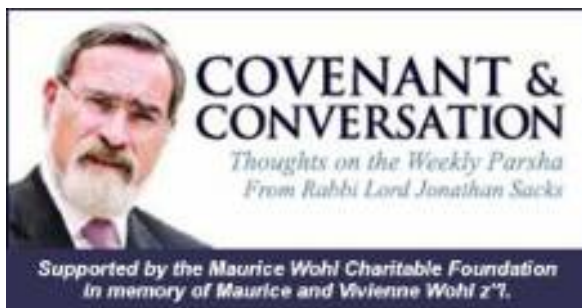


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On Leadership: To Lead Is To Listen

"If only you would listen to these laws ..." (Deut. 7:12). These words with which our parsha begins contain a verb that is a fundamental motif of the book of Devarim. The verb is *sh-m-a*. It occurred in last week's parsha in the most famous line of the whole of Judaism, *Shema Yisrael*. It occurs later in this week's parsha in the second paragraph of the Shema, "It shall be if you surely listen [*shamoa tishme'u*] ... (Deut. 11:13). It appears no less than 92 times in Devarim as a whole.

We often miss the significance of this word because of what I call *the fallacy of translatability*: the assumption that one language is fully translatable into another. We hear a word translated from one language to another and assume that it means the same in

both. But often it doesn't. Languages are only partially translatable into one another.⁽¹⁾ The key terms of one civilization are often not fully reproducible in another. The Greek word *megalopsychos*, for example, Aristotle's "great-souled man" who is great and knows he is, and carries himself with aristocratic pride, is untranslatable into a moral system like Judaism in which humility is a virtue. The English word "tact" has no precise equivalent in Hebrew. And so on.

This is particularly so in the case of the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a*. Listen, for example, to the way the opening words of this week's parsha have been translated into English:

If you *hearken* to these precepts ...
 If you *completely obey* these laws ...
 If you *pay attention* to these laws ...
 If you *heed* these ordinances ...
 Because ye *hear* these judgments ...

There is no single English word that means to hear, to listen, to heed, to pay attention to, and to obey. *Sh-m-a* also means "to understand," as in the story of the tower of Babel, when God says, Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand [*yishme'u*] each other" (Gen. 11:7).

As I have argued elsewhere, one of the most striking facts about the Torah is that, although it contains 613 commands, it does not contain a word that means "to obey." When such a word was needed in modern Hebrew, the verb *le-tzayet* was borrowed from Aramaic. The verb used by the Torah in place of "to obey" is *sh-m-a*. This is of the highest possible significance. It means that *blind obedience is not a virtue in Judaism*. God wants us to understand the laws He has commanded us. He wants us to reflect

on why this law, not that. He wants us to listen, to reflect, to seek to understand, to internalise and to respond. He wants us to become *a listening people*.

Ancient Greece was a visual culture, a culture of art, architecture, theatre and spectacle. For the Greeks generally, and Plato specifically, knowing was a form of *seeing*. Judaism, as Freud pointed out in *Moses and Monotheism*, is a non-visual culture. We worship a God who cannot be seen; and making sacred images, icons, is absolutely forbidden. In Judaism we do not see God; we hear God. Knowing is a form of *listening*. Ironically, Freud himself, deeply ambivalent though he was about Judaism, in psycho-analysis invented the *listening cure*: listening as therapy.(2)

It follows that in Judaism listening is a deeply spiritual act. To listen to God is to be open to God. That is what Moses is saying throughout Devarim: "If only you would listen." So it is with leadership - indeed with all forms of interpersonal relationship. Often the greatest gift we can give someone is to listen to them.

Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz and went on to create a new form of psychotherapy based on "man's search for meaning," once told the story of a patient of his who phoned him in the middle of the night to tell him, calmly, that she was about to commit suicide. He kept her on the phone for two hours, giving her every conceivable reason to live. Eventually she said that she had changed her mind and would not end her life. When he next saw the woman he asked her which of his many reasons had persuaded her to change her mind. "None," she replied. "Why then did you decide not to commit suicide?" She replied that the fact that

someone was prepared to listen to her for two hours in the middle of the night convinced her that life was worth living after all.(3)

As Chief Rabbi I was involved in resolving a number of highly intractable *agunah* cases: situations in which a husband was unwilling to give his wife a *get* so that she could remarry. We resolved all these cases not by legal devices but by the simple act of listening: deep listening, in which we were able to convince both sides that we had heard their pain and their sense of injustice. This took many hours of total concentration and a principled absence of judgment and direction. Eventually our listening absorbed the acrimony and the couple were able to resolve their differences together. Listening is intensely therapeutic.

Before I became Chief Rabbi I was head of our rabbinical training seminary, Jews' College. There in the 1980s we ran one of the most advanced practical rabbinics programmes ever devised. It included a three-year programme in counselling. The professionals we recruited to run the course told us that they had one precondition. We had to agree to take all the participants away to an enclosed location for two days. Only those who were willing to do this would be admitted to the course.

We did not know in advance what the counsellors were planning to do, but we soon discovered. They planned to teach us the method pioneered by Carl Rogers known as non-directive or person-centred therapy. This involves active listening and reflective questioning, but no guidance on the part of the therapist.

As the nature of the method became clear, the rabbis began to object. It seemed to oppose

everything they stood for. To be a rabbi is to teach, to direct, to tell people what to do. The tension between the counsellors and the rabbis grew almost to the point of crisis, so much so that we had to stop the course for an hour while we sought some way of reconciling what the counsellors were doing and what the Torah seemed to be saying. That is when we began to reflect, for the first time as a group, on the spiritual dimension of listening, of *sh-m-a Yisrael*.

The deep truth behind person-centred therapy is that listening is the key virtue of the religious life. That is what Moses was saying throughout Devarim. If we want God to listen to us we have to be prepared to listen to Him. And if we learn to listen to Him, then we eventually learn to listen to our fellow humans: the silent cry of the lonely, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the people in existential pain.

When God appeared to King Solomon in a dream and asked him what he would like to be given, Solomon replied: *lev shome'a*, literally "a listening heart" to judge the people (1 Kings 3:9). The choice of words is significant.

Solomon's wisdom lay, at least in part, in his ability to listen, to hear the emotion behind the words, to sense what was being left unsaid as well as what was said. It is common to find leaders who speak, very rare to find leaders who listen. But listening often makes the difference.

Listening matters in a moral environment as insistent on human dignity as is Judaism. The very act of listening is a form of respect. The royal family in Britain is known always to arrive on time and depart on time. I will never forget the occasion - her aides told me that they had never witnessed it before - when the Queen

stayed for two hours longer than her scheduled departure time. The day was 27 January 2005, the occasion, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The Queen had invited survivors to a reception at St James' Palace. Each had a story to tell, and the Queen took the time to listen to every one of them. One after another came up to me and said, "Sixty years ago I did not know whether tomorrow I would be alive, and here I am talking to the Queen." That act of listening was one of the most royal acts of graciousness I have ever witnessed. Listening is a profound affirmation of the humanity of the other.

In the encounter at the burning bush, when God summoned Moses to be a leader, Moses replied, "I am not a man of words, not yesterday, not the day before, not from the first time You spoke to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Ex. 4:10). Why would God choose to lead the Jewish people a man who found it hard to speak? *Perhaps because one who cannot speak learns how to listen. A leader is one who knows how to listen: to the unspoken cry of others and to the still, small voice of God.*

1. Robert Frost said: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Cervantes compared translation to the other side of a tapestry. At best we see a rough outline of the pattern we know exists on the other side, but it lacks definition and is full of loose threads.
2. Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim) famously described Freudian psychoanalysis as "the talking cure," but it is in fact a listening cure. Only through the active listening of the analyst can there be the therapeutic or cathartic talking of the patient.
3. Anna Redsand, *Viktor Frankl, a life worth living*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006, 113-14.



Blessing on Eating and Learning Torah

Devarim, 8:10: “You will eat and you will be satisfied, and you will bless Hashem, your God, for the good Land that He gave you.”

Brachos, 48b: “From where do know that Grace after Meals is from the Torah? As it says, ‘and you will eat and you will be satisfied and you will bless...’”

The Torah instructs us to bless God after we eat to satiety. The Rabbis explain that this refers to when we have eaten a bread meal and are fully satisfied after the meal. The Talmud¹ attempts to derive through *kal v'chomer* (the ‘all the more so’ argument) that there are two other situations where the Torah obligates a person to make a blessing. One is that the blessing before one eats a full bread meal should also be Torah mandated, and the second is that after one has finished learning Torah, there should be a Torah obligation to bless God. The Talmud’s conclusion is that one cannot derive a Torah obligation in either case.

The Meshech Chachma² addresses what the Talmud’s initial thought was, and why it was ultimately rejected. We will address the two cases of blessing before a meal, and blessing after learning Torah, separately: With regard to

making a blessing before a meal, the Meshech Chachma explains that the Talmud understood that the main purpose of making a blessing is in order to show gratitude to God for the food that He has given us. According to this understanding, a person who is hungry, feels more enhanced by food than when he is sated. This is because when one is sated, he is more likely to take for granted the great benefit of food, while before he has eaten, he will still have a great appreciation for the food that he is about to eat.

However, the Talmud concludes that this is not the only reason that the Torah would mandate a blessing. The other possible purpose of making a blessing is to offset feelings of complacency and haughtiness. Once a person’s needs are fulfilled, he tends to become self-assured and confident in his own powers, and there is the real risk that he will be distracted from the recognition that God is the source of all good.

Indeed, the verse that immediately follows the commandment of Grace after Meals warns us: “Beware, lest you forget Hashem your God³.” This forgetfulness comes about as a result of complacency when one is satiated. Accordingly, there was more of a necessity to mandate a blessing after one has eaten in order to offset this natural feeling of self-assurance. In contrast, before one has eaten, there was less of a need to be concerned with this attitude, because a hungry person is far less prone to such an attitude.

With regard to the attempt to prove that one should make a blessing after learning Torah, the Talmud originally reasons that if a person feels gratitude to God after eating food, which gives this-worldly benefit, then all the more so one

should thank God after Torah learning, which gives spiritual gains.

However, the Talmud rejects this proof with the same line of reasoning as with regard to making a blessing before food, but applied in a different way. The focus is again on when a person is likely to forget Talmud, and so the blessing is necessary to remind him of the correct focus. The Meshech Chachma points out that there is a source to make a blessing before learning Torah⁴, because before one comes to learn, there is a great risk that he can have the wrong motives in learning. He may want to learn for self-aggrandizement or, even worse, to use it to take advantage of others. This is very dangerous, as our Sages tell us that when Torah is studied for the wrong reasons it becomes a death-potion, rather than a life-giving elixir⁵. Hence, the necessity of a blessing before learning Torah to connect the great gift of Torah with its source.

Indeed, this is of such importance that the Talmud tells us that one of the reasons for the destruction of the Temple was that they did not make a blessing before Torah study. The Meshech Chachma explains this to mean that they did not connect Torah with God.

The Meshech Chachma continues that all of this applies to before learning Torah, but after learning Torah he asserts that there is no such need. He explains that Torah is uplifting and edifying, and within the study session, a person is protected from retribution and from succumbing to the *yetzer hora*. On a deeper level, he writes that the Torah can be seen as a string of Names of God, and by clinging to Torah, a person attaches himself to the Name of God. Moreover, the soul of every Jew is sourced

in the Torah. When Jews connect to it, they become as one entity through it. The outcome of all this is that the aftermath of a session of Torah is the polar opposite of a full meal. A person naturally moves closer to Hashem through it, rather than subconsciously moving away. Accordingly, there was no great necessity to require a blessing after Torah learning.

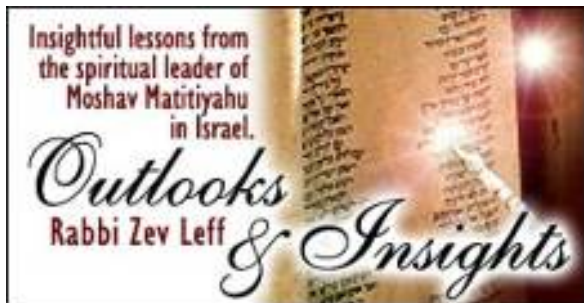
There are two important lessons that emerge from the words of the Meshech Chachma. Firstly, the purpose of a blessing is not simply to enable us to express our natural feelings of gratitude to God, rather it also comes to remind us, even in times of plenty, that our only source of sustenance is God. This reminds us in general to be wary of becoming too self-assured and complacent when things are going well, and to remember to turn to God in thanks.

Secondly, with regard to Torah learning, the Meshech Chachma took it for granted that after a person learns he naturally feels closer to God and therefore has no need to remind himself of God's presence with a blessing. It follows that if a person does not feel this way after he has learnt Torah, then there may be something lacking in his approach to his learning. One possible reason for this may be that one may be prone to forgetting God before he comes to learn – having said the before-blessing many hours earlier – and during his learning. The Nefesh HaChaim, who was known to be against thinking lofty thoughts while learning Torah, nonetheless writes: "Whenever one prepares himself to learn, it is proper for him to spend at least a small amount of time contemplating a pure fear of G-d with a pure heart."⁶ He even argues that at times one should take a small break during his learning to rekindle his

awareness of God.⁷

May we merit to benefit in the intended ways in both our blessing and our Torah learning.

1. Brachot, 21a.
2. Meshech Chachma, Devarim, 8;10.
3. Devarim, 8:11.
4. Devarim, 33:3.
5. Shabbat, 88b.
6. Nefesh HaChaim 4:6.
7. Ibid. 4:7.



Loving the Convert

"...[God] loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. You must also show love toward the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:18-19)

The Torah informs us of God's great love for the *ger* (convert). Since we are required to emulate God, it follows that we must also love the convert. Why, then, is it necessary to add, "for you were *gerim* in Egypt?"

Maimonides (Responsa No. 369) points out that the Torah commands us to respect and honor our parents and obey a prophet, but it does not command us to love them. Yet we are commanded to love the convert just as we are commanded to love God. To understand this we must understand the Torah concept of love.

The numerical value of "love" is the same as "one." Love is the product of unity between

individuals, a recognition of a commonality and affinity. In our relationship to God this commonality is intrinsic, since we are created in God's image. Likewise, we share common responsibilities and goals with our fellow Jew. He is our peer in Torah and mitzvot. Parents and spouses, however, aside from the intrinsic commonality they share as Jews, may have nothing else in common.

Of course we must work to develop and nurture an affinity and commonality in the latter relationships. Love of a parent is an enhancement of honor; love of a spouse is a rabbinical directive (Maimonides, Ishus 15:19). And most certainly it is an ideal to love and honor the righteous. However, the Torah did not command us to create an affinity where it does not exist intrinsically. Rather, where such an affinity exists naturally, the Torah commands us to develop it.

STUDENT OF ABRAHAM

Maimonides, in the aforementioned response, writes to a convert whose mentor insulted him and called him a fool for asking a legitimate question:

...That which he called you a fool is very perplexing. One who left his father and mother, and his birthplace, and his nation, which is now in power, whose heart and mind led him to cling to a nation that is today detested by the nations of the world, ruled over by slaves, and to recognize and understand that their religion is the true and righteous one; one who understood the ways of Israel, and pursued God, and entered the path of holiness, and entered under the wings of the Divine presence, and sat at the dust

of the feet of Moses, the master of all prophets; one who desires God's mitzvot, whose heart inspires him to draw close to bask in the light of life, and to ascend to the level of angels, to rejoice and take pleasure in the rapture of the righteous; one who cast out this mundane world from his heart and did not follow vain and idle things - is a person who reached this lofty stature to be called a fool?

God has not designated you a fool, but rather an intelligent and wise and understanding individual, who proceeds on proper paths, the student of Abraham, who likewise left his father and birthplace to follow God. May He Who blessed Abraham, and rewarded him in this world and the next world, bless and reward you properly in this world and the next. May He lengthen your days, so that you will be able to teach God's laws to His congregation, and may you merit to see all the consolations in store for Israel in the future, and may the good that God will do for us also devolve upon you, for God has spoken good concerning Israel.

HOLY SPARK

The convert has discovered on his own what the Jew was born with. Yet, the Sages tell us (Yevamos 48b), a convert sometimes experiences hardships after the conversion due to the fact that he procrastinated in converting. The Chida explains that every convert has an innate spark of holiness that is suppressed and lies dormant until he becomes aware of it and converts. He procrastinated in not acting upon that spark.

The famous convert and martyr, Avraham ben Avraham, posited that while each nation rejected the Torah when God offered it to them, there was a minority that was willing to accept the Torah. It is the descendants of that minority who eventually convert.

Through a proper halachic conversion, the convert transforms himself into a new individual. That spark of holiness is transformed into a Jewish soul and replaces his previous identity as a non-Jew. He is a newborn person with no halachic connection to his past.

God shows particular love and solicitude for the convert, feeding and clothing him. Food is man's basic necessity. Out of recognition of the elevated essence of the convert, God provides his essential necessities. Clothing represents one's honor. By providing clothing, God honors the convert.

STRANGERS IN EGYPT

On the one hand, we share an intrinsic affinity with that which the convert chose and accepted upon himself. Nevertheless, it is difficult to relate to the convert with a sense of total affinity, since his embrace of Torah and mitzvot was voluntary and ours was by birth. Therefore the Torah could not merely exhort us to emulate God in loving the convert, since there is an impediment to actually fulfilling this command. Thus the Torah adds, "*for you were gerim in Egypt.*"

We can appreciate and identify with the convert, for in our national experience we also were quasi-*gerim*, when we left Egypt and accepted the Torah. Although we were already potentially Jews from the time of Abraham, and all that had to be done was bring out the potential that

already existed at Sinai (see Gur Aryeh to Genesis 46:10); we experienced at Sinai a conversion, an acceptance of Torah and mitzvot not binding upon us at birth. Because we share that experience with the convert, we can be commanded to recognize and enhance that commonality.

The Sages comment (Yevamos 47a) that converts are as difficult for the Jewish people as *spachas* (an affliction of the skin). On the one hand, non-Jews who convert for ulterior motives, who basically masquerade as Jews, are a plague and sickness to the Jewish people.

On the other hand, Jews who convert for the reasons Maimonides describes and who undergo a halachic conversion are a pleasant affliction for the Jewish people. Just as *tzora'as* (skin affliction) is a lesson to goad one to repent and improve, the devotion and meticulous observance of mitzvot of a true convert are an indictment of those born Jews who are not as devoted, meticulous or appreciative of their heritage.



Spiritual Nourishment

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's parsha contains the verse, "...Not by bread alone does man live; rather, on all that comes from the mouth of God does man live"

(Deut. 8:3). We will return to this verse shortly, after we see a few other Torah sources about eating.

In Parshat Beshalach, Moses speaks to the Jewish people regarding the manna, saying, "Eat it *today*, for *today* is Shabbat; *today* you will not find it in the field" (Exodus 16:25). The manna was the Jewish people's primary sustenance during their 40 years in the wilderness. Based on the three-fold repetition of the word "today" in this verse, the Talmud (Shabbat 117b) derives that we must eat three meals on Shabbat.

When the day before Passover is Shabbat, bread may not be eaten for the third Shabbat meal. The Remah (Orach Chaim 444:1) states that, according to the Ashkenazi custom, egg matzah may not be eaten either. Instead, in this situation, fruit, meat and fish make up for the lack of bread or matzah. Furthermore, the Magen Avraham notes that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai used to spend the third Shabbat meal studying Torah, and this satisfied his obligation.

Where do we see that studying Torah can be an adequate substitute for eating a meal? The verse mentioned earlier from this week's parsha ("...Not by bread alone does man live; rather, on all that comes from the mouth of God does man live") may explain this. The mitzvah of a Shabbat meal is not through eating "bread alone." We greatly enhance the meal by learning Torah - the Divine wisdom "that comes from the mouth of God."

We can suggest that this idea specifically refers to the third Shabbat meal. In the verse about the manna mentioned above, the third mention of the word "today" corresponds to the third meal: "*Today* you will not find [the manna] in the field." We can infer from here that we do not

always find the nourishment for the third meal in the produce of the field. Rather, we can be nourished as well by using our mouths to speak words of Torah, as the verse says, "The matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to perform it" (Deut. 30:14).

Among certain circles, the third Shabbat meal tends to be neglected. This is a troubling oversight, since all three meals are an integral part of the mitzvah of Shabbat and are obligatory according to Jewish law. The Talmud (Shabbat 118a) teaches that our care in eating all three Shabbat meals will protect us from three calamities that precede the messianic era: the war of Gog and Magog (Armageddon); the "birth pangs of Messiah" (severe disagreements among Torah scholars [Rashi]); and the judgment of Gehennom. Each meal seemingly protects us from one of these three punishments.

THIRD MEAL

The third Shabbat meal is traditionally referred to as *Shalosh Seudos* (literally, "three meals"), or more accurately, *Seudah Shlishit* ("third meal"). The siddur Yesodei Yeshurun, however, explains that *Shalosh Seudos* is actually a truer description of the meal. Eating the first two Shabbat meals is a mitzvah - but we are hungry anyway. It can therefore be difficult to tell whether we are eating these meals for God or just to satisfy our own hunger. Only once we reach the third meal (especially in the winter, when we sit down at the table again just an hour after finishing lunch) can we discern our true motivations for eating. When we push ourselves to eat the third meal, despite our lack of hunger, it is clear that we are eating only in order to fulfill a mitzvah. Our pure intentions for this meal are then retroactively applied to the first

and second meals as well. The reward for all three meals is contained in the third - hence its traditional designation as *Shalosh Seudos* ("three meals").

In contrast to the weekday prayers, each of the three Amidah prayers on Shabbat is different. The Friday night Amidah mentions the creation of heaven and earth; the liturgy on Shabbat morning discusses Moses's bringing the Torah down from Mount Sinai; and the Amidah on Shabbat afternoon describes the messianic era, when God's unity will be universally recognized.

The commentator Ohr Gedalyahu explains that each Shabbat meal corresponds to one of these monumental historical events. Thus, as we gather to eat the three delicious Shabbat meals, we also have the opportunity to digest their significance. On Friday night, we focus on strengthening our belief that God created the world. On Shabbat day, we celebrate receiving the Torah. And at the third meal, we tap into an energy of purity and sanctity that will characterize the messianic era. Our awareness of the potential of these times can help us make the most of every Shabbat.

May we be blessed with the highest of Sabbaths - not just this week, but also when we eventually reach the messianic era, described as "a day that is entirely Shabbat." Through the mitzvah of strengthening ourselves in Shabbat, its meals, and what they represent, may we be spared the difficulty and upheaval of the End of Days, and soon merit to live in a world where every day will have the sanctity of Shabbat.