



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

Relationships

The Gemara (Berachot 28b) recounts that before the passing of R' Yochanan ben Zakkai, he blessed his students that "the fear of Heaven should be upon them like the fear of flesh and blood." The students were puzzled; shouldn't the fear of Heaven supersede everything else? The sage explained that this level of *yir'at Shamayim* that he was prescribing was actually much loftier than they imagined, as people are sometimes afraid to sin in the presence of other people, yet don't always concern themselves of avoiding shame before G-d in private settings.

This Talmudic passage attracts much commentary, one of which is a profound idea shared by R' Michael Gutmacher. Both on a national and personal level, G-d fills many roles. He is our Father, our King, our Master, our Creator, and our Best Friend. He is described in the Amida as well as throughout Tanach as our Healer, our Teacher, our Judge, our Provider, and our Redeemer. Hashem even refers to His relationship with us as one shared between spouses. In this sense, G-d can be viewed as wearing many hats (so to speak), caring for us and running the world in so many various and unimaginable ways.

Our ultimate *avodah* is forging a deep and real relationship with Boreh Olam and connecting to Him in this world. Now, how exactly can we relate to G-d in order to connect with Him? We dwell in the physical realm, while He is the Creator of existence, an infinite Being!

Perhaps, we can draw insight from the words of R' Yochanan ben Zakkai, who blessed his students that their *yir'at Shamayim* should be like their *yir'at basar v'dam*. Homiletically, we can understand this teaching in a new light: *our relationship with Hashem can be inspired from our dealings with other people!* We encounter many personalities in life: parents, teachers, friends, doctors, etc. Each affiliation comes with its own unique associations and communications. A person deals with his parents differently than with his employer, and that bond is different than that of him and his wife, and so on. Perhaps the reason Hashem created the world this way, in that various positions are filled by different people, is so that the relationship one develops with each position can be emulated in relating to G-d in each specific situation in life. Thus, we can understand why this level is extremely lofty, indeed. This is the ultimate example of utilizing the physical for the spiritual, where human interactions are used as a draft to paint the ultimate relationship between man and his Creator.

"In finances, be strict with yourself, generous with others." (Rambam)

Are You Listening?

As Shavuot is right around the corner, I'd like to share a fascinating idea that I heard from R' Label Lam. We are about to approach the big day – the anniversary of Hashem "marrying" the Jewish People with His Torah, to which we eagerly responded the famous words "נעשה ונשמע/*na'ase v'nishma* – we will do and we will listen." Although שמע/*shema* is generally translated to "listen," Jewish wisdom reveals that actually, like virtually everything else, there is much embedded beneath the surface. What does it really mean to *listen* to somebody?

The Vilna Gaon sheds light upon this through pointing out the onomatopoeia (use of words whose sound suggests the sense) of the word "שמע" and drawing significance from it. Each of the 3 letters that make up the word שמע – and the specific order of the way they're sequenced – gives off a vocal imitation that bears resemblance to the deeper meaning of the word. The first is the letter *shin* / ש, whose sound is: "*shhhh...*" This comes to symbolize that the first step in true listening is silence – to give one's full and undivided attention to the person speaking. It may be very challenging feat – especially today, with so much going on and phones that seem to never stop buzzing and stealing our concentration – but it is crucial for effective listening. Next is the letter *mem* / מ, which echoes: "*hmmm...*" – the sound of sincere contemplation and understanding, and affording thought towards what the other person is trying to communicate. This, too, may present a challenge for some, who love piping up instantly and offering their own "brilliant" pieces of advice. While good advice is often very healthy, even the most optimal input cannot penetrate and is commonly ill-received when one does not carry out the simple task of just hearing what the fellow has to say and considering his/her point of view. Finally, after giving the speaker's words your attention (ש) and thought (מ), one can complete the ultimate trifecta through the recognition of the last letter, *ayin* / ע, which reverberates: "*ahhhh...*" – the sound of acceptance. Not always must you agree with everyone, but lack of agreement doesn't necessarily hinder one's ability to empathize and validate what the other individual is going through. Perhaps, suggested R' Lam, this can be further alluded to from the fact that the accurate pronunciation of the letter *ayin* / ע actually has a unique, piercing sharpness – representative of the reality that it can often be difficult to accept what the other person is saying and to really internalize where he or she is coming from. Notwithstanding, the power and healing impact of effective listening is frequently underestimated, and these three elements, hinted to in the word שמע, provide insight into what it means to truly attune oneself to what another is trying to communicate. *People don't always want your solutions; they oftentimes just want a listening ear...*