

# TO HEAR OR TO SEE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Trust is not that simple. Trust demands that we be vulnerable. Trust demands that we relinquish control. Trust assumes that the person or persons we trust are deserving of trust. It assumes that they are good. Trust is always on trial, it must always prove itself. At the first failure trust can be irreparably compromised. Trust is not so simple to give and it should not be simple to receive.

After wandering almost 40 years in the desert, Sefer Divarim (book of Deuteronomy) presented to the Bnai Yisroel final confirmation of their trust in Moshe and the absolute divinity of his prophecy. For the almost 40 years in the desert G-d had spoken only to Moshe. Moshe would then deliver G-d's words to the people accurately without additions or deletions. Following the delivery of the exact words G-d had spoken, Moshe would then elaborate and explain the meaning and application of G-d's words. Matan Torah (Revelation) was the single exception. Matan Torah was the only time the nation had heard G-d speak without the human buffer of Moshe's ministry. This meant that for the better part of 40 years the Jews had to extend to Moshe absolute trust. They had to trust that the words he delivered to them were absolutely the same as the ones G-d had spoken to him.

This was not G-d's original intention. Originally G-d intended that each individual would be able to hear Him speak. Purified by the persecution of Egypt, catapulted into awareness and recognition through the miracles of the Exodus and Kriyas Yam Suf (parting of the sea), and elevated by the experience of Revelation itself, the Jews had returned to the purified innocence of pre-sin Gan Eden (Paradise). They had become like Adam and Chava before the sin and were able to hear G-d "walking in the garden." Had they not sinned with the Golden Calf, the entire nation would have been able to hear G-d speak directly. Unfortunately, they sinned with the Golden Calf and hearing G-d speak directly became impossible.

More so was the nation's response at the time of Matan Torah. "You (Moshe) speak to us and we will listen and do not let G-d speak, we are afraid that we will die. In essence, at Matan Torah, the nation willingly relinquished a degree of control they otherwise would have had over the validation of G-d's word. By asking that Moshe act as the intermediary between themselves and G-d they proclaimed their willingness to trust Moshe to faithfully deliver the word of G-d. Implicit in that was that even if he had chosen to alter the word of G-d they would still listen to Moshe

From that moment and on, because of their choice and because of their eventual sin, the nation did not hear G-d speak again. In its place they were given the prophecy of Moshe and the ongoing

manifestation of G-d's will in the universe through natural law and miracles. In its stead Hashem gave them exactly what they had requested. Moshe would speak and they would hear the word of G-d through him.

Starting with Sefer Divarim the order of delivery changed. Rashi explained, "G-d spoke through the throat of Moshe." That means that whereas the first four books of the Torah were first spoken to Moshe who would then write the exact words of G-d and then teach those words to the people, in Divarim the nation heard Moshe speak the words of G-d at the very time that he himself was hearing them. Basically, it meant that they were hearing the word of G-d a step sooner than before. They became witnesses to the actual prophecy, not just second hand recipients of Moshe's delivery on the basis of their trust.

### *Why the change?*

Sefer Divarim was Moshe's final words to the Bnai Yisroel. It was G-d's final words of instruction to a generation and an entire universe for all of time. A good part of that generation had not witnessed Matan Torah. A good part of that generation had been born after Shavuot. This was the generation that G-d had intended to lead a brave new world across the Yarden and into redemption. They were to be the first generation that would have to trust without the benefit of ever having experienced hearing G-d speak. G-d in turn had to trust them that they would convey the truth of His Torah, the truth of Moshe's prophecy, to all the subsequent generations in a manner and with a conviction that negated any possibility of doubt as to whether or not they were transmitting the word of G-d and living by the word of G-d. To facilitate this transition from the actual witnesses of Matan Torah to the faithful transmitters of their belief in that event, Hashem allowed the generation to be first hand witnesses to Moshe's final prophecy. More so, Moshe reviews key moments in the history of the nation with the full impact of fact not possibility in the presence of many who had experienced the event and the many that had not. In doing so, he elevated the second generation to the level of witnesses.

Immediately following the repetition of the Ten Commandments Moshe stated, (5:19-23) "These words G-d spoke to your entire assembly upon the mountain? a great voice. He wrote them upon two stone tablets and gave them to me to pass when you heard the voice out of the fire you said, G-d see His glory and His greatness and we have heard His voice. If we are hearing the voice we will die You (Moshe) approach and hear all that He say and you will speak to us faithfully"

By repeating the events as they occurred, Moshe made the new generation first hand witnesses to the validity of the history. As all the commentaries point out, if what Moshe had said was a lie and really the entire assembly had not witnessed G-d speak at Sinai, and they had never heard their parents and grandparents tell over the awesome events of that singular moment in history, someone would have challenged Moshe's ridiculous, made-up account of the past. Instead, Moshe repeated the events as they happened, he underscored their insistence on relinquishing control over

the validity of G-d's word, and obligated them to convey that truth to all future generations.

In this week's Parsha Moshe did the same. Starting with the word "Re'eh" Moshe proclaimed to the new generation that G-d had given them a choice. They could choose a blessed life or a cursed life. However, he presented it to them with the word "Re'eh, see."

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains the usage of the word "Re'eh, see" in the context of the transition of leadership from the generation that experienced Mattan Torah to the generation that would cross the Yarden and take possession of the land.

"This marks the end of the introductory review and is the transition to the compendium of laws intended for the generation that is about to take possession of the Land. "See," You now understand that by means of the Law communicated to you through Moses; G-d has placed it completely into your hands to choose whether the future will be one of blessing or one of curses. Understand, too, that you have formed this conviction not on the basis of "belief" of teachings you have accepted from another person, but from everything you yourselves have experienced up until this point; these are the experiences that were recalled to you in the retrospective survey just completed."

Some of those experiences were first hand and some the product of tradition. Regardless, Moshe's retelling and the manner of his retelling elevated them all to the status of having heard the word of G-d.

## **Ellul Reflection & Return**

As we greet the month of Ellul this coming Tuesday and Wednesday, it is important to appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of this month of preparation.

The Jews received the 10 Commandments on the 6th of Sivan, 2448. Moshe ascended Sinai to learn the Torah and remained for 40 days and nights. In his absence, due to a mistaken calculation, the Jews assumed that Moshe was not returning and made the Golden Calf. Descending from Sinai on the 17th of Tamuz, Moshe broke the 1st Luchos, destroyed the Golden Calf, punished the sinners, and began a second 40-day period of prayer and supplication begging for G-d's forgiveness. On the 1st day of Ellul, (this coming Wednesday) G-d commanded Moshe to reascend Sinai to receive the 2nd Luchos. During the 2nd stay of 40 days and nights the people immersed themselves in prayer and Teshuvah (repentance) hoping for G-d's reacceptance of them as the Chosen People. In order to avoid making the same miscalculation as before, the people sounded the Shofar at the end of each day that Moshe was on the mountain. Moshe returned after 40 days on Yom Kippur, 2449, bearing the 2nd Luchos and G-d's full acceptance of their Teshuvah. From then on, the 40 days, starting with Rosh Chodesh Ellul and culminating with Yom Kippur, have been designated as the period for soul searching, and Teshuvah.

Starting with Mariv on Tuesday, we add Psalm 27 at the end of Shachris and Mariv. Friday morning after Shachris, we will begin sounding the Shofar every day. The saying of L'David continues through

Succoth. We do this because of the references to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Succoth made in that Psalm.

This period and the Yomim Noraim are resplendent with symbols and customs. Beginning with the month of Ellul, we introduce into our daily activities the focus of this special period: Tefilah (prayer), Teshuvah (repentance), and Tzedaka (charity). The sounding of the Shofar reminds us of the origins of this period, culminating with Yom Kippur. However, the intent is far more than a historical commemoration.

As explained, the Jews in the desert sounded the Shofar at the end of the day to indicate the end of each of the 40 days Moshe was on the mountain and avoid a repeat miscalculation. Why then do we sound the Shofar every morning after Shachris?

This period is intended to focus us on our ability to rebuild and do Teshuvah. Therefore, we sound the Shofar in the morning to capture the imagery of Moshe ascending the mountain on the morning of the 1st day of those last 40 days to accept the 2nd Luchos and G-d's forgiveness. Knowing that we have sinned is important; knowing that G-d forgives, is far more important. How often have we been motivated to seek forgiveness from a friend only to be rebuffed by their lack of desire to forgive? How quickly that desire to apologize dissipates! Knowing that G-d will forgive generates the desire to seek forgiveness. The custom of adding Psalm 27 to the daily davening is another technique for focusing us on the nature of this special month. Starting with the 1st day of Ellul we enter into a period highlighted by the severity of being judged on Rosh Hashanah, the certainty of being forgiven on Yom Kippur, and the celebration of renewed intimacy with G-d, manifested during Succoth. It is an amazing sequence of introspection, change, and renewal that is captured within the verses of the 27th Psalm. The first verse refers to G-d as our "light and salvation". Light refers to the harsh, but honest, perspective of judgment that forces us to confront the truth of our actions and rationalizations. Salvation refers to the benevolence of G-d's forgiveness on Yom Kippur that embraces us in renewed intimacy and trust.

The later mention of being "sheltered by G-d's Succah", is the comfort and security generated by our intimacy with G-d and the trust we have in Him. We are so confident in our renewed relationship that we celebrate with seven days of joy, culminating in Simchas Torah.

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