

## Parsha Vaetchanan

### Learn to Listen and Listen to Learn

The meaning of the title of our Parsha this week, Vaetchanan, means pleading and crying out in prayer. "I pleaded with G-d at that time." Moshe 'poured out his heart like water.' Moshe so much wanted his prayer to enter the Holy Land be answered by G-d. He waited for an answer. But all he could do was listen to the noise, the sounds, and the silence. The Beit Yaakov a Hasidic text says: "Sight shows us the external aspects of things but hearing reveals their inwardness." While Moshe saw the land of Israel from afar, at this moment he was unable to hear G-d's answer. Most of the time we pray with words, with our own voices, but the listening part of prayer sometimes gets ignored. I recently started attending a Morning Minyan. After all, Jewish Law states we should pray with a congregation of 10. But what sometimes gets lost for me in that time and space is the ability to simply hear the spaces in between the words. That still small voice that is supposed to be part of our Prayers. If we Pray in our own words, with our sighs, pain, hopes and aspirations maybe it is slightly easier. But we need to practice listening.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that when Moshe Pleaded with "G-d at that time" it meant that every Prayer should be totally new. The prayer we say today is never the same as what we said yesterday or the day before or even a few moments ago.

It is remarkable how often listening is mentioned in this Parsha. In the Shema, in fact Hashem COMMANDS us to listen. G-d speaks the 10 commandments to us but we were only able to listen to one of them. Listening for us Jews as a community and individually has always been hard it seems.

When we say the Shema we are commanded to hear G-d's Oneness. But how do we do this in this age of constant noise, constant distractions. Cell Phones, TV, blaring news and advertisements. We listen. The Rambam in The Mishna Torah teaches that people would wait an hour before they started to pray the formal prayers. They were not watching the News or cemented to their cell phones. They sat and listened and after entering a silent space then and only then could they pray.

We can pray alone or in a congregation but how much of that time are we listening to what we are saying. Listening has always been difficult for me. My Father of Blessed memory would constantly remind me "Learn to Listen and Listen to learn."

Nowhere is listening as important as in relationships. Not only in our relationship with G-d, but with others. Good listening gives us a fighting chance of really understanding the person in front of us. If we are distracted as I often am, then we are not getting the whole story. Maybe

all the references to the Mishkan and Temple in our Tradition imply going into our own sacred space to be alone and listen.

Increasingly it seems, life offers us less and less chances to enter a space of deep listening. Many years ago, I attended a silent 10-day meditation retreat. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day we were permitted to 'break the silence'. I remember how each word that came out of my mouth in those first few moments were like diamonds. They were so precious and deep.

I have been working with the homeless for 5 years now. They are a tough group. They battle severe mental illness and drug abuse. Sometimes they are wrestling with voices only they can hear. And they will know if you are not really listening. Listening requires moment to moment mindfulness. Every new moment is a miracle. A gift from G-d. Are you listening?