

Parashas Vayikra

פרשת ויקרא

Hearing the Voice

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר ד' אֵלָיו מֵאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר

*And He called out to Moshe,
and God spoke to him from
the Tent of Meeting, saying. (1:1)*

HASHEM “SPOKE TO MOSHE FROM THE TENT OF Meeting.” Rashi explains that the voice of Hashem reached Moshe’s ears, but the Jewish people did not hear it. The voice stopped at the walls of the Tent. One might think that it stopped because it was soft and faint, but Rashi assures us that this is not the case. It was a powerful voice, a voice that “breaks cedar trees.” And yet, this powerful voice came to a sudden stop and was not heard outside the Tent of Meeting. Had someone placed his ear right up against the wall of the Tent, he would also not have heard Hashem’s voice.

How could such a thing be? Was it a miracle?

Not necessarily, writes Rav Yaakov Neiman in his *Darchei Mussar*. It is possible that only Moshe heard the voice of Hashem because only he was attuned to it. As for the others, it passed right by them without their being aware of it.

We all know that different ears are set for different audio frequencies and that sounds heard by one species may not always be heard by another. In order to hear the voice of Hashem, a person's ears would have to be set to a high spiritual frequency. Otherwise, he would hear nothing. Moshe was attuned to that frequency, and he heard Hashem's voice. The rest of the Jewish people were not attuned.

The Mishneh tells us (*Avos* 6:2) in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, "Every day a heavenly voice (*bas kol*) goes forth from Mount Chorev and proclaims, 'Woe to humanity because of the Torah's humiliation.'" Has any of us ever heard this heavenly voice? I don't think so. But that does not contradict Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement. He certainly heard that voice, as did other people of his stature in his times, people attuned to the spiritual frequency on which heavenly voices travel. We, however, who are not attuned to that frequency, cannot hear the heavenly voice.

Having the faculty of hearing does not guarantee that we will really hear. Having the faculty of sight does not guarantee that we will really see. The sounds and the images may reach us, but that does not mean they will make an impression on our brains and hearts. They may just be left to languish on the surface.

By way of illustration, I would like to discuss an event that most of us remember vividly and all too painfully — the Persian Gulf War of 1990. We all recall our terror and anxiety as we waited for Iraq to carry out its threat to rain Scud missiles on Israel. And then it happened. Thirty-nine Scuds landed in Israel, but miraculously, only three people were killed.

I say miraculously not as a figure of speech but as an internationally acknowledged description of what had happened. It was beyond incredible that thirty-nine Scuds should cause such minimal casualties. And if we had any doubt about it, a Scud missile struck an American barracks in Saudi Arabia and killed scores of American servicemen. These were no firecrackers. But they did virtually nothing to Israel.

We all knew we were witnesses to a great miracle, but did it penetrate deep into our hearts and minds? Was our appreciation just superficial or did it cause profound changes in our lives, in the way we thought and felt, in the essence of who we are? Did we really “see” the miracle, or did it go right by us at the edge of our superficial awareness?

Rav Eliahu Lopian once said that *emunah*, faith, is not manifest in the intensity of the prayers we say during a crisis but by the intensity of the praises we offer up to Hashem when the crisis has passed. To pray when in danger is a natural reaction; as the common saying goes, there are no atheists in a foxhole. But faith reaches much deeper. It reflects a profound relationship with Hashem sometimes forged in the fire of experience. But when the fire passes, is the relationship still as intense? That is the test of true faith. We may have seen miracles in our time, but did they penetrate beyond the surface and effect changes in who we are? That is the question we must ask ourselves. Did we really “see” the miracles?



The Mystical Power of Torah

וְהָבִיא אֶתֶם אֶל הַכֹּהֵן

And he shall bring them
to the Kohein. (5:8)

THE ROLE OF THE *KOHEIN* BROUGHT HIM INTO CONTACT with numerous Jewish people and gave him the opportunity to have a positive effect on them. The Midrash, describing how Aharon, the *Kohein Gadol*, dealt with other people, quotes from the prophet *Malachi* (2:6), “The Torah of truth was in his mouth . . . and he turned many away from sin.”

We think of Jewish outreach as a new phenomenon, but apparently, Aharon was already an outreach activist back then. He embraced people and drew them toward the Torah. How did he do this? By telling the truth.

“He did not forbid that which is permitted,” the Midrash states, “nor did he permit that which is forbidden.” He did not compromise. He did not waffle. He was straightforward and consistent, telling things exactly as they were, and people responded to him. People are not necessarily seeking *heterim*, leniencies, or *chumros*, stringencies. They want the truth. They can handle it. Furthermore, Aharon drew them close by learning Torah with them, and this was perhaps his most effective tool.

Let me tell you a story about a man who is very active in Jewish outreach. When he was just married, he was learning in a *yeshivah* in Eretz Yisrael, and he couldn’t afford to spend much on rent. As it turned out, he found an apartment within his range, but it was in a nonreligious area. In fact, he was the only observant Jew in his building.

It seems that his natural talents and tendencies were already budding then, because as soon as he moved into his apartment he set out to draw his neighbors to Torah. Some Israelis are harder to reach than unaffiliated American Jews. Sometimes, they can be very antagonistic to observant Jews. But he was undaunted. He invited his neighbors to come and learn Torah in his apartment once a week. And he was successful! A number of his neighbors agreed, and he organized the session.

As the night of the session drew near, he gave a lot of thought to the subject matter of his presentation. Should he learn Jewish philosophy with them? Perhaps the Rambam's *Guide to the Perplexed*? Or maybe *Chumash* would be best? Or how about some of the great works of *Mussar*? He couldn't make up his mind.

Then, providentially, on the morning before his presentation, he met Uri Zohar in *shul*. Uri Zohar had been an icon of Israeli secular society — entertainer, comedian, television and radio host, social satirist, movie star, film producer. Everyone knew Uri Zohar. Then, at the height of his fame, he went and did a shocking thing. He became fully observant. Afterward, he wrote the very popular *Waking Up Jewish* and became active in the *teshuvah* movement.

“What should I do?” the young man asked Uri Zohar. “What should I learn with these people?”

“Well, what are you learning in yeshivah?” Uri Zohar asked.

“I'm learning *Bava Kama*.”

“Then learn *Bava Kama* with them.”

“*Bava Kama*? Are you serious?” asked the young man. “Do you think they'll be interested in an ox that gores a cow? In pits and fires? This will bring them to Judaism?”

“My dear friend,” said Uri Zohar with a wry smile, “you don't believe in Torah! If you doubt that learning *Bava Kama* with them is going to bring them back, then you don't fully believe and appreciate the power of Torah.”

To this day, the young man, who is a lot older now, learns *Bava Kama* with his adult beginners. And it works just fine. Better than fine.

Torah, regardless of the subject matter, has tremendous spiritual power. It has a mystical, almost magical effect on the soul. It is the nourishment the Jewish soul craves. Aharon fed Torah to the people who came to him, and by doing so, “he turned them away from sin.”