

The Earth Speaks, The Earth Listens

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Our tradition meditates often on the sense of hearing. We have references to Deafness being erased by the power of HaShem, rules on how we should regard the Deaf, and even stories of Deaf ancestors like Chushim ben Dan. Hearing is a privileged sense in Jewish practice—so much so that, when we say the Shema, we cover our eyes and call out to our neshamot to hear the singular truth of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. The poem Moses recites in this parsha also begins with the sense of hearing: “give ear (הֶאֱזִינוּ, ha’azinu) O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear (וְתִשְׁמָע, v’tishma) the words I utter!” He asks that his “discourse come down as the rain . . . Like droplets on the grass,” which Abraham ibn Ezra interprets as a call for humanity to receive this message and for the Divine to witness, like a refreshing rain nourishing a verdant field.

The Chizkuni points to an important distinction between shama (שָׁמַע, to hear) and azan (אָזַן, to listen), where one refers to hearing things from a distance and the other is used for closer listeners. The prophet Isaiah, the rabbi adds, turns to a similar phrase in his own prophecies. While Isaiah felt closer to Heaven and so chose to begin with shema (שָׁמַע) to call out to

the distant earth, Moses chose ha'azinu to call to the Heavens as a way to signify his proximity to the terrestrial, a link between Earth and the Divine made even more explicit through HaShem referring to Themselves in this poem as the Rock. Moses, destined to walk his people through the sea to the Promised Land, to carve instructions on stone tablets, to die on a mountain for striking a stone rather than speaking to it, is intimately linked with the Earth (אדמה, adamah) and Humanity (אדם, adam), with the Land (ארץ, eretz) and the Rock (צור, tzur), words all linked by close orthographic and conceptual ties. He is punished for disregarding the Earth which has defined his journey, and so too are the Israelites punished for their separation and having “spurned the Rock of their support.” But what does it mean that the Earth is listening, or hearing the Earth in turn? What can we learn today from this past disconnect, about staying grounded, about listening through the Earth?

Perhaps we are being asked to attend to the world with more than just our ears. HaShem created the world for humanity, set us “atop the highlands, to feast on the yield of the earth” and it is our responsibility to take care of this gift. The world we live in today is radically different from the world of Moses in every conceivable way, but those differences only make it more important that we listen intently: when the Earth shows signs that we must act differently and change our relationship with

the land which sustains us, we need to be receptive; when catastrophe “[consumes] the earth and its increase” and fires have “eaten down to the base of the hills,” it is within our power to hearken to our fellow and share our support, to let “discourse come down as the rain” and calm the flames. We must commune with the world in a multitude of ways, despite how challenging that can be.

The hearing aids I wear modify the sounds that my ears wouldn't pick up otherwise, but I still must use other techniques like reading captions, lips, body language, and many other signs to understand what's going on around me. I must constantly adapt, advocate, and work to listen to what others likely hear with less effort. Hearing can be exhausting, hearing aids can be uncomfortable, and that makes it difficult to connect with the community I call home. There are times that I, and many people living in a world not designed for their needs, understandably wish to strike the proverbial rock—to be angry at the world for asking me to do the work of hearing with little regard for how hard that can be for so many. Those outside of the Deaf community must work to understand our experiences and make the world more universally accessible, because using all that energy to listen takes a significant toll. But, since the Tower of Babel, communicating has been imperfect regardless of one's level of hearing, and so it is crucial that we all think about how we interact with one another.

Engaging with the Earth means observing the environment around with all our available senses, continually adapting tools to improve our comprehension, and comparing our experience with others to learn from the differences. It means when we are told not to strike the Rock that supports us—not to take advantage of the Earth's resources or intentionally harm others—we hear, speak to it, and make every effort to change our relationship with the environment around us; it means ensuring that everyone, including oneself, has equal access to hear and be heard, be it through civic participation or asking for closed captions to be turned on. This is what Devarim asks of us: to attend to the needs of the fellow and the stranger when one can, and to empathize with their suffering regardless. We listen through more than the air alone, but through those next to us, through discussion and debate to understand the Earth and reveal the many faces of our holy Torah. We ought to feel empowered when we are able to engage with and through our community rather than by ourselves, for in doing so we will understand the world differently. This parsha asks us not to individually reflect upon the words we read and recite, nor to merely absorb them with a single sense, but to listen to others and collectively connect to the Earth from which we came.

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