



## Parshat Vaerah

# Why is Listening so Important in the Torah?

**Dear Rebbetzin,**

I'm writing to you because I'm a scholar of listening and am very interested in listening in Judaism. I was hoping that you could direct me to some good resources, or examples of listening in Judaism. While I cannot read Hebrew (to my shame, honestly), I'm happy to read different kinds of texts. I just need a couple of shoves in the right direction. The *Shema* is the obvious place to start, but I'm very interested in other kinds of listening you can think of – especially the healing aspects. I'd be very happy for anything you can point me to. Although I'm a Jewish woman, I'm not a scholar of Judaism or Jewish thought. Would you help me?

Thanks very much for your time and consideration.

**Shelly Shimoni** (name changed)

**Dear Shelly,**

Listening is indeed very important in the Torah. In fact, the root שמע/*shema* – 'listen' appears 1216 times in the Tanach (Bible), and 238 times in the Chumash. It starts with Adam and Eve hearing the sound of G-d walking in the Garden (*Bereishit* 3:8) and ends with the Israelites listening to their new leader, Yehoshua (*Devarim* 34:9). Although this week's *parasha* is called וַאֲרָא/*Vaera* – "I appeared," which is related to the word for seeing, the central theme of *Parashat Vaera* is actually שְׁמִיעָה/*shemiah* – 'listening' or 'hearing.' We learn this from the fact that the root, שמע/*shema* is mentioned no less than 15 times in *Parashat Vaera* (mostly in the negative, describing the inability of the Israelites to hear). Why is listening so important in the Torah and why specifically at the end of the Egyptian exile?

## Hearing and Opening Our Channels of Intuition

We learn from Avraham, our father, that 'listening' in the Torah refers to our ability to tune into our inner voice where we are connected to Hashem's truth. Even before the Torah was given, it states about Avraham, "Since Avraham שמע/*shama* – listened to My voice and kept My charge: My commandments and My teachings" (*Beresishit* 26:5). From here, our Sages teach that Avraham learned the entire Torah through his kidneys, which became like two pitchers of water that would overflow with Torah (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 95:3). Modern spiritual movements advise us to follow our "inner voice" and trust our intuitive knowledge. Yet, we have to remember that we are not Avraham and our inner voice may be tainted by the desires of our ego. Nevertheless, women are attributed to have extra intuition, which is essential for making numerous daily decisions such as, which doctor to choose, which school to send our children, which non-profit organization to support etc. We can't just disregard our inner voice, and always rely on our husband or other authorities to make our decisions. We also need to listen to our intuition in order to decide the right balance between consultation with outside advisors and tuning into our voice within. Through meditation, prayer and spiritual healing, we may work further on purifying our intuitive channels to be more attuned to Hashem's will.

## Hearing and the Kidneys

Hearing the deepest truth is attributed to the kidneys in the Talmud: "The Kidneys give advice" (*Babylonian Talmud, Chulin* 11a). Recent research proves a connection between the kidneys and our hearing. A [study done in Australia](http://hearinghealthfoundation.org/blog?blogid=118), published in the *American Journal of Kidney Diseases*, October 2010, (<http://hearinghealthfoundation.org/blog?blogid=118>) showed a link between chronic kidney disease

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(CKD) and hearing loss. This connection has been known in the ancient wisdom of Chinese medicine, where it is explained that the ears, which resemble the kidneys in shape, reflect the condition of the kidneys. "The kidney qi communicates with the ears; if the kidney functions properly, the ears can distinguish the five essential sounds" (*Neijing* [www.itmonline.org/5organs/kidney.htm](http://www.itmonline.org/5organs/kidney.htm)). If we work on strengthening our sense of hearing by paying attention to our inner voice and listening to what others tell us and by engaging in active listening, we may preserve our kidney health, B"H!

### Our Ability of Expression Corresponds to the Attention of the Listener(s)

As a teacher, I have experienced that I'm able to teach much better when my students are attentive and excited to hear what I have to share. Likewise, when someone is telling over Torah at the Shabbat table, if we give ear to truly listen, the person will be able to express himself much more eloquently. The more parents make an effort to listen to their children, the more articulate the children will become in their ability to express themselves.

**פַּרְשַׁת שְׁמוֹת פָּרָק ו פְּסוּק יב** ... הֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי פָּרְעֹה וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׁפָתַיִם:

...“Behold the children of Israel have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, and I have uncircumcised lips?” (*Shemot* 6:12).

The prophet's ability to prophesize depends on the people's capacity to listen. Sefat Emet explains that there is an innate connection between Moshe being of uncircumcised lips, and the Israelites inability to hear. The reason why Moshe was of uncircumcised lips was specifically because Israel could not listen to him. It was this inability of the Jewish people to listen, which prevented them from receiving the Ten Commandments directly from G-d ([Women at the Crossroads: A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion](#) p. 51).

### Removing the our 'Spiritual Earwax'

Moshe was of uncircumcised lips, yet, the Israelites in Egypt were of uncircumcised ears. The prophet, Yirmeyahu, uses this expression, as it states, "To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ear is uncircumcised (עֶרְלָה אֶזְנָם/*arela oznam*), and they cannot pay attention..." (*Yirmeyahu* 6:10). Being uncircumcised implies that there is a foreskin or blockage which separates between a particular limb and its inner truth. Although "words that come from the heart enter the heart," sometimes, we have a foreskin on the ear that doesn't allow words to enter. The harsh work of the oppressive Egyptian slavery caused the ears of the Israelites to be blocked.

**פַּרְשַׁת שְׁמוֹת פָּרָק ו (ט)** וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:

"But when Moshe spoke this to the Israelites, they did not listen to Moshe through anguish of spirit due to harsh labor" (*Shemot* 6:9).

The Israelites in Egypt had no respite for listening to Moshe because their physical anguish dominated their souls. Preoccupation with mundane worries blocks our inner channels and separates us from connecting with Hashem's Oneness. G-d gives us the gift of an extra soul on Shabbat in order to free ourselves from the enslavement of our body. When we separate from the worries and hard work of our weekly routine, we have the opportunity to remove the 'spiritual earwax' from our ears as we earnestly implore Hashem, "purify our hearts to serve You in truth" (Rav Tzaddok HaKohen, *P'ri Tzaddik, Vaera* 6). Then, we are ready to immerse ourselves in the verbal mikvah of the *Shema Yisrael*, the prayer that purifies us from all doubts and worries by opening our spiritual channels to be aligned with the Oneness of Hashem.