

The Act of Listening

Yitro 5783

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I.

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.

Indeed, Yitro himself seemed to sense the vulnerability of his position even before arriving in the camp. Yitro first sends a message to Moshe that he is approaching, hoping that his son in law, now a leader of historic proportion, will still agree to a mere audience with him. And, if not in his own merit, then at least on account of Moshe's wife and children.

What, and who, gave Yitro the license to speak so freely?

II.

Perhaps the answer to this question, to a great extent, can be found in the very first word of this week's sedra, *va'yishma*. 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.

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 radically 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 immeasurably more valuable.

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 three of the seven characteristics of the wise person is that he does not speak in front of one who is wiser or more senior than he is, nor does he interrupt one who is speaking with him, nor does he rush to answer. The entire ethos entailed by the first injunction in all of Avot (1:1), *heve metunim ba'din*, bespeaks an intellectual and spiritual posture of deep seriousness and contemplation.

In the collection of rabbinic teachings known as Kinan Ha'Torah appendaged to the end of Pirkei Avot, we find that elocution, *arikhat sefata'im*, is indeed one of the manners in which Torah is acquired. And yet, small wonder, it is immediately preceded by *shemi'at ha'ozen*, the capacity to listen well.

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 *lev shomea*. The request meets with Divine approval of the highest form, and is considered such a profound act of righteousness which is deserving of its own reward, as Shlomo is granted unprecedented honor and wealth amongst kings in addition to the wisdom he sought.

Perhaps most significantly, this approach, that it was Yitro's credentials as a listener that served as the proverbial matir, permission structure, for him to suggest such a fundamental change to the structure of the Jewish camp, is confirmed by Moshe's recapitulation of the incident at the beginning of Sefer Devarim.

In that section, in the space of just two verses¹, Moshe three times uses the term “to listen”, *shema*. Of all of the requirements of serving as a dayyan, the *sine qua non* is the virtue which Yitro had above all, the capacity to listen well, to listen attentively, irrespective of the station of the petitioner- *ka’katon ka’gadol tishma’un*- and on that basis, to ask probing questions to discern truth and falsehood.

III.

Social media, which has wrought fundamental, even astounding changes upon our society, has created numerous platforms through which speaking and listening have effectively been decoupled. One can post or tweet into the cyber ether to an audience of millions; 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, the very fabric of our society is imperiled by the hyperbolic and often incendiary nature of social media, as well as its capacity to both produce and amplify disinformation.

Those of us who aspire to the tradition of Yitro, the dayanim appointed by Moshe Rabbenu, and the entire rabbinic tradition which emerged in their image, know well that the act of listening must, of necessity, precede any meaningful speech.

As Yitro said over three thousand years ago, when led by a judiciary which reflects this ethic, *gam kol ha’am ha’zeh al mekomo yavo b’shalom*, the entire nation will be made more secure, more peaceful, more wholesome.

¹ Devarim 1:16-17.