive silence in the soul, we can hear.

The author of the Gospel of John knew the importance of Shema and the Word (Logos). He then applied it to Yeshua along with the concept of "Light":

1 In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. **2** This one was in the beginning with God. **3** All *things* came into being through him, and apart from him not one *thing* came into being that has come into being. **4** In him was life, and the life was the **light** of humanity. **5** And the **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **6** A man came, sent from God, whose name was John. **7** This one came for a witness, in order that he could testify about the **light**, so that all would believe through him. **8** That one was not the **light**, but *came* in order that he could testify about the **light**. **9** The **true light**, who gives **light** to every person, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and the world did not recognize him. **11** He came to his own *things*, and his own *people* did not receive him. **12** But as many as received him—to those who believe in his name—he gave to them authority to become children of God, **13** who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a husband, but of God.

14 And the **Word** became flesh and took up residence among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth. **15** John testified about him and cried out, saying, "This one was *he about* whom I said, 'The one who comes after me is ahead of me, because he existed before me.' " **16** For from his fullness we have all received, and grace after grace. **17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ.** **18** No one has seen God at any time; the one and only, God, the one who is in the bosom of the Father—that one has made *him** known.

Why So Few Jews

Near the end of Va'ethanan, so inconspicuously that we can sometimes miss it, is a statement with such far-reaching implications that it challenges the impression that has prevailed thus far in the Torah, giving an entirely new complexion to the biblical image of the people Israel:

"The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

In Genesis God promised the patriarchs that their descendants would be like the stars of the heaven, the sand on the seashore, the dust of the earth, uncountable. In all these texts and others it is the size, the numerical greatness, of the people that is emphasized. What then are we to make of Moses' words that speak of its smallness? Targum Yonatan interprets it not to be about numbers at all but about self-image. He translates it not as "the fewest of all peoples" but as "the most lowly and humble of peoples."

God did not choose a nation for the sake of His honour. Had He done so He would undoubtedly have chosen a mighty and numerous people. His choice had nothing to do with honour and everything to do with love. He loved the patriarchs for their willingness to heed His voice; therefore He loves their children. Jews did not seek to convert others. Had they done so they would have been closer in numbers to Christianity (2.4 billion) or Islam (1.6 billion).

Moses warns them against intermarriage with the other nations, not for racial but for religious reasons: "They will turn your children away from following Me to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:4). Malbim interprets our verse as Moses saying to the Israelites: Do not justify out-marriage on the grounds that it will increase the number of Jews. God is not interested in numbers. Consistently throughout history, Jews have chosen to be true to themselves and to stay small rather than make concessions for the sake of increasing numbers.

The Jewish people are small but have achieved great things to testify in themselves to a force beyond themselves.

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4:32–34)

Israel defies the laws of history because it serves the Author of history. Attached to greatness, it becomes great.

Nations are judged not by their size but by their contribution to human heritage. You do not need numbers to enlarge the spiritual and moral horizons of humankind. You need other things altogether: a sense of the worth and dignity of the individual, of the power of human possibility to transform the world, of the importance of giving everyone the best education they can have, of making each feel part of a collective responsibility to ameliorate the human condition. Judaism asks of us the willingness to take high ideals and enact them in the real world, unswayed by disappointments and defeats.

This small people has outlived all the world's great empires to deliver to humanity a message of hope, you need not be large to be great. What you need is to be open to a power greater than yourself. It is said that King Louis XIV of France once asked Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician and theologian, to give him proof of the existence of God. Pascal is said to have replied, "Your Majesty, the Jews!"

The Politics of Responsibility

Without the Jews there would be no Christianity or Islam. The Jews are foundational to both of these major religions.

In England, John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke formulated new understandings of political authority and limited, "constitutional" monarchy, and did so because they were inspired by the Hebrew Bible in general and the book of Deuteronomy in particular. Across the Atlantic, John Adams, second president of the United States, paid similar tribute to the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to liberty:

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations. If I were an atheist of the other sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent,

wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization.

It was not the people who inspired, but their Torah. That was what Moses was trying to teach them throughout the book of Deuteronomy.

It is not your righteousness that makes you special, nor your size, he says (Deut. 9:5–6; 7:7).

In the language of today: there is nothing special about Jews; there is everything special about Judaism. It is your laws, given to you by God Himself, that will lift you to greatness. It will be your story that will inspire others to undertake the long walk to freedom.

The book of Deuteronomy makes repeated reference to the word *brit*, the Torah's word for covenant. It appears no less than twenty-seven times. What is more, as I explained in the introduction, the entire book is structured, albeit on a monumental scale, along the lines of an ancient Near Eastern covenant. But it is the transfiguration of the idea as it enters biblical thought that is spiritually radical and intellectually revolutionary.

Covenant is an attempt to break away from this entire universe of relationships. Covenantal politics is distinctive in the following ways:

1. It is a politics of collective responsibility. The parties to the covenant are, said Moses, "your leaders, your tribes, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, the strangers in your camp, from woodcutter to water-drawer" (Deut. 29:9–10). This is what is meant in the preamble to the American Constitution by the phrase, "We, the people."
2. It is a politics rooted in the principled equality of dignity of all citizens. This is what Abraham Lincoln meant when he spoke, in the Gettysburg Address, of "a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."
3. It is a moral politics – a politics in which we can be called to account on the grounds of justice. Hence the importance, in biblical politics, of the prophetic voice. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. was invoking when, in his great speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, he quoted the prophet Amos (5:4): "We are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"
4. It is a politics rooted not in power but in a mutual pledge. As Philip Selznick puts it: "Faith based on covenant might be called a constitutional faith," founded in the "giving and receiving of promises."
5. It is a politics rooted in remembrance and covenantal renewal.

It was this historic encounter between Christians and the Hebrew Bible in the seventeenth century that led to the birth of liberty in both England and America. The Calvinists and Puritans who led both the English and American Revolutions were saturated in the politics of the Hebrew Bible, especially of the book of Deuteronomy. The first document in American political history, the Mayflower Compact of 1620, is constructed as a covenant on the biblical model: its signatories

declared that they "solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation."

"In more modern times, the best expression of this faith was given by Lyndon Baines Johnson in his presidential inaugural in 1965:

They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish..."

Covenantal politics, first set out in the book of Deuteronomy, thus became, as Moses knew it would, "your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations," though it took the better part of three thousand years for it to happen. Covenant is the most powerful path to lasting freedom yet discovered. But its challenge remains: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.