

To Listen, and then, to Speak
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The fact that Yitro is the intellectual architect of the *halakhic* judiciary, and not his Divinely inspired son-in-law, is an eternal testament to the capability of an outsider to reform, and even transform, society around him.

In consideration of Yitro's audacious, unsolicited critique of the *status quo ante*, it is tempting to see Yitro in somewhat unfavorable terms. After all, given the remarkable series of events which had just transpired to this nascent nation, events which Yitro himself exclaims are all the direct work of the Almighty, 'greater than all other gods', one might have imagined a greater degree of modest reticence on Yitro's part. What, and who, gave Yitro the license to speak so freely?

Perhaps the answer to this question, to a great extent, can be found in the very first word of this week's sedra, **וַיִּשְׁמַע**. Before Yitro shares his own view, he listens, he opens his heart and mind to the events which were changing the world around him.

As detailed extensively in rabbinic literature, Yitro left a position of security, prominence, and prestige, to pursue authenticity in the desert. Yitro made profound changes to his own life, according to many views, becoming the first ever convert to Judaism, because he was willing to accept truth whatever its origins.

To my mind, what gives Yitro the license to speak in such a forthright, original manner, is the very fact that he had an irreproachable record as someone who knew how to listen carefully, and even to transform his own existence on the basis of what it is that he learned. When a person has a demonstrated record of commitment to the truth, and recognizes the views of others as often as he advocates his own, his suggestions are just that much more credible.

This is hardly an isolated example. In fact, the Talmud (Eruvin 13b) teaches us that the reason that Beit Hillel was established as the normative halakha, even though Beit Shammai had a claim to equal veracity, was precisely because of their commitment to careful study of the words of their interlocutors. It was the practice of Beit Hillel first to listen, and only then, if necessary, to speak.

Likewise, the mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:6) teaches us that two of the seven characteristics of the wise person is that she does not interrupt one who is speaking with him, nor does she rush to answer.

When the young King Solomon (Melakhim I 3:5,9) was granted the ultimate Divine offer, and given the opportunity for supernal assistance in any area, he asked for nothing other than a 'heart which listens,' a **לב שומע**.

Social media, in which our society is saturated, has created numerous platforms through which speaking and listening have effectively been decoupled. One can post or tweet into the cyber ether, that is, one can speak, without having first gone through a deliberative process of careful listening.

The results, on the whole, for the level of our collective discourse, have not been encouraging. On the contrary, we recognize, in light of recent events, that the very fabric of our democracy is imperiled by the hyperbolic and even incendiary nature of social media. Those of us who aspire to the tradition of Yitro, of King Solomon, of Beit Hillel, and Pirkei Avot, know that there is a better way: to listen first, and then, to speak.