

“Listening for Heavenliness”:

Ha'azinu

September 29, 2001

Sefat Emet, a popular commentary on the Torah from the early 1900's by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger comments on the opening verse of this week's parasha:

“Listen O heavens, and I shall speak, Let the earth hear the words of my mouth”

And says the following:

“The Torah has its roots in heaven; its power is to draw everything in earth up to heaven. These two factors are dependent on each other,” he explains, “the more a person binds each mitzvah or teaching to its root, the greater its chances of spreading forth below as well. The greatest heights and the greatest depths depend on each other.”

This commentary is teaching us that we can achieve greater holiness, and thus elevate our daily acts by linking them to a greater purpose. The purpose of Moses' poem which constitutes this week's Torah portion, and is read the shabbat after Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is to explain to the Jewish people that they have an obligation to uplift all corporeal and lowly things.

It comes at an appropriate time. It is as if, having concluded these intense, beautiful and uplifting ten days of awe, although we still have the holiday of Sukkot around the corner, we will soon be returning to our daily existence, and to our regular routines. Consequently, we need to be reminded that we can take the sense of spirituality which overcomes us during the holidays into our everyday lives and tasks.

The Sefat Emet is teaching that the message we should take with us on this shabbat is that one should never be depressed about having to concern oneself with humble or worldly matters, for everything is imbued with the divine, and has the power to be God-like.

Rabbi Arthur Green in his commentary on the writings of the Sefat Emet explains, “The essential religious task, as Judaism understands it, is that of sanctifying the ordinary, of uplifting the most common of worldly objects, deeds, and moments to reveal themselves as repositories of divine light.”

The Hasidic Kotzker Rebbe read the opening words of this week's parasha and came to a similar conclusion. He reinterprets the words, Ha'azinu hashamayim, Listen Heavens, for I will speak” and reads it not in the traditional fashion, but says that it is a message to each and every one of us --- that we should always “listen to heavenliness.”

In other words, we should attune our ears to always be prepared to hear God in whatever we do.

Rabbi Abraham Twersky writes about the Kotzker rebbe's interpretation, “A person may train his ear to be sensitive to music, and to be able to distinguish shades of tones that the untrained ear cannot perceive. Similarly, our ears may be so accustomed to hearing only

mundane matters that we are essentially deaf to spiritual messages, and although they may be communicated to us, we fail to perceive them. We must train our ears to be receptors of spirituality.

How do we do this?

There is a reading in the Likrat Shabbat prayer book which illustrates what is meant by training our ears to be attuned and receptive to spirituality.

The person who attends a concert with a mind on business, hears- but does not really hear.

The person who walks amid the songs of birds and thinks only of what will be served for dinner, hears- but does not really hear.

The man who listens to the words of his friend, or his wife, or his child, and does not catch the note of urgency: "notice me, help me, care about me," hears-but does not really hear.

The person who listens to the news and thinks only of how it will affect business, hears- but does not really hear.

The person who stifles the sound of conscience and thinks "I have done enough already," hears-but does not really hear.

The person who hears the Hazzan pray and does not feel the call to join in prayer, hears- but does not hear.

The person who listens to the Rabbi's sermon and thinks that someone else is being addressed, hears-but does not really hear.

For only if we hear you, do we have the right to hope that you will hear us.

Rabbi Twesky goes on to say, "Not only is a spiritual message ineffective if it falls upon an unprepared ear, but it can also be distorted. History is replete with human tragedy that resulted from misguided applications of otherwise noble ideals, such as holy wars to force one's particular belief on others. Our sages caution us that *derech erez kadimah latorah*: decency must precede torah, because in the absence of proper character traits, even torah can be distorted.

How true. Perhaps this is why, in the long history of our people, one would be hard-pressed to find an example of the Jewish people initiating or pursuing a holy war.

Torah is our people's guide to finding God throughout the created world, which is why the opening verse of our parasha, continues, "May my teaching drop as rain."

Again, I return to share with you how the Sefat Emet interprets this verse. "Within every Jew there is a living point. That life-force has to be awakened by means of Torah.

Just as rain brings the fruits of the soil from the earth, so, too does torah bring forth into reality all that is within the world.

However, Rabbi Twersky tempers the words of the Sefat Emet by reminding us that in order for that rain to bring forth the treasures of the earth, it must fall on fields which have been tilled and prepared for the growth. On the unprepared field, rain only turns the soil to mud.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
October, 2001  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek