

SEEING THE SOUNDS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And all the Nation saw the voices and the flames, and the sound of the Shofar, and the mountain smoking, and the nation was afraid, and they trembled, and they stood far away." [20:15]

There is considerable discussion among the commentators about an obvious problem: how does one "see voices?" What does this verse mean to say?

Some say that this was a miraculous occurrence -- that the sounds actually became visible. Rashi writes: "they saw that which is heard, which is impossible to see in another situation." The Kli Yakar says that the Israelites saw G-d's Commandments: "that each statement which emerged from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, materialized into a physical reality, and it had substance to the point that they could see the letters flying through the air, as if it were all written before them."

Others take a different approach, because all of our senses are merely various sources of "sensory input." This is found in Ibn Ezra, and Rav Baruch Epstein points to several other places in Tanach (the Bible) where we see similar references to "seeing" what is perceived in other ways -- such as "see, the scent of my son is like the scent of a field blessed by HaShem" [Genesis 27:27] and "my heart has seen much wisdom." [Koheles (Ecclesiastes) 1:16] Sight, in many ways, make a more profound emotional input (imagine seeing an explosion rather than merely hearing it), and the verse means to emphasize the tremendous impact that the Revelation at Sinai had upon the Jewish People.

The Shearis Menachem takes a homiletic approach, which teaches a profound lesson. He explains that what they heard on Mount Sinai was visible afterwards, in their homes. You could see it in their way of life, in how they spent their days. You could see the spirit of Shabbos, the spirit of living a Jewish life, the spirit of purity. What they heard could be seen. In other places and situations, what people heard, was merely heard and not seen, meaning that what they had learned was not visible in how they lived their lives.

Our "faith" is intellectual. We are not told to simply "believe" -- on the contrary, Maimonides begins his codification of Jewish Law by saying that the first and most fundamental obligation is to know that G-d exists. Not to believe, but know -- and knowledge is acquired through research and analysis. Beyond this, Judaism is built upon scholarship, upon arguing over interpretations of Jewish texts and tradition.

With all that said, however, Judaism cannot merely be an intellectual exercise. It must be felt, it must be perceived, and the effects must be visible. "Intellectual Judaism" can be merely a dead shell, if it

can't be seen. The way we emerge from Torah study cannot be the same as the way we emerge from university studies of science, languages, or philosophy.

What our ancestors heard at Sinai, you could see. The Jewish People were changed by that experience; in fact, you can still see what they heard, even today. You see it in a tiny people, scattered to the four corners of the earth, which should have disappeared from the planet centuries ago if not millennia. Instead, we have flourished, because throughout the generations the impact of that heard at Sinai was still visible in the practices of our ancestors.

How about us? When we learn a profound insight, when we hear an inspirational thought -- can others perceive the effect afterwards? Do we go home and live more inspired lives, or does that which we heard fail to materialize?

What we hear, what we learn, we must put into practice in our lives. We must be more careful in how we speak, how we act, how we pray. This is the challenge of Sinai, and the challenge of taking our illustrious heritage on into the future.

Good Shabbos,
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