Parshat Vaerah

Why is Listening so Important in the Torah?

Dear Rebbetzin,
I’m writing to 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 אראו/Vaera – “I appeared,” which is related to the word for seeing, the central theme of Parashat Vaera is actually שמיעה/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, published in the American Journal of Kidney Diseases, October 2010, showed a link between chronic kidney disease
(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). 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.

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