

Date: 27 Elul 5786 (September 9, 2026)

Torah Portion: Ha'Azinu

Topic: Torah and Tefillah

It is written (Devarim 32:1), **“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.”** Moshe begins the Song of Ha'azinu with an appeal to *hearing*. The heavens are summoned to “give ear,” and the earth is commanded to “hear.” This is more than poetic language. Throughout Torah, hearing is closely connected with receiving, understanding, and obeying the word of YHWH. Thus, before Moshe delivers his final prophetic testimony to Yisrael, he draws attention to the faculty through which Torah must first enter the human being: the ear.

In connection with this verse, the Midrash turns to a halachic question concerning the ear. If a person suffers from pain in his ear, may he receive treatment on Shabbat? The Mishnah establishes the governing principle: **“Any possible danger to life supersedes Shabbat”** (Yoma 8:6). Where an ailment may constitute a danger to life, the restrictions of Shabbat are set aside so that the person may be treated. Human life is precious, and the commandments themselves were given that man might live by them.

After considering the danger associated with an afflicted ear, however, the Midrash moves from the physical ear to the spiritual ear. The Sages teach that if a person desires protection from suffering—not merely in the ear, but throughout his entire being—he should incline his ear toward Torah. As Yishayahu declares, **“Incline your ear and come to Me; listen, and your soul shall live”** (Yishayahu 55:3).

The connection is profound. The ear can become an avenue through which life enters the person. Just as an injured physical ear may require treatment to preserve life, the spiritual ear must remain open to the words of Torah in order to sustain the inner life of the soul. Torah is not merely information to be accumulated; it is instruction that must be heard, received, and allowed to govern one's life. Thus, *hearing* Torah means more than allowing its sounds to reach the ear. It means inclining oneself toward YHWH with a willingness to receive His instruction.

The opposite is equally true. Refusing to hear Torah has spiritual consequences. R' Chanina bar Pappa teaches that whoever turns his ear away from words of Torah causes even his prayer to become objectionable before Elohim. This principle is expressed in Mishlei: **“He who turns away his ear from hearing the Torah, even his prayer is an abomination”** (Prov. 28:9).

The Maharal is troubled by the severity of this language. Why call such a person's prayer an **“abomination”**? Would it not have been sufficient to say simply that his prayer is not accepted?

The answer lies in understanding the purpose of prayer itself. Prayer is not intended merely as a means of acquiring material benefits. A person naturally prays for health, food, livelihood, protection, family, and the necessities of life. There is nothing improper in doing so. Indeed, human dependence upon YHWH is itself one of the great lessons of tefillah. Yet the material things for which we pray are not ends in themselves. They are gifts through which a person is enabled to fulfill the purpose for which he was created—to serve YHWH, perform mitzvot, study Torah, practice righteousness, and sanctify ordinary life.

The Maharal illustrates this principle through the case of one who prays while intoxicated. The Sages likewise speak severely concerning such prayer (Eruvin 64a). Intoxication temporarily overturns the proper relationship between body and mind. Human beings possess physical appetites and needs, but these are meant to be governed by wisdom and directed toward a higher purpose. When reason is overcome by intoxication, the person becomes, for that moment, dominated by his physical condition. Consequently, his prayer can no longer properly rise above the material realm from which it originates.

This teaches an important principle: **the problem is not that a person asks YHWH for physical things; the question is what purpose those physical things serve.**

Shalom.